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HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FORTY-NINTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 1999–2000

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19 June 2000

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FORTY-NINTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 352**

FOURTEENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 1999–2000

House of Commons

Monday 19 June 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SOCIAL SECURITY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Pensioners

1. **Ms Oona King** (Bethnal Green and Bow): What plans he has to help those pensioners with modest occupational pension schemes who do not benefit from the minimum income guarantee. [124925]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): We want to reward rather than penalise pensioners who worked hard to provide for their own retirement. As we have said, we will consult later in the year on proposals for a pensioner credit that will reward those who have built up modest pensions or other savings.

Ms King: I am sure that I speak for all my hon. Friends in welcoming the consultation on the pensioner credit.

Given that the proposed legislation is two, three or even four years away, will my right hon. Friend consider an interim measure to help the pensioners who have worked so hard, many of whom live in east London? Will he consider an increase of more than the rate of inflation in the basic state pension, just during the years preceding the introduction of the credit?

Mr. Darling: As my hon. Friend will know, the Government are spending more on supporting pensioner incomes than they would have if they had simply reinstated the earnings-linked pension. The question is where the money is best spent, and more than half the increase is going to the poorest pensioners. We are helping all pensioners through the winter fuel payment and free television licences, both of which the Conservatives have now said they will scrap. We are helping the poorest pensioners through the minimum income guarantee and other measures, because we believe it is right to deal with the pensioner poverty that we inherited from the last Conservative Government.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): I welcome the review, but does not the minimum income guarantee represent, in the long run, the equivalent of a funded pension of around £100,000? Is it not also true that while the deliberation is going on, and while the three or four years mentioned by the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) are ticking away, the jaws of the vice will open progressively, as the minimum income guarantee is linked to earnings while the state pension is linked to prices?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman should be aware of the reason for the introduction of the minimum income guarantee. Whereas the top 20 per cent. of pensioner incomes had risen by 80 per cent. in the past 20 years, the bottom 20 per cent. had risen by just over 30 per cent. It was therefore necessary to do far more for those on low incomes than had ever been done in the past: we were determined to deal with the problem of pensioner poverty that we had inherited.

As for the future, the hon. Gentleman should also be aware that the introduction of the state second pension—the legislation is currently in the other place—will mean

that many on low incomes who in the past would have retired on income support will be able to accrue a better pension over their lifetimes. We are determined to ensure that everyone can retire on a decent pension after a lifetime's work. That certainly was not the result of the policies that the last Tory Government left us.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Government policy is to maintain the value of the basic pension, and then to target extra resources on those who need them most by means of the minimum income guarantee, while at the same time helping all pensioners through winter payments. Is not the problem, in terms of pensioners' reception of that policy, the rogue figure that appeared last September—a 1.1 per cent. inflation rate that was not the real inflation rate? Is not the answer to ensure that next year the increase in the basic pension that the Government give pensioners is based on a realistic inflation rate, and makes up for the shortfall of the past year? Anything on top of that would of course be well received, but if we did that we would be providing real benefits for pensioners and not—as the Conservatives wish to do—giving with one hand and taking with the other by providing only 42p, not even 75p.

Mr. Darling: As my hon. Friend knows, at the last election all the major political parties stood on the basis of a manifesto commitment to increase the pension in line with prices, and that is what we have done. All three parties—even the Liberals, although I note that their spokesman sadly cannot be with us today—stood on the same platform.

We wanted to do more than that, however. That is why we have increased the amount that we spend on pensions by £6.5 billion. As my hon. Friend says, half of that has gone to the poorest pensioners, who lost out. If we had not taken such action, we would simply have perpetuated the circumstances that existed during the Tory years, when a growing number of pensioners were living in poverty.

As for the rogue figure, my hon. Friend is right: the only rogue figure is the extra 42p that the Conservatives promise that they would give pensioners if they were ever returned to power.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): The only rogue figure is the Secretary of State. May I ask him a straight question? Will he confirm that he is spending a lower proportion of our national income on pensioners than we were spending in our last full year in office? How does he reconcile that with his manifesto pledge that

> all pensioners should share fairly in the increasing prosperity of the nation?

Mr. Darling: As the hon. Gentleman knows, national income is rising, thanks to the prudent economic policies of this Government. However, I thank him for the compliment.

As for our manifesto commitment, we said that we wanted pensioners to share fairly in the rising prosperity. We are achieving that: that is why we are spending £6.5 billion more. My guess is that, come the end of this Parliament, pensioners and others will be able to judge which party is fair and just to pensioners. They will be in no doubt that it is the Labour party, and they will remember exactly what the Tories did during their years in government. The Tories did absolutely nothing to deal with the growing scandal of pensioner poverty.

Mr. Willetts: The Secretary of State claims that pensioners are doing badly because—he believes—the economy is doing well. No wonder the ministerial team has such a rough time whenever it tries to explain its policy to pensioners. I remind him of the reception that the Minister of State, Department of Social Security got at the Scottish pensioners convention last week. He was heckled. A section of the audience began a slow handclap. Some who asked direct questions threatened to change their votes at the next general election, a point that was loudly applauded by the rest of the gathering.

The Minister of State has obviously been trying to copy the Prime Minister. Instead of trying to do that, why does he not learn something from us? Why does he not try a better approach—the approach of his colleagues on the Back Benches? Why does he not consolidate all the gimmicks and more into a substantial increase in the basic pension, and give pensioners the respect and dignity that they deserve?

Mr. Darling: As for Conservative policy, I can do no better than remind the House what the shadow Chancellor said about it. He said that it was a one-off. He said that it was money that was already being spent. He added:

> We are making quite a limited announcement.

No wonder he said that: the House of Commons Library, which the hon. Gentleman is always praying in aid of his pensions announcement, has confirmed that, as a result of what the Tories are promising, the best that a pensioner could hope for is 42p more before tax, without taking into account that 2 million poorest pensioners would lose out because of the way in which the benefit system operated.

To pay for that policy, the hon. Gentleman has also pledged to scrap the new deal for lone parents—which has already seen 50,000 lone parents get into work—as well as to take £90 million out of the social fund, which goes to some of the poorest people in society and for which the Conservatives have no substitute.

We are spending £6.5 billion more on pensioner incomes. As a result of the policies that we have introduced, some of the poorest, least well-off pensioners will be £280 a year better off than they would otherwise have been. Our policy has been to tackle first the pensioner poverty that we inherited. The next stage is to introduce the pensioner credit, which is designed to reward pensioners who have saved a little, or perhaps have a modest occupational pension in the bank. That never happened during the 18 years that the Tories were in power.

2. **Mr. Colin Burgon** (Elmet): What progress the Government are making in tackling poverty among pensioners. [124926]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): We are committed to tackling pensioner poverty. During the current Parliament, more than half of the £6.5 billion that my right hon. Friend the

Secretary of State for Social Security has said will be spent will be deliberately targeted at the oldest and poorest pensioners. We make no apology for that.

Mr. Burgon: I thank the Minister for that reply. Along with millions of other people, I welcome the Government's commitment to tackling poverty among pensioners, especially through the introduction of the minimum income guarantee. I further welcome the fact that the minimum income guarantee will be uprated in line with—I had better get the word right—earnings this year and next, but, as one of those Members who has organised a series of take-up campaigns, may I point out that some pensioners find the form-filling process complicated? How can we simplify that and ensure that pensioners get what they are entitled to?

Mr. Rooker: The overall aim of the minimum income guarantee is to get more money to the poorest pensioners fast; that is what it is about. We know from research that there are people who are not claiming it for various reasons. We have modified the form. It is possible—minimum income guarantee uptake is the subject of a later question—to make the claim over the telephone. When the form comes to be signed and dated, perhaps only two or three pages will have to be filled in, rather than the 40 pages of the standard income support form, but I welcome my hon. Friend's support for the minimum income guarantee.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): Does the Minister appreciate that many pensioners are also carers caring for their retired husbands or wives, or for disabled children, and that, as a result of being over 65, they do not receive invalid care allowance? As a result, as the Carers National Association demonstrated ably only last week, they are living on the breadline in poverty. What will the Government do to extend the allowance and to create a carers benefit that recognises and values the work of carers, particularly elderly carers, who form the vast majority of carers? When will the Government act—this side of an election, or some time never?

Mr. Rooker: As the hon. Gentleman will know, that matter has been the subject of debates on the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill that is currently being considered in the other place. He has asked about invalid care allowance, but he would have been well advised to take this opportunity to remind pensioners that they can still claim attendance allowance, for which there is no age cut-off and there is a high non-take-up rate. We reckon that about only 40 per cent. of pensioners who are eligible for attendance allowance claim it. Although I realise that that benefit goes to the person who needs care rather than to the person providing it, nevertheless, the benefit is a means of getting more cash to those families at a crucial time.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): Will my right hon. Friend list some of the things that the Government have done since 1997 for pensioners? What prospects might there be, in the comprehensive spending review, for a substantial increase in the basic old-age pension?

Mr. Rooker: The answer to the last part of my right hon. Friend's question will have to wait until the autumn, when decisions are taken after the review is completed. We are required by law to conduct such a review, taking into account matters such as an increase in the inflation rate. Nevertheless, we are quite proud to recite the catalogue of actions that we have taken, including the provision of free eye tests and cutting VAT on fuel. Those actions cannot be dismissed out of hand. Furthermore, before 1997, winter fuel payments—which, from this year, are worth £3 per week for each pensioner household—were not even available.

As the House will also know, because of recently passed legislation, free television licences will be available for over-75s. It is a tax-free benefit that, in cash terms, is worth £2 weekly for the over-75s.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): On my way to the House today, I bought petrol at 85.9p per litre. Could the right hon. Gentleman tell us why a pensioner is worth less than a litre of petrol?

Mr. Rooker: Well, I fill up my own tank from time to time. The hon. Lady knows that it is not true to say that the basic state pension increase was the only benefit increase provided to pensioners. In April, the poorest pensioners received an increase of not 75p, but £3.45, and almost 2 million pensioners speedily received that extra money. Such a facile question is beneath contempt.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Would it not be interesting to find out how often Labour Members, in the 18 years of the previous Government, repeatedly demanded that help be given to pensioners to deal with harsh winters? On every single occasion that we did so, Tory Ministers' response was, "No help other than the state pension is to be given." Why did the Tories do their best to ensure that pensioners were denied free television licences and even vote down legislation to that effect in January 1987?

Mr. Rooker: Basically, as my hon. Friend said, the Tories did not care.

Single Parents

3. **Mr. Norman Baker** (Lewes): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education and Employment in respect of support for single parents undertaking courses of higher education. [124927]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): Officials in the Department of Social Security and the Department for Education and Employment meet regularly to discuss issues affecting all students. Ministers also meet regularly—as you will be glad to hear, Madam Speaker—and discuss the support of single-parent students.

Mr. Baker: I am pleased to hear that. However, may I draw the Minister's attention to a loophole that goes against the Government's policy, which I support, of trying whenever possible to get people off benefit and into work? Even during holiday periods, single-parent students who are at university cannot claim income support because they are deemed to be covered by DFEE regulations. There is, therefore, effectively a disincentive for single parents to take university courses. Many of my

constituents are giving up university courses and going on income support because they cannot afford to stay on at university. Surely there is a case for giving income support to such people, at least in the holiday period. If we do not do so, the rules will undermine the Government's own policy.

Angela Eagle: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would be glad to know that, from September, there will be provision from access funds to help those who are in higher education to meet the costs of child care. That extra help will be disregarded for income-related benefit purposes.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): In replying to my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait), the Minister of State said that it was facile to talk about the price of petrol. What does the hon. Lady say to my single parent constituents who have to drive 20 or 25 miles to their place of further education and pay £4 for a gallon of petrol?

Madam Speaker: Order. I do not think that this question relates to that at all.

Pensioners

4. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): What progress has been made in encouraging pensioners to claim benefits to which they are entitled. [124928]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): I ask the hon. Gentleman to take account of the two dates that I shall cite, so there is no misunderstanding.

Since the launch of the minimum income guarantee take-up campaign was announced at the end of March, about 72,000 calls have been received at the tele-claim centre. A television advertising campaign to support the mailshots began on 30 May, and in the first two weeks of this month we sent letters to about 417,000 pensioners who have been identified as having a potential entitlement to income support. As at 15 June, the latest date for which I have information, we had received applications from about 67,000 pensioners.

Mr. Swayne: Will the Minister turn his attention to future take-up? Does he estimate that, for a 75-year-old pensioner, it will be easier to take up a free television licence or £100 cash?

Mr. Rooker: The television licence is not really a matter of take-up, because we have passed legislation to enable my Department to give the BBC the names and addresses of people over 75. That is how we are dealing with that. As the House knows, we have identified about 2 million pensioners from our records who we believe may be entitled to income support and are not claiming it. We do not know everything about everybody, which is a good thing in many ways, but the fact is that, within those 2 million, we suspect that there are about 500,000 entitled pensioners, and we will mail them personally—by name—to invite them to make a claim.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): Given that my right hon. Friend has been in the House longer than I have, may I ask him to be as charitable as possible, to dredge his mind and to cite one move that the Tories made in government to undertake a take-up campaign to inform poorer pensioners of their rights?

Mr. Rooker: My right hon. Friend may want to apply for an Adjournment debate on that. The fact is that this is the first time that there has ever been a Government take-up campaign on this scale. Local authorities have done it, as have many hon. Members, but this is a specific, targeted campaign directed at 2 million people, by name, in addition to the television advertisements encouraging others to claim. The campaign is costing a modest amount, about £15 million, but it will get more money quickly to the poorest pensioners who, for various reasons that we all understand, are being missed out. It is long overdue.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Many pensioners find it difficult to understand the complex world of social security benefits, and their only point of contact is the postmaster or postmistress. Following today's announcement by the Post Office that it has made a loss of £265 million, will the Minister give my pensioners a guarantee that, if they so wish, they will still in future have that point of access, with their post office remaining open? When will the Government stop their attacks on pensioners and their assaults on the Post Office?

Mr. Rooker: In the middle of all that, there was a fair and justifiable point. The fact is that members of the Government, including the Prime Minister, have made it clear on more than one occasion, from the Dispatch Box and elsewhere, that after the implementation of the policy announcement—after 2005—it will still be possible for pensioners and other beneficiaries to access their money via the Post Office network.

One of the implications behind the hon. Gentleman's question, especially concerning the rural post offices, is that we should ban people in rural areas from having access to their benefits via their bank account. People are voting with their feet every week and deciding to have their benefit paid via the banking network. If we do nothing to manage the situation, we will lose the Post Office network without understanding why. Because we do not want to do that, we have a policy to ensure that it will not happen.

Appeal Procedure

5. **Mr. David Borrow** (South Ribble): What steps he is taking to improve the social security appeal procedure. [124929]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): We have introduced a new system to streamline and modernise appeals that has already led to a faster and more efficient service. The appeals service has already made significant improvements to clear backlogs and reduce waiting times. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has set challenging targets to improve the service still further.

Mr. Borrow: I welcome my hon. Friend's statement, but I draw to her attention the fact that constituents of mine, and—I am sure—of other hon. Members,

find access to the tribunal system difficult, either because of physical disabilities, although many tribunal rooms have disabled access, or because of the stress of making a case in person in a benefit appeal. Some people are reluctant to go through that stress, and I ask my hon. Friend to ask her officials to consider steps to assist both those groups of potential beneficiaries.

Angela Eagle: I am happy to do so. My hon. Friend will be aware that in exceptional circumstances domiciliary visits can be made if an individual would find it difficult to get to the place where the tribunal normally meets. Hearings have been held in people's front rooms, for example. I hope that my hon. Friend will welcome the recent figures which demonstrated that the 70,000 backlog of 18-month-old cases, with which the new Appeals Service started, is now down to only 3,500 cases. The process used to take seven months, on average, to clear an appeal, but it now takes only 14 weeks. That is a significant improvement, and much congratulation is due to those who work in the Appeals Service.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Does the Minister think that the new appeals system deals with the charge made by the Select Committee on Social Security only last month about the disturbing culture of delays in the social security appeal system? Will she recognise that delays are caused in the early stages of appeals by the appeal system, and that is the direct responsibility of the Department? Will she accept that criticism?

Angela Eagle: We knew when we came into government, when it took seven months on average to hear any appeal, that we had inherited a system that was silting up and was not working. The changes in the Social Security Act 1998, which streamlined the system, were designed to deal with some of those difficulties. The results so far show, as I have just announced, that the backlog has plummeted from 70,000 to 3,500 and the average seven-month waiting time is now down to an average of 14 weeks. Significant improvements have been made, but we are never complacent and will continue to do what we can to improve the accessibility of the system and its effectiveness.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the excellent record in reducing the backlog in the appeals system. May I urge her to consider the number of applications for incapacity benefit that go to appeal and how many should have been successful before reaching that stage? The present procedure is causing pain and anguish to many people, who find it extremely difficult.

Angela Eagle: Disability benefits are among the most difficult to administer and to apply for, because they are discretionary and based on individual circumstances. We keep a watchful eye on what we might do to improve them, but they are complex benefits to administer. However, I hear the point that my hon. Friend makes.

Child Care

6. **Mr. Dafydd Wigley** (Caernarfon): If he will review social security regulations to ensure that single mothers and those on low incomes receive the full benefit of the Government's child care policies; and if he will make a statement. [124950]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): We need to help more lone parents into work as part of our drive to eradicate child poverty. Measures announced in the Budget include help with funding child care costs for the first year for lone parents in part-time work who work fewer than the 16 hours required to get the working families tax credit.

The national child care strategy, which has delivered a big increase in child care places, will—together with the working families tax credit—help more lone parents and those on low incomes to move into work.

Mr. Wigley: May I draw to the attention of the Secretary of State the case of single mothers who had successfully applied for the WFTC and the child care tax credit, only to find that their housing benefit had been reduced by an identical sum, because the local authority treated as income the benefits paid to help with child care? Will he review the situation and, if necessary, write to every local authority to point out that that should not happen and that the full benefit of the tax credits should be available to make child care available to those on low incomes?

Mr. Darling: The right hon. Gentleman will know that the Government have published proposals for housing benefit reform, and we want to examine whether the system provides a disincentive for people entering work. If the right hon. Gentleman is telling me that some local authorities are giving inappropriate advice or are dealing with the administration of housing benefit wrongly, he should draw to my attention which authorities he has in mind and I will look into it.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Is my right hon. Friend aware that, occasionally, single mothers are clobbered by things that are obviously not deliberate? Is he aware that moving from payment by the Inland Revenue to payment by employers has involved a move from paying in advance to paying in arrears? I can assure my right hon. Friend that most single mothers who have not been in work do not have enough money to pay for child care two months at a time, and that has caused enormous trouble.

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend will know that we have introduced changes to income support to allow for benefit run-ons to take account of the fact that there is a gap between someone giving up benefit and going into work. She will agree that the working families tax credit has been a great contributor to making clear to people that work pays, and is worth £24 more on average than the previous family credit scheme. It is a matter of great regret that the Conservatives have announced today that they intend to abolish it; that is a £24 tax increase for many of the lowest-paid people in the country.

Early Retirement

7. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): What recent representations he has received on his policy in respect of early retirement by the over-50s. [124951]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): We have received a number of representations. We have no problem with people who choose to retire early as long as they can support themselves. The problem today is that too many have retired early because they were compelled to do so and half of those over 50 who have retired early rely on benefit. That is a situation that no Government can allow to continue.

Miss McIntosh: Will the Secretary of State allow people to continue to contribute to occupational pension schemes as well as to his stakeholder scheme? Does he accept that by raising, or threatening to raise, the age at which a person can draw an occupational pension from 50 to 55, he is taking away the very flexibility and stability that have encouraged people to contribute to such pension schemes in the past?

Mr. Darling: I agree with the hon. Lady; I do not want to take away any incentives or flexibility. We want people to take up occupational pensions and to continue to do so and we want people to take up stakeholder pensions. The problem is not those people retiring over the age of 50 who can afford to do so, but the fact that a growing number of people have been put out of work—usually because they have been persuaded or forced to—who cannot afford to support themselves. A lot of those people rely on benefits to make up their income. No responsible Government can allow that to continue.

We will not make any changes to the pensions system without consultation or without giving adequate notice. Also, we will make no apology for the fact that we want to do far more to ensure that those over 50 who do not want to leave work or cannot afford to do so get the opportunity to stay in work. That is why we have introduced the new deal and a variety of other measures to encourage them to do so.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Why not call a spade a spade? In my constituency, and nearly every coalfield constituency, we have probably 2,000, 3,000 or 4,000 people unemployed who were sacked by the Tories because they worked in coal mines at the time. Every single one of them did not want to go on benefit. They all wanted a job and would have loved the pits to stay open. The same is true of shipbuilding and steel areas. All of those people who were chucked on the scrap heap by the Tory Government in those 18 miserable years would love to be in work. That is the real reason why many of them cannot get a job. The sad fact is that, in constituencies such as mine, the percentage of unemployment is still in double figures and the chances of getting a job are remote until we can rebuild to make jobs available. But for God's sake, let us put the blame where it lies—it was the Tories who caused havoc.

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is quite right. People will not forget that, up and down the country, large numbers lost their jobs in the 1980s and early 1990s and were left high and dry by the Tory Government. Those who were not left in the dole queue were transferred to the sick list in an attempt by the last Government to hide what was happening. Unlike the Tories, this Government are helping older people by ensuring that we have the right economic conditions to create more employment. There are now nearly 1 million more jobs in the economy than there were. Also, specific measures such as the new deal help people to get back to work. These and other measures would all be abolished by the Conservatives were they ever to get back into government. They would return this country to the division and unfairness in society that we had during their 18 years.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The savings ratio has halved in the first three years of this Government, pension funds have been clobbered with additional taxation and the average 30-year-old will be required to pay an extra £200 a year into his or her pension to prevent its value being depleted on retirement. Given all that, by exactly how large a figure does the Secretary of State anticipate that the number of people able to afford to retire at 50 will fall in the lifetime of this Government?

Mr. Darling: As I told the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh), I have no problem with people retiring at 50, as long as they can afford to do so. The problem that we inherited from the previous Government was that far too many people over 50 retired who have had to rely on benefits as a result. The pension changes that we have made will ensure that people who have worked for a lifetime will be able to retire on an adequate income.

The hon. Gentleman will also want to bear in mind the fact that the stable economic conditions that the Government have built, and our changes to corporation tax that allow companies to retain more profits, are of benefit to pension funds. They create a far more stable and benign environment for pensioners than anything that the previous Government achieved.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the real costs of early retirement are starting to come home to roost? Interestingly, the move toward early retirement peaked in 1997. Should not the Government launch an inquiry into the true economic, social and personal costs of early retirement?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right. There is an economic cost to the policies left by the previous Government. It costs between £3 billion and £5 billion a year to have people not paying tax but drawing benefits.

My hon. Friend mentioned an inquiry: the country held an inquiry into such matters three years ago—and threw the Tories out.

New Deal (Disabled People)

8. **Dr. Brian Iddon** (Bolton, South-East): What progress has been made with the new deal for the disabled. [124952]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): The results from the measures being piloted under the new deal for disabled

people are very encouraging. Already, more than 3,000 disabled people have started work. We have announced the first stage of work to build on the success of the pilot studies, which were held in Bolton and elsewhere, and to develop nationwide services.

Dr. Iddon: Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking Peter Jones and his staff at the Bolton pilot scheme, who have seen almost 800 clients to date? Of those, 201 have been helped into work, 66 have been helped into education or work-based experience, and 28 have been helped to find voluntary work. However, is not it just as important to prevent people losing their jobs? For example, what policies are being developed to ensure that people who become disabled at work stay with their firms?

Mr. Bayley: I do congratulate Peter Jones and his colleagues in Bolton, and I know from the visit that I made to the pilot that it is working extremely well. Moreover, I want to highlight how particularly impressed I was by the steps being taken to get the message of what the new deal has to offer across to Bolton's large ethnic minority population. I know that those efforts have attracted good publicity in the local ethnic community media.

In Budget 2000, the Government announced plans for job retention and rehabilitation pilots to help people who become ill in work. Those pilots will begin next year and will test the effectiveness of early, work-focused help involving health and employment services.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): We welcome the gradual and rather belated move towards a national roll-out of the new deal for disabled people. However, given the need for extreme sensitivity and for expert advice linked to the specific impairment of a disabled individual, will the Minister tell the House what hard lessons he has learned from the pilots about the handling of disabled people for new deal purposes? What clear targets will he set for the scheme when it becomes national?

Mr. Bayley: I am delighted to hear a welcome from the Conservative Benches for the new deal, as they have in the past opposed it. We needed to pilot the new deal because the performance of the Conservatives in providing employment opportunities for disabled people was lamentable. Under the Conservatives, the number of people on incapacity benefit trebled. People were simply parked on benefits rather than being given the opportunity to get back into work.

The Government's labour force survey shows that 1 million people on incapacity benefit say that they want to get back into work. It is those people on whom we are concentrating with the new deal.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government have every reason for taking credit for the very positive contribution of the new deal to finding jobs for disabled people? Given the renaissance of Remploy, will my hon. Friend and his colleagues continue to consult colleagues in the Department for Education and Employment so that they, too, can benefit from initiatives on the new deal in the interests of work and opportunities in their field?

Mr. Bayley: Supported employment plays an important part in providing the job opportunities that the new deal seeks to open up and make available to disabled people. I work extremely closely with the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities on this and other issues. We are joint stakeholders, and equally committed to the new deal for disabled people.

Pensioners

9. **Mr. Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury): If he will make a statement on the take-up of income support by pensioners. [124953]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): We estimate that around 500,000 pensioners are missing out on their entitlement, and we are concerned about those in real need because they do not take up the minimum income guarantee. At the end of May, we launched an ambitious minimum income guarantee take-up campaign, and there is intense activity on a number of fronts to encourage those who may be entitled to the minimum income guarantee to claim it.

Mr. Robertson: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply. However, is it not true that the poorest pensioners are in fact the oldest pensioners? Is it not also true that the oldest pensioners are probably less likely to take up income support or the minimum income guarantee? Given the Government's stated objective of helping the poorest pensioners, would it not be a failure of the minimum income guarantee if that were the case? Would the problem not be alleviated if pensioners—or at least today's pensioners and older pensioners—received a better state pension?

Mr. Bayley: It is the intention of the take-up campaign to ensure that all pensioners who are entitled to a minimum income guarantee but are not claiming it get it. That includes a lot of older pensioners—precisely those to whom we are giving the additional help of the free television licence.

In the first two weeks of the campaign, we have received 40,000 calls on the MIG helpline, and an additional 30,000 requests have been received through the post from people returning the tear-off slips in the mail shots that we have sent out so far. We are getting a good response, and we know that it will provide the additional support of a minimum income guarantee for a lot of pensioners who have not have had it hitherto, although they were entitled to it.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): I welcome what my hon. Friend has said about the number of those calling the helpline. However, even when people receive the partially completed form, many pensioners who live alone, and some with disabilities, will find it very difficult to complete the other relevant parts of the form, particularly people who are blind or partially sighted. Will my hon. Friend consider the possibility of a link-up between the

telephone helpline and local social security offices or welfare rights advisers in an area, so that pensioners who still need help with completing the forms can receive it?

Mr. Bayley: I can reassure my hon. Friend that the way we have structured the MIG take-up campaign is intended to deal with precisely that problem. When people telephone the helpline, they can fill in the form over the telephone there and then.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Is not the Government's minimum income guarantee for pensioners a complete con, because it depends on some of our poorest pensioners having to go cap in hand to the Government to claim income support? Is it not high time all our pensioners had a decent minimum pension?

Mr. Bayley: I am just astounded by that question. Let me take the House back to May 1997, when the basic state pension was £62.45. Those getting the MIG now are getting £16 more. If the hon. Gentleman tells the people who are getting £16 more as a result of a Labour policy that the MIG is a bad thing, they will laugh in his face.

Pensions and Savings

10. **Mr. Andrew Love** (Edmonton): What steps he is taking to improve public knowledge about pensions and saving for retirement. [124954]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): We want everyone who can save to do so. People think about their education and their working career, and they should think also about their retirement. So we are introducing individual pension forecasts that set out how much individuals will get on retirement. It should concentrate minds wonderfully.

Mr. Love: All the evidence suggests, first, that people begin to think about their pensions only when it is too late and, secondly, that the level of financial literacy in this country is far too low and needs to be raised. The Financial Services Authority has been given a statutory duty to promote an information and education campaign, but is that enough? What further steps of encouragement can the Government take to help people save for their retirement?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend has a good point. I suspect that most people tend not to think about their income in retirement until they are in their 50s, or when it is too late to build up a second pension.

First, we had to ensure that there were the means to enable people to save for their retirement. That is why we have reformed SERPS for the new state second pension and introduced a stakeholder pension to provide options that previously did not exist. We shall ensure that everyone receives an annual statement that tells him or her exactly how much they will get when they retire. Members will no doubt be aware that the Fees Office is in the process of sending out just such statements to Members, who frequently think about their second and third careers, especially at this stage in a Parliament. I am sure that many Conservatives wish now that they had thought about these matters during the previous Parliament. We want to ensure that everyone in the country knows exactly where he or she stands on retirement, and then does something about it.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): When it comes to knowledge about saving for retirement, will the Secretary of State acknowledge that the basic state pension is popular precisely because it gives dignity to people? They do not view it as a handout. It is something that they have worked for all their life. That is why they want an increase in the basic state pension. Is that perhaps why a Labour Back Bencher was quoted as telling the *Daily Mirror*:

> It's terrible. The Tory leader is saying in public what we've been saying in private for months . . . ?

Let us have some humility and no more spin. Just give pensioners what they want. Does the right hon. Gentleman acknowledge that 75p was a political disaster for the Government, and will he now act?

Mr. Darling: As far as I am aware, the hon. Gentleman stood on exactly the same manifesto as the rest of his Conservative colleagues at the previous election. Conservative policy in government and at the general election—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): He was a Minister.

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend reminds me that the hon. Gentleman was a Minister in the previous Tory Government. Every year, they increased the state pension in line with prices, and that is what their policy remains. Despite the one-off policy of increasing pensions by all of 42p, which is what their policy is now, they say that that was a one-off and that they will go to price indexation thereafter.

We are doing better than that, but our priority in the first instance is to help pensioners who lost out during all the years when the Conservatives were in power, and during the years when the hon. Gentleman was a Minister, when he said absolutely nothing about pensioners or the basic state pension. He does not even dispute that. The Conservative Government's record was to leave us with a generation of pensioners who had so little to retire on that they were living below income support levels. That situation should not be tolerated, and that is why we have increased the moneys that we spend on supporting pensioners. In the first instance, we are giving most help to those pensioners who lost out during the Tory years.

Ms Helen Southworth (Warrington, South): I really welcome the action that my right hon. Friend is taking for tomorrow's pensioners. It will solve many future problems. Far too many of today's pensioners are on unacceptably low incomes, thanks to 18 years of Tory Government mismanagement, which caused appalling neglect. Will my right hon. Friend take some early action to continue the work that he has already begun, so that we can increase the basic state pension and provide what Age Concern calls a modest but decent income for everybody?

Mr. Darling: We should aim to ensure that all pensioners share in the country's rightful prosperity. Surely the first priority must be to address the situation that we inherited, in which about 2 million pensioners

were living on pensions that were so low that they needed income support. I welcome what my hon. Friend has said, because she recognises that half the additional £6.5 billion that we are spending on pensioners is going to the poorest pensioners. On top of that, we have doubled the capital limits that enable pensioners to qualify for help. The Conservative Government did nothing about that for some 10 years before they lost the last election.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): I am afraid that the Secretary of State does not seem to have been listening to his own Back Benchers. Several Labour Back Benchers have called for a substantial increase in the basic state pension. That is our policy. We would get rid of e gimmicks and consolidate that money in a pension that pensioners want, which is a guaranteed entitlement. Why on earth did the Secretary of State not argue that case with the Treasury? Why was he happy to accept the 75p, when we are offering what pensioners up and down the country want? We are offering all pensioners an increase in the real value of their pension on top of what they get from the Government at the moment. If the Secretary of State does not listen, all Labour Members will need some retirement planning.

Mr. Darling: That is wishful thinking on the part of the hon. Gentleman. I shall tell him what I did listen to: I listened to the shadow Chancellor when he was asked about the Conservative party's pension policy. He said:

It is a one-off policy. It is money which is already being spent.

He is right, because the Conservatives are planning to scrap the winter fuel payment, the free television licence, the Christmas bonus and a range of other measures, and to give that money back to pensioners, the net result of which he has now had to admit would be that pensioners would be not £5, £7 or £10 a week better off, but 42p. That is before they start paying tax, and without taking into account the fact that some 2 million pensioners would lose out because of the help they get through the benefits system.

When the election comes, I am quite happy for us to be judged against what we have done, what the Tory party did in office and what it is now promising. Most pensioners will see that this Government are doing more for pensioners than the last lot would do if they were ever returned to power.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): May I say openly and honestly that many of my constituents have expressed concerns about pensions and have urged the Government to do more, but not one of them has said that pensioners would be better off under a Conservative Government? They know that when the Conservatives, over 18 years, had the opportunity to do something about pensions, they did absolutely nothing. Does my right hon. Friend agree that during the debate on this issue in the past few months not one representative pensioners' leader has endorsed the Conservative party's proposals?

Mr. Darling: I can tell my hon. Friend something else. I am not sure that many pensioners would be grateful for their 42p once they read what the shadow Health Secretary had to say earlier this year. He said that health conditions such as

hip and knee replacements, hernia and cataract operations

should be covered by private medical insurance. I do not know much about subscriptions to BUPA and other private insurance, but I am pretty sure that health cover costs more than 42p a week. A hernia operation costs £1,500, a knee operation £8,400 and a hip replacement operation £7,800. Those are BUPA prices—I took the trouble to find out what it is quoting, and 42p would not even look at it. Pensioners know exactly what to make of Tories bearing gifts: they do not believe a word of it.

Dividend Tax Credits

11. **Mr. David Ruffley** (Bury St. Edmunds): If he will make a statement on the abolition of the ACT dividend tax credit as it relates to pensioner incomes. [124956]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): The abolition of advance corporation tax was part of a package of measures to encourage companies to invest in their long-term future. Removing the tax credit removed the encouragement for companies to pay dividends instead of retaining profits to finance future expansion. That is in the interests of all investors, both individuals and pension schemes, and will help to promote a thriving economy, which will benefit all pensioners' incomes.

Mr. Ruffley: The Minister should be aware that there are some 300,000 pensioners whose incomes are so low that they do not pay tax but who are modest shareholders. They now face the loss of about £75 a year as a result of the Government's abolition of dividend tax credit. Why did the Government impose this sneaky, unjust and unfair stealth tax on some of our poorest pensioners?

Mr. Rooker: To be honest, it is not possible to disaggregate the exact effect of a package of measures designed to improve economic performance. From the hon. Gentleman's experience as an economic consultant to the Conservative party, he knows that it is much better for businesses to base their decisions on the operation of the business, not on the vagaries of the tax system. Making the change made a substantial difference. The average return on pension fund investments in 1998 was 16 per cent; in 1999, it was 21 per cent. Part of the package was that corporation tax went down from 33 to 30 per cent. Pensions are a lifetime investment—the hon. Gentleman understands that—and they need a strong and healthy economy. That is what we are creating.

Lone Parents

12. **Laura Moffatt** (Crawley): What steps he is taking to help lone parents gain access to information about the labour market. [124957]

13. **Mr. James Gray** (North Wiltshire): If he will make a statement on the new deal for lone parents. [124958]

16. **Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick** (Poplar and Canning Town): What progress has been made with the new deal for lone parents. [124962]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): The new deal for lone parents offers a comprehensive package of back-to-work help for lone parents on income support, through an individual personal adviser service—and it is working.

More than 148,000 lone parents have participated in the new deal since the programme started; 50,000 have found jobs and nearly 16,000 have entered education or training.

Laura Moffatt: There is little doubt—especially in my constituency of Crawley—that the whole programme has been warmly welcomed by lone parents, who are thrilled by the response they receive when they go to the Employment Service. May I raise the issue of child care? Will my hon. Friend enlighten the House as to how all lone parents—women and men—get information about the availability of child care places? There has been an enormous increase in the number of places available. Is there good departmental working so that lone parent advisers can give the information about the location of those places to our new dealers, so that they can take advantage of them?

Angela Eagle: Yes; by the end of this year, the expansion of child care is due to create 180,000 new child care places, not counting the extra places created in nurseries for four-year-olds and for those three-year-olds whose parents want them. In practical ways, we are allowing lone parents—who were left on the scrap heap by the Conservatives and given no practical way to get back into work so that they could be better off—to take those steps into work. So far, 50,000 of them have done so; 16,000 are undertaking training and education to improve their job prospects.

Mr. Gray: The Minister makes use of the figure of 50,000 lone parents—the number, she says, who have found jobs since 1 May 1997. Will she admit that the reality is that the figure of 50,000 includes all lone parents who have found jobs during that time—most of whom have nothing whatever to do with the new deal? The truth is that only 1 per cent. of lone parents who found jobs say that the new deal was the reason they did so. If that figure is put against the cost of the programme, the cost is £22,000 per job. Will she admit that that is an expensive gimmick, and that it is not only a gimmick but a flop? Will she abandon it?

Angela Eagle: No, it is not a flop, nor is it a gimmick; it is giving many thousands of lone parents good chances to get back into work. They were offered nothing by the Conservatives. The programme is key to our policies in the battle to end child poverty. It is clear from their pronouncements that the Tories—who created the large increase in child poverty of the past 20 years—are not interested in ending it. They have already announced that they will abolish the scheme—they will abolish the new deal, the working families tax credit and help with child care. That is some Tory guarantee for lone parents—"You're on your own".

Mr. Fitzpatrick: Will the Minister commend with me the efforts of Miss Carole Lowry and her Employment Service lone parents team covering Newham and Tower Hamlets? Miss Lowry is confident that the first of nine pilots for London to train child minders will be as successful as the existing classroom assistants training scheme that has been running in Tower Hamlets and Newham. Does the Minister agree that those are the types of employment opportunity that many lone parents trying to break back into the job market would find attractive? Would not such opportunities be jeopardised if the Conservatives had their way and abolished the new deal for new parents?

Angela Eagle: Yes, the Tory party says that it would save the £190 million that we are spending on the new deal for lone parents, but 90 per cent. of that spending pays for itself. It would therefore save very little money and it would consign the 1 million lone parents whom we inherited and who were given no help by the previous Government to the dole.

Let me provide some figures. In the final years of the Tory Government—between 1991 and 1997—there was a 14 per cent. increase in the number of lone parents on income support. The record speaks for itself. Between 1997 and 2000, there has been a 10 per cent. fall in that figure—100,000 fewer lone parents are on income support than we inherited. That, by anyone's measure, is success.

National Air Traffic Services

3.30 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) (*by private notice*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the failure of National Air Traffic Services computer systems on Saturday 17 June and the ensuing chaos for air travellers.

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Mr. Nick Raynsford): As has been widely reported, the flight data processing system—FDPS—at the London air traffic control centre at West Drayton suffered a software failure last Saturday, 17 June. That resulted in extensive disruption to air traffic and consequent delays to air passengers over the weekend. I naturally very much regret the serious inconvenience that that failure caused to passengers and to airlines, and I understand that the chief executive of NATS is issuing an apology to his customers today.

The main concern of NATS is to maintain and enhance safety in air traffic control. When faced with problems with the FDPS software on 17 June, NATS therefore acted immediately to maintain safety standards by imposing tight limits on the flow of aircraft in UK airspace. It maintained service to aircraft and safety standards, in the first instance, by using stand-by procedures. Those procedures involve the manual transcription of flight details, which creates additional work for controllers who can therefore handle safely fewer flights than normal. The delays experienced by airlines and passengers were a direct consequence of these measures.

NATS staff have been working hard to identify and correct the problem with the FDPS software, which had malfunctioned on one previous occasion on 9 June. The software in question was upgraded some three months ago to meet changes in the way that NATS manages UK airspace. Upgrading the software is a common occurrence. The FDPS is a relatively modern computer system, but it has to be upgraded regularly to match growing levels of traffic and changes in NATS operating procedures to cope with that growth.

My understanding is that NATS has yet finally to resolve the underlying problem with the new software. NATS continues to work on that, but in the meantime has reverted to the fallback system, which involves using the previous well-tried version of the software. This takes some hours to set up and therefore could not be immediately deployed when the software problem came to light. However, this back-up system, which was the main system until three months ago, is now functioning well and air traffic should substantially be back to normal today. It is the intention of NATS to continue to operate this well-tried system until the problem with the new software has been identified and remedied.

This incident demonstrates the importance of the air traffic control system to the well-being and smooth operation of the United Kingdom. It also demonstrates the commitment of NATS and its staff, at all levels, to maintain safety in our skies. It shows the importance of building on NATS operational excellence with investment in new technology and world-class project management skills, so as to meet the demands of the growing market in air transport.

Mr. Jenkin: I thank the Minister for the regrets and the apology from NATS management that he has conveyed. However, I reflect on the irony of the fact that the answer to this vital question was given by the Minister for Housing and Planning, which is not an entirely satisfactory situation for the House.

This weekend, thousands and thousands of air passengers' journeys were disrupted. Their flights were cancelled and they found themselves stranded at airports around the United Kingdom. Will the Minister join me in congratulating and thanking all those who made Herculean efforts to manage the crisis and to recover from it? That includes not just airline and airport staff, but the air traffic controllers who had to resort to the manual information system that he described.

For all its efforts, the House must surely agree that NATS completely failed its customers on Saturday morning, causing not just massive inconvenience, but damaging the reputation of Britain as a place to do business. In this country, we pride ourselves on having the most advanced, best managed and safest air traffic system in the world. Air passengers from Britain and abroad are entitled to be reassured that this totally unprecedented breakdown is an isolated incident and not a fundamental deterioration in the service provided by NATS.

First, for the record, will the Minister confirm absolutely that safety was not compromised in that breakdown? Secondly, will he say more about the causes of the computer breakdown and confirm that it was caused by the failure of completely standard software which has been used in various forms around the world for many years? Will he confirm that the volume of air traffic on Saturday, while heavy, was not exceptional at the time that the failure occurred? Is there any truth in the rumour that the software that failed was reinstated after a failure in the upgrade?

Thirdly, is it not a matter of concern that this is the second breakdown in a few days and that the two incidents appear to be unconnected? Fourthly, will the Minister confirm that he is not yet in a position to advise the House on the underlying causes of the failures and therefore cannot reassure the House and air passengers that this will not happen again? Related to that, when the West Drayton system transfers to the new Swanwick centre near Southampton, will controllers still be able to fall back on manual systems in the event of a similar failure?

Has the Minister made an assessment of the outlook for the viability of the public-private partnership in the light of this major failure? Do the Government intend to press ahead regardless with their unnecessarily complex proposal to dispose of 51 per cent. of the shares in NATS. I remind the House that the Transport Sub-Committee described that as

the worst of all the possible options.

Mr. Raynsford: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman has not become used to my presence at the Dispatch Box. After all, we sparred with each other for five months over the Transport Bill. I should have thought that, by now, he would be used to me speaking on these matters.

[Mr. Raynsford]

The hon. Gentleman asked whether I would join him in congratulating NATS staff and all concerned on dealing with the problems created by the software malfunction. Of course I do. I made it clear in my response to his original question that the fallback system works effectively in the interests of safety, although it inherently involves delay as it is not possible to process as many flights manually as it is when the computer is operational. I find that slightly difficult to reconcile with the hon. Gentleman's request that I confirm that NATS failed its customers. As he acknowledged, I made it clear that I very much regretted the failure and said that NATS would be writing to apologise to its customers. As he acknowledged, NATS responded well to the crisis and put in place stand-by arrangements to ensure that safety was paramount at all times, which must be the main consideration.

The hon. Gentleman asked me to confirm that this was an isolated incident, not a fundamental breakdown. I think that I have made it clear that the problem, which has not yet been fully identified, is associated with the new software package introduced three months ago. Until the problems with it have been identified, the previous well-tried software will be operated by NATS. For that reason, I must reject the hon. Gentleman's suggestion that I am not able to give any reassurance. He will understand that, until the faults with the new software are identified, the system now operating is that which was operating successfully until just three months ago.

The hon. Gentleman asked me to confirm that safety was not compromised. I think that it is clear from what I have said that safety is paramount at all times. He made the point, which I reiterate, that the problem was not to do with exceptionally heavy traffic. Newspaper reports that there is therefore the prospect of further difficulties over the summer when traffic volumes rise are not a correct analysis of the problem—which was to do with a software malfunction, not the volume of air traffic.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the software involved was reinstated software. I made it clear in my original response that it is a new software package, which was introduced some three months ago. He asked whether the two incidents were unconnected. Until the cause of the failure has been fully explored, understood and corrected, we will not know for sure whether the latest incident was a repeat of the malfunction that occurred on the previous occasion, but it is likely that there is a connection. Apart from those two incidents, the software has worked successfully since its introduction.

The hon. Gentleman asked what will happen when the transfer to Swanwick takes place. It was always envisaged that the existing system would continue to operate from West Drayton until 2005, so it is not affected in any way by the move to Swanwick or the delay in that move. However, under the two-centre strategy there will be an added safeguard because Prestwick and Swanwick will both be operating on comparable systems, so in the event of a failure of either of those systems, the other system will be able to provide assistance.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked me about the implications for the public-private partnership. It should be clear to him that although the way in which air traffic control deals with its primary responsibility, which is ensuring safety, has been proved to work well on this occasion, once again we have seen the difficulties associated with the introduction of new software or systems. That reinforces the Government's belief that it is essential to get increased private investment through the public-private partnership and to bring in world-class project management skills to ensure that those new investment proposals and programmes are introduced efficiently and effectively.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Is my hon. Friend aware that the excellence and experience of the air traffic controllers in dealing with their little bits of paper kept people safe in the skies over the weekend? It is noticeable that the system, which should have been replaced some 15 years ago, is in need of constant upgrade. Moreover, because its private manufacturing suppliers have not been able to fulfil the conditions that they offered air traffic control, there will be continuing difficulties; indeed, that is the problem for NATS at Swanwick.

Will my hon. Friend point out to the general public that most of us would prefer to rely on the responsibility of air traffic controllers, in looking after our safety in the skies, moving bits of paper around, rather than on the private suppliers of software which may be very expensive and extraordinarily unreliable?

Mr. Raynsford: I say at once to my hon. Friend that she and I entirely agree about the excellence of NATS staff in responding to the problems created by the software failure. However, I do not agree with her about the excellence of NATS in relation to new software and investment in the necessary equipment to enable those controllers to do their job properly. This incident, sadly, is a further instance of a failure of a new system. The Government believe that the right way forward is, as I have already said, to combine the possibility of attracting substantial additional private investment for the considerable new investment needs in the years ahead with world-class project management skills—which, sadly, have not been too much in evidence in new investment in NATS in the past.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I, too, congratulate the air traffic controllers and others on working so tirelessly to minimise the difficulties created by the breakdown. Does the Minister agree that part of the problem may well have stemmed from the failure to invest in air traffic services in the 1980s, which was characterised not least by the failure to bring Swanwick on stream quickly enough? Does he therefore agree that the introduction of the part-privatisation of NATS may well prove a distraction from the urgent work of getting Swanwick on line and resolving the problems? Given that the busiest time of the year is now upon us, what assurances has he been given that similar occurrences are unlikely?

Mr. Raynsford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words of congratulation for the staff at NATS who, as hon. Members have said, did a first-rate job in responding to difficult circumstances when the software failed. He asked whether the problem may be to do with past failures in investment. I believe that, in this case, the problem is associated with a software package that was introduced recently as part of a continuous process of

upgrading. That will be confirmed only as and when the various checks have been carried out that are necessary to identify the fault and remedy it.

On the hon. Gentleman's final point, he will understand that I cannot give an absolute assurance. However, the problem was to do with software failure rather than with the volume of air traffic using the system, so there is no reason to believe that further failures will occur this summer because of growing volumes of air traffic in the area. We have coped well. In fact, Britain has coped better with rising volumes of air traffic than Europe as a whole. The average delays to flights into and out of the United Kingdom are less than the European average, and it is certainly our intention that NATS should continue to maintain that good record.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Is the Minister aware that the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting was one of those who managed to get away this weekend? In a few hours, she is due to make a 20-minute keynote speech to an international conference on tourism in Las Vegas. Having been carried there at vast expense, will she be able to reassure the United Kingdom and the international tourism industry, during those 20 minutes, that such an incident will not happen again this summer? Or will there be a persistent repetition of such incidents at Heathrow, greatly damaging the United Kingdom tourism and travel industry?

Mr. Raynsford: The best possible assurance that can be given is to compare the record of air traffic control in Britain with other European countries. Throughout the first four months of this year, we have achieved an average delay of about one third of the average across Europe. That is a proud record, and it is certainly our intention that it should continue. As I have made clear in response to earlier questions, the failure was not due to the volume of traffic; it was to do with a computer system that has recently been introduced. The software system was introduced just three months ago, but by reverting to the well-tried and proven software system that was previously in operation, and which worked without such a failure, we should be able to ensure that there will be a fully adequate service for people coming to this country during the months ahead. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting is able to convey that message to anyone who expresses any doubt about coming to Britain by air.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): May I, too, salute the professionalism of our air traffic controllers, who have done a magnificent job in very difficult circumstances? Is the Minister aware that the airlines, too, regard their efforts as having been Herculean and that there is no criticism of NATS for what it has done in that respect? May I ask him two specific questions? First, is the software that failed the same as that which is proposed to be installed in Swanwick? Clearly, if it is there are severe implications for Swanwick. Secondly, given that British Airways alone lost about 200 flights this weekend and that other airlines also suffered losses, can the Minister tell us whether there will be any compensation?

Mr. Raynsford: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's congratulations on the performance of the air traffic controllers. We all recognise that they have done a very good job in difficult circumstances. I remind him of my earlier comment that the current flight data processing system at West Drayton was not intended to be replaced until 2005—long after the move to Swanwick and the introduction of the new systems there. The two systems would have operated in parallel, and, therefore, there would have been no reason to be concerned as a result of this incident about the proposed arrangements being made at Swanwick. The delay in introducing Swanwick did not cause this particular problem.

There is no provision for compensation either in the existing legislative framework or in the one proposed under the Transport Bill. If the hon. Gentleman reflects on the matter, he will immediately realise that there could be perverse incentives, which could work against the interests of safety, should air traffic controllers face a serious financial risk if delays were caused by introducing procedures that guaranteed safety. As he will be aware, the delays that occurred during the weekend, although regrettable, were necessary to ensure that safety was given primacy in all circumstances. It would be perhaps more difficult to do that if there were a potential liability because of compensation claims. That is the background to the absence of such provision.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): How long did it take to go from the computer system that crashed to the manual system? During that period, how many aircraft were circling? The Minister stated that the manual system cannot run at the same speed or handle the same number of aircraft as the computerised system. How was that dealt with? For how long was the upgrade piloted?

Madam Speaker: Order. One or two questions at a time. We have two statements to come.

Mr. Raynsford: The introduction of the manual fallback system was immediate. The introduction of the alternative—the old tried and tested computer software system to which I referred—took a matter of hours. As I have explained to the House, it is not possible for the two systems to run in parallel. There is a start-up time on the alternative software system and, therefore, during the gap before it could be brought into use the manual fallback system operated. That is why NATS—to avoid any repeat of the two previous incidents—has decided to run the old tried and tested software system until the faults with the new system have been identified and put right.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the number of flights affected. The answer is a substantial number—virtually all flights into the United Kingdom were affected in one way or another. However, I am pleased to say that as a result of the excellent work of NATS, the position has been restored to virtual normality.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Will the Minister please give a straight answer to the question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry)? What will the delays be later this summer?

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman clearly did not listen to my earlier responses. The two failures that occurred some 10 days ago and last Saturday were both the result of a malfunction of a new computer software system, which was introduced three months ago. As a result of the experience of those two failures, NATS has

[Mr. Raynsford]

reverted to the former well-tried and tested software system that worked successfully up to its replacement three months ago. There is no reason, therefore, to fear any recurrence of the incidents that occurred 10 days ago and last Saturday. People abroad can have every confidence that they can come to Britain in the usual way, depending on an excellent air traffic control system operated efficiently and effectively.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): May I press the Minister further on the particular model that he has chosen for the Transport Bill—the privatisation of NATS? Is he persuaded that that model will release enough funds from the private sector to allow for the type of investment to which he referred?

Mr. Raynsford: Yes.

Deaths at Dover

3.53 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): With permission, Madam Speaker, I wish to make a statement about the discovery at Dover at 11 o'clock last night of 58 people found dead in a lorry, which had arrived from Zeebrugge in Belgium. Of these, 54 were men and four women. In addition, two men were found alive and have been taken to hospital. This is a most terrible human tragedy. The whole House will be appalled by that loss of life and our thoughts are with the relatives of those who have died. The vehicle concerned was a refrigerated lorry, which had been hermetically sealed, and the 58 who perished must have died a most terrible death. I pay tribute to customs officers, to officers and civilian staff of the Kent police and to staff of the immigration service for the very great dedication and professionalism that they have shown.

The incident is now the subject of a major criminal investigation being conducted by the Kent police. A man is being held in connection with the incident and will be interviewed. Indications are that these people are from the far east, but the police are not, at this stage, able to determine the nationality of those who have died or of the two survivors. Hon. Members will understand that, while there is such an investigation into potential criminal offences, I am unable to give the House further details.

As the House knows, the Government and law enforcement agencies have long been concerned about the involvement of serious organised criminals who make huge illegal profits from the smuggling of illegal immigrants into this country. No one should be in any doubt that that is a profoundly evil trade, whose perpetrators have no regard whatever for human life. We should all be determined to crack down on that dreadful trade. Co-operation between the police, Customs, the immigration service, overseas agencies and authorities and carriers has been intensified in recent months, and the vehicle involved in this incident was intercepted as a result of an operation by Customs.

Further to deter such trafficking, powers were taken in the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 to impose civil penalties on hauliers and drivers found with clandestine entrants in their vehicles. Drivers must be on the alert to discourage that dangerous activity. There is already evidence that the civil penalty is working. A comparison of the two months before the imposition of the civil penalty with the two months after has shown a reduction of 26 per cent. in clandestines seeking entry at the port of Dover. In addition, under the 1999 Act, the criminal penalties for facilitation have been increased and new controls on unscrupulous immigration advisers are being imposed.

I am afraid to say that this terrible tragedy must serve as a stark warning to others who might be tempted to place their fate in the hands of organised traffickers. Those who tragically died last night are, without question, the victims of those traffickers. Those organised groups do not care about human safety; they care only for profit and this appalling tragedy is a grim reminder of that. I know that right hon. and hon. Members will join me in deploring the trafficking of humans and in extending our sympathies to the relatives of those who died.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I thank the Home Secretary for that statement and for his

courtesy in giving me notice of it. I associate Conservative Members with his extension of sympathy to the relatives of those who died, and with his congratulations to the various statutory authorities on the way in which they and the individuals who uncovered this appalling tragedy reacted with great professionalism.

I am aware that the right hon. Gentleman cannot give many details at this stage, but he will know that one of the major points of concern must be the degree of international co-operation that does or does not prevail in trying to prevent this trade, and the rigour of checks carried out outside this country. If he is not yet able to state the point of origin of the vehicle's journey, will he at least tell the House either where the last check was carried out before Dover and the results of that check, or whether any such check took place?

Does the Home Secretary agree that the rigour of checking outside Britain is not what it might be? To assist lorry drivers in their duty to check their vehicles, will he put pressure on other Governments to provide secure and well-lit areas in which drivers can carry out those checks? Is he aware that, during ferry crossings, drivers are compulsorily separated from their vehicles? Has he any plans to institute checks by immigration officials during ferry crossings when, it is claimed, many transfers of human beings from one vehicle to another take place?

Bearing in mind that many will think that the tragedy has been waiting to happen, will the Home Secretary state how many instances there have been in the past 12 months of 20 or more clandestines in a single vehicle being detected at our ports? Is that an increasing, a decreasing, or a stable trend? Will he also provide some indication of when, subject to the limits that I understand entirely, he will be able to release to the House further details of the vehicle's journey, its origins and its consequences?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her association with my expression of great sympathy for the relatives of those who died. I know that the whole House will join in the congratulations on and appreciation of the work of the Kent police—many civilian scenes of crime officers were involved, as well as police officers—the immigration service and Customs. It must have been deeply traumatic for the staff who found the people and subsequently had to deal with the matter.

The right hon. Lady asked about the degree of international co-operation. We are all the time seeking to improve international co-operation against the traffic in illegal immigrants. As the House may know, I was in Lisbon on Friday last, discussing with colleagues who are Ministers of the Interior how we improve co-ordination of our immigration and asylum policies across Europe, to try to bring an end what has correctly been described as asylum shopping between one member state and another.

Early on in this Administration, carriers' liability was imposed by me on Eurostar trains from Brussels, with the full agreement of the then Minister of the Interior in Belgium, Mr. Van de Lanotte. As the right hon. Lady may also know, we recently signed a protocol to the Sangatte treaty in respect of Eurostar traffic from France to ensure that we can impose what are called juxtaposed controls and to have British immigration officers checking those who board Eurostar trains at Gare du Nord, Calais and Lille, in return for French immigration officials doing the same on this side of the channel. Until that comes into force—it is a matter of procedure in the French Parliament—there will be enhanced controls for Eurostar by the French police and other authorities on the French side.

We are always taking other measures. With regard to Zeebrugge, security there has generally been significantly better than that at Calais. We are involved in continuing discussions with the port authorities at Calais, and with the hauliers and ferry operators. The right hon. Lady and the House may wish to know that I had a meeting this morning—he has agreed that I should say this—with Lord Sterling, the chairman of P&O Ferries, about the measures that we could take to improve security at Dover.

The right hon. Lady asked when the last check was made before Dover. I cannot give her an answer on that, but I shall do my best to provide her with an answer as soon as I have the information.

As to the rigours of checking outside the United Kingdom, in some cases checks are, by definition, rigorous and they work. For example, with the co-operation of the Italian authorities, we have improved the checking on freight trains which are assembled in freight yards in Milan and then come straight through the tunnel. That has helped to detect and deter quite a large number of east European illegals seeking to gain access to the trains there. I accept entirely that there is a great need for other countries to improve the checking of vehicles coming into the United Kingdom.

The right hon. Lady said that she understands that drivers are not allowed on the freight decks of ferries. That is true, because it is a matter of health and safety. However, from time to time we provide immigration officials as part of operations better to detect illegals.

The right hon. Lady also asked whether I can give the numbers of those who have been detected in the back of vehicles, where the groups were 20 or more. I need notice of that question, but I shall be happy to provide her with the information as soon as possible.

As soon as I can, consistent with the integrity of the criminal investigation, I shall provide the right hon. Lady and the House with further information.

Mr. Gwyn Prosser (Dover): I thank my right hon. Friend for his tribute to the authorities in Dover—the police, Customs and immigration officers. May I add to that list the ambulance workers of Kent, who were faced with horrific scenes this morning—scenes and stories that have yet to be told, but which are the stuff of nightmares?

I welcome my right hon. Friend's commitment to further co-operation overseas, not just in Europe but worldwide, because the problem is a global one.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important to distinguish between the victims—innocent parties who sometimes find themselves washed up on the coasts of Dover, scrambling out of the backs of lorries, having fled oppression, fear of death and torture; we will always support and give asylum to them—and the racketeers and professional crooks, who simply exploit the situation for their own benefit?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's comments. I should have paid tribute to the ambulance personnel in Kent earlier. I want to do that now, and correct the omission.

[Mr. Straw]

My hon. Friend is right about the increasing co-operation, which we need. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is raising the terrible incident, its consequences and the need for heightened European and international co-operation with fellow Heads of Government today at the Feira Council.

My hon. Friend spoke of the distinction that we must make between—I paraphrase—those who are genuine asylum seekers, although they have had to use illegal means to gain entry into the United Kingdom, and the racketeers and professional crooks who stand behind them. I agree. However, one of the problems that the United Kingdom—and almost every other European country—faces is that although between 20 and 30 per cent. of people who seek entry into the United Kingdom have a genuine, well-founded claim to refugee status, the claims of many of the rest, who come here for what they regard as a better life, have no basis in the 1951 convention. They are better classified as economic migrants. A further tragedy, which has been illustrated only too well today, is that those people are given all sorts of promises about the life they will find in this country. Even if they get through alive, they are often sorely disappointed when they arrive.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I share the horror and sympathy that the Home Secretary has expressed at the unnecessary loss of life. Those who died were, in all likelihood, the victims of other people's misdeeds. I share with the Home Secretary and colleagues from all parties the view that the international policing systems should track the traffickers in human life to the ends of the earth, if necessary, to ensure that they are caught, and punished as severely as possible. If the Home Secretary believes that the penalty system should be reviewed at home and across Europe, we would be happy to participate in that.

We have never received an answer from the Government about the way in which people can seek asylum lawfully in western European countries. Unless there is a lawful way for people to make an application and come to a country that might accept them, they must use illegal means and put themselves in the hands of those who will exploit them. That was shown yesterday.

There was a report two months ago about a system for scanning all vehicles to detect whether there are human beings in them. Is the system sufficiently advanced at ports of departure and entry in Britain and all other European countries for ships and trains? With such a system, we could check all vehicles for people as well as for Customs and Excise contraband, just as our luggage is checked when we travel by air.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his association with the remarks that I made early in my statement. He mentioned the need for better international policing. We are improving co-operation within Europe gradually, although not fast enough. We have some way to go before we have properly sensitised several other Governments, especially some of those in Asia, about the need for their full co-operation in practice as well as in principle, and about the steps that they must help to initiate to prevent this terrible traffic.

The hon. Gentleman asked how those with a genuine and well-founded claim for asylum could make that claim without effectively breaking the immigration rules, and often the criminal law, of the receiving state. The answer to that at the moment is, "With very great difficulty", unless they have previously gained lawful entry to the United Kingdom, and subsequent to that entry there has been a change in the circumstances of the home country. I sought to make exactly that point in a speech to fellow Interior Ministers in Lisbon last week, and I urge Members to consider it.

I said in that speech that a contradiction lay at the heart not of the obligation under the 1951 convention, but of the way in which it operates. We need to discuss the issue rationally, because the current system is irrational. I say that having also said that I regard our obligation to give refuge to those in well-founded fear of persecution as absolute. We must look at better ways of achieving that, so that we do not end up—and I am afraid that the operation of the 1951 convention leads to such a result—inadvertently pushing people, whether they have a genuine and well-founded fear or are simply economic migrants, into the hands of these terrible facilitators.

The hon. Gentleman asked about systems for scanning vehicles. The immigration service currently uses dogs, which have proved remarkably effective, and carbon dioxide detectors. It has been proposed that the service should also have access to major X-ray facilities. It is open to experiment, and I know that the proposal is also currently the subject of an inquiry by the Home Affairs Committee.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): Were not the appalling events at Dover murder in all but name by those who traffic illegally in human beings, and bring them across continents knowingly to break our immigration laws? May I urge my right hon. Friend to continue his efforts to secure agreement throughout the European Union that applications for asylum in this country can be made in the first safe country in which those seeking it arrive, rather than their having—knowingly, and sometimes as victims of those who engage in this vile people traffic—to put themselves in the hands of the traffickers in order to get here and make their applications?

Mr. Straw: Yes. The central principle of the Dublin convention, which came into force in October 1997, is supposed to be that applicants are required to make their applications in the first safe country in which they arrive within the European Union. Except in the case of those who arrive here by air, and the handful who go on from here to the Republic of Ireland, that country can never be the United Kingdom. Another major challenge that we face is to ensure that the practice of the Dublin convention matches the theory.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): It appears that the introduction of fines has had some real impact on what might be called the more casual form of illegal immigration racketeering, but is there not a lesson to be learned from this awful tragedy? It appears to have had no impact whatsoever on the organised gangster system that has led to substantial numbers of people seeking to become illegal immigrants.

The Home Secretary recently went to Dover—as did the Intelligence and Security Committee—and saw for himself just what a daunting task is involved, given the volume of lorries, the other ports that exist and the containers. He must have realised the simple impossibility of making effective checks. The only way in which the position can be challenged is by means of determined international collaboration, bringing together the law enforcement agencies and, in particular, the intelligence and security resources of all the countries concerned. That is the only way in which traffic can be identified, and the only way in which we shall have some real chance of apprehending those involved.

Mr. Straw: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's point that the civil penalty is more likely to have had a significant effect on hauliers when proper checks have failed to be made, but I think it far too early to say that it has had no effect on criminal facilitators. As we are now seeing, the fact that those penalties are being imposed has put pressure on the hauliers and on ports abroad significantly to improve their checking and security. That can only help us in ensuring that there is better detection of these people.

On the right hon. Gentleman's second point, I agree: the scale of traffic in and out of Dover is such that it is not possible—nor is it necessary—to check every vehicle. As with other criminal activities, we increasingly rely on good intelligence. As I have told the House, the vehicle was intercepted not by accident, but as a result of good intelligence and of a Customs operation. We continue to ensure that the National Criminal Intelligence Service, the Security Service and the other agencies make available to the immigration service and to Customs their great expertise in both detecting and disrupting the criminal gangs.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): I join the Home Secretary in expressing deepest sympathy over the deaths of all those people at Dover and in condemning the racketeers who have brought people to that terrible pass, but will he consider the fact that it is not the first such tragedy? Not so many years ago, a ship capsized off Italy. A very large number of supposedly illegal immigrants drowned as a result. Many are washed up on the shores of Europe all the time—people come into Europe by all sorts of means.

Following that terrible tragedy, in which more than 50 lives were lost, is it not time that the world learned that people who are seeking to escape from political, social or economic tragedies and repression adopt desperate measures to get out? Perhaps we should start to look at human rights abuses, in both their widest and narrowest forms, in the countries from which people seek to escape before we start to take even more draconian measures, which I suspect will end up victimising very many more innocent people. Another such tragedy might well happen again.

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend is right to say that it is not the first tragedy. Nor, I fear, will it be the last. Of course we understand the motives of those who seek asylum in countries of western Europe, whether because of a well-founded fear of persecution or because they are economic migrants, but we must also get it across to them that there will be severe dangers—in some cases, of death—if they get involved with the criminal facilitators. The last people in the world who have any regard for human rights are those criminal facilitators. They do not care about the human rights of those whom they are trafficking; they care only about their profits.

On the wider issue, I agree with my hon. Friend that western European countries in particular, along with other countries in the west, should do much more to try to reduce the push factors of civil and political disruption, and other problems, in a number of states. Indeed, that was part of the purpose of my speech in Lisbon last week.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): Will the Home Secretary consider widening the British Government's involvement in the Normandy ports of Le Havre, Cherbourg and Caen—which bring many heavy vehicles to the south coast of Great Britain—and, in particular, look at the issue raised at Le Havre, where many vehicles are left unattended for long periods outside secure areas? Is he satisfied that the fines being levied against drivers and others for that trade are sufficiently severe to deter them? The going rate is now $1,000 or DM2,000 per person, so there is a lot of money to be made. Will he address the issue in Belgium and France in particular, and in Italy? The authorities there know well where the organisers of the rackets are and where the trafficking goes on, yet persist in doing little or nothing to bring to justice the people who are behind it.

Mr. Straw: As I said in my answer to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), we are working hard with the Belgian, French, Dutch and Italian authorities to improve the security of vehicles—whether they be road or railway vehicles—leaving their ports; some freight trains leave the so-called port of a freight yard outside Milan. We are working very hard with them to improve their security. As I said, one thing that the civil penalty has done is greatly to improve the incentive for those ports and hauliers to improve security. The previous criticism of the civil penalty was that the fine of £2,000 per head was too large, not too small. However, we are always open to review fines.

I am aware of the stories about the Belgian, French and Italian authorities. We have, however, been able to achieve considerable co-operation and understanding from the Belgian, French, Italian and other authorities. Every country in western Europe, with the almost single and singular exception of Portugal, has a major problem both of asylum seekers—some genuine, but many unfounded—and wholly undocumented illegal immigrants.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): My right hon. Friend said that we could not be told very much until the criminal investigation had been conducted. However, could we not be told some very elementary things, such as what the tachograph and the freight manifest show? Is it not true that one could not get many more than 60 people inside a refrigerated box van? Does not that fact suggest that there was no freight in the van? Could we not have answers now to some fairly simple questions?

Mr. Straw: As the House would expect, I have spoken to the chief constable of Kent in anticipation of this statement. As everyone would expect, he is very concerned that information that is sensitive and that could, if released, be prejudicial to the investigation is not

[Mr. Straw]

released. I hope that my hon. Friend will understand that. As I said, when it is safe to release the information and Kent police are satisfied that no prejudice to the investigation will arise, I shall be the first to release it.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): It is an appalling tragedy. If any good could possibly come out of it, it would be that action followed from it and that such a tragedy never happened again. If any of the Governments with whom the Home Secretary has been in touch believe that there is no sense of urgency, perhaps this tragedy will persuade them that we must urgently clamp down on this appalling and vile trade. Will the Home Secretary also look into new technology, even military technology, that Governments across the whole of Europe could use to detect whether human beings are inside vehicles? Checking only at ports is simply not enough, particularly if people are able to board vehicles before they reach ports. I understand that, to date, we do not even know where those individuals boarded, or where they died in transit.

Mr. Straw: I hope very much that this dreadful tragedy will have the beneficial outcome of getting some countries in Asia better to understand that they have to be really serious about helping the countries of western Europe to deal with this traffic. Every country in the world that I am aware of signs up to statements saying that they will co-operate effectively; now, we have to ensure that action follows. As I told the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), we are ready to consider any new technology that can secure the better detection of clandestines before they enter the United Kingdom.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): While we all condemn the criminal gangs who trade in human misery, should we not also—as my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) said—recognise the sheer desperation of those who are willing to venture upon such a journey and recognise, at least to some extent, the risks that they face? Should we not also work on the reasonable basis that they did not undertake that journey to come to Britain to live on benefits? They were desperate people. Although we recognise that immigration control is absolutely necessary, we should not forget for one moment that those people wanted a better life, and that they died for that reason.

Mr. Straw: It is, of course, a matter for common humanity. We must all recognise the desperation of those people—there is no question about that—and the circumstances in which they died, sealed in that vehicle.

I have already explained the Government's approach, and I hope that this event will send a message to those who may be enticed into involvement with these criminal facilitators that any promises that are held out to them of an easy journey and an easy life when they get here will turn out to be empty.

Euro 2000

4.25 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): With permission, Madam Speaker, I shall now make a statement on the violence involving so-called England supporters at the Euro 2000 football championships in Brussels and Charleroi in Belgium. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has already made clear, Her Majesty's Government profoundly regret what has happened, and I would like to express our deep apologies to the people of Belgium.

As the House knows, events on the field this weekend were wholly overshadowed by events off the pitch. I am sure that the whole House will have felt my feelings of outrage and shame as we witnessed our fellow citizens engage in appalling drunken violence on the streets of Belgium. Those people have disgraced the nation and our national game.

We, of course, fully share UEFA's anger at the disgraceful scenes, and the whole nation has taken full account of the warnings issued by UEFA regarding our future participation in the competition. Up-to-date information is as follows. There were serious disturbances in Brussels on Friday last, 16 June, and then on Saturday 17 June, in Charleroi and Brussels. So far, we have received information on the identity of 584 United Kingdom citizens who have been arrested in the disturbances.

In a few cases, the individuals have been charged with specific criminal offences, including possession of offensive weapons and assault. However, in the overwhelming proportion of cases the detention was by what is known in Belgium as an administrative arrest, typically for failure to carry a passport or other means of identification, and no charges have followed. Instead, the individuals have been made subject to immediate deportation. So far, about 400 have been returned to the United Kingdom. As they have arrived, police and immigration officials have required them to provide full details of their identity.

The House has been kept informed about the arrangements made over many months to intensify co-operation between the United Kingdom and the Belgian, Dutch and French authorities to ensure as far as possible that anyone previously involved in football hooliganism should not be able to gain entry to those countries.

It is widely accepted across Europe that the British police, led by the National Criminal Intelligence Service and by Assistant Chief Constable Tim Hollis, are among the most professional and thorough in identifying known hooligans and in policing arrangements in co-operation with overseas police forces. The Dutch Minister of the Interior, Klaus de Vries, to whom I spoke this morning, has issued a further statement expressing his satisfaction with the co-operation provided by the British authorities.

Well in advance of the competition, lists were provided to the Dutch and Belgians of 500 British individuals subject to banning orders and a further 500 against whom there were football-related convictions but no banning orders in force. All 500 who were subject to any kind of banning order were sent letters advising them not to travel, and 101 individuals subject to international

banning orders are directly prohibited from travelling abroad. There have been no reports of any of those 101 leaving the United Kingdom during the period of the competition. In addition, the National Criminal Intelligence Service has provided information to the Netherlands and Belgium on another 200 individuals on whom there was good intelligence but who had no football-related convictions.

All this has been part of an extensive international operation in which British police and immigration officials and the football authorities have been actively involved. Further details were set out in the report of the Euro 2000 Co-ordinating Group placed in the Library of the House on 7 June.

The House will, I believe, understand that it is, by definition, far more difficult to identify in advance those who might cause trouble if they have not been previously convicted of a football-related offence or if there is no police intelligence about them. The overwhelming majority of those arrested and expelled from Belgium come into that category.

Of the nearly 400 now being deported, just 15 have been identified as previously known hooligans and of those, one has had a domestic exclusion order against him. One of those is too many, but that does demonstrate that our controls against known hooligans have largely been effective. It also demonstrates that legislative changes of the kind that the House has had before it recently, and which have been urged, could not have had the effect of reducing by a significant degree the numbers of people, without previous football convictions or intelligence against them, involved in the trouble in the past three days.

We have always made it clear that we would keep under review the arrangements that we have made in the light of events, including the fact of large-scale arrests that have led in the main to deportation directly, rather to than prosecution and conviction in the Netherlands and Belgium. Further to the measures announced on 7 June, therefore, we are putting in place the following further measures to take account of the current situation.

The scrutiny by law enforcement agencies at ports has been intensified to prevent any of those deported from Belgium in the last few days from returning either to Belgium or the Netherlands. Immigration and police checks have been stepped up and the main carriers and the Belgian and Dutch authorities are being given full access to the information available to the law enforcement agencies so that they may refuse to take as passengers people whom they know will be refused entry at the other end.

British police services are being asked to make contact with all those deported to warn them not to return to Belgium and the Netherlands, and the likely serious consequences of returning. We have offered further assistance from British police forces, in addition to the significant presence already in Brussels and Charleroi and on Eurostar, led by Assistant Chief Constable Tim Hollis, to spot known troublemakers and to help to identify those arrested.

We have proposed that the Belgian and Dutch authorities mark the passports of those they deport to make subsequent identification easier should they try to return. We have urged upon the Belgian and Dutch authorities the importance, in our view, of restrictions on the sale of alcohol in the areas affected, as was successfully achieved by the Dutch at Eindhoven.

Following discussions today involving the Government, the Football Association and the premier league clubs, any supporter convicted of hooliganism, or against whom there is good evidence of hooliganism, will be banned by the clubs for life from attending football matches in England.

Let me now come back to the issue of legislation. The powers of the courts were strengthened last September by the Football (Offences and Disorder) Act 1999, which was piloted through the House by the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) on the basis of drafting provided by the Home Office. The Act imposed a duty on the courts to make a banning order whenever someone is convicted of a football-related offence if a ban would help prevent violence or disorder connected with football matches. The Act also provided for the imposition of passport conditions on anyone subject to an international football banning order. We had hoped that the Act would also include a power for courts to make banning orders preventing unconvicted hooligans from attending international matches—if there was good evidence against them that was insufficient to achieve a conviction—but, as the House knows, that proposal encountered vociferous opposition from certain hon. Members.

The courts have extensive powers to impose passport conditions on anyone subject to an international ban and to impose an international ban whenever a domestic ban is imposed, but few international bans have been made. We will be taking steps to encourage courts to impose such orders in all cases in which they could help to prevent hooliganism by England supporters overseas. We will also consider whether to make a single banning order for domestic and international matches with mandatory passport conditions, as well as powers for the courts in respect of unconvicted hooligans against whom there is other good evidence.

Over the past decade, the United Kingdom has done a huge amount to stamp out football violence at home, and we have done much work with the police, the Football Association and the authorities abroad to prevent violence overseas. However, the incidents remind us once again of the shame that hooliganism has brought on our country down the years and they must reinforce our determination to help to stamp it out overseas as we have done at home.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I thank the Home Secretary for that statement, but he must be aware that many will regard it as woefully complacent and inadequate.

The situation that faces the Home Secretary is that UEFA has said that if there is any more trouble, England could be banned from the rest of the contest. That is the extremely serious situation that faces us. It would have very much strengthened his hand in dealing with UEFA and other Governments if he had been able to say that he had taken all measures that other countries have taken. Is he aware that one of the most pathetic exhibitions over the past few days has been that of a Home Secretary who has been in office for three years trying to blame the Opposition for his own inaction?

Perhaps it would help to put on the record exactly what happened and to ask the Home Secretary whether he agrees. Does he agree that, in 1998, my right hon. Friend

[Miss Ann Widdecombe]

the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler)—who then held the post that I hold now—tabled an amendment not to a private Member's Bill, but to a Government Bill, which would have allowed unconvicted persons to be restrained from travelling? Does the Home Secretary agree that he himself rejected that very sensible amendment?

Does the Home Secretary agree that, having rejected it, he then wrote to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield and said that, although he had rejected it, he agreed that it was an important issue, that such a measure was necessary and that, therefore, perhaps it could be tagged on to a private Member's Bill—namely that being produced by my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns)?

Lo and behold, my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford proposed his Bill and my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) tabled an amendment to it to prevent unconvicted persons, in certain circumstances, from travelling during international matches. Is the Home Secretary aware that, far from it being my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) who stopped that, it was actually Labour Members as well?

The hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), who was the Minister responsible for the Bill, said—*[Interruption.]* I am afraid that Labour Members are going to hear what actually happened. The Home Secretary is going to have to admit what happened because he has been trying to shelter behind the flimsiest of excuses for the last three days. The House is now going to hear the truth.

Does the Home Secretary agree that, in Committee, the Minister for Sport said:

> We need to find a way of dealing with those people. We accept that the issue is complex and that the Bill is not the right place to deal with it . . . we may be able to deal with this issue later in a Government Bill.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee D*, 5 May 1999; c. 5.]

That was in May 1999; it is now June 2000. Does the Home Secretary admit that he has done absolutely nothing in between to fulfil that promise? Even as Euro 2000 was starting, once again—following in the footsteps of my right hon. Friends the Members for Sutton Coldfield and for Penrith and The Border—the Opposition offered the Government support for any emergency legislation that they wanted to propose. The Government proposed no such legislation.

Is the Home Secretary aware that the mayor of Brussels has said that there was an agreement between the British Government and the Belgian Ministry of the Interior to stop as many people as possible who might commit offences, but that it had not been implemented? What was that agreement and why was it not implemented? UEFA has criticised Government inaction; the Football Association has criticised Government inaction; the National Federation of Football Supporters Clubs has criticised Government inaction. Will the Government now admit that they have indeed been inactive?

Will the Home Secretary, even now, use the remaining stages of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill in the House of Lords to introduce the measures that the Minister for Sport was foreshadowing over a year ago—or is he instead going to leave it to the next Conservative Government, who are now not very far off?

Mr. Straw: Yet again, we have seen a display from the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) that fails to meet the requirements of the occasion. A huge amount of work has been undertaken, by the Government, the National Criminal Intelligence Service, and by—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the Home Secretary, but I must tell the House that this extremely serious matter is better conducted without chorus and counter-chorus.

Mr. Straw: A huge amount of work has been undertaken by Ministers, the National Criminal Intelligence Service, the territorial police and by many people overseas to ensure that the arrangements that have been put in place work effectively. I remind the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald that, as I mentioned in my statement, the Dutch Minister of the Interior telephoned me today to tell me that he was very grateful for the extent of the co-operation. He certainly understands the problems that we have faced.

The right hon. Lady does no service at all to herself, and still less to this country. The simple truth is that we would have liked to have in place the powers to which she referred, but they would not have helped us to deal with this situation. The right hon. Lady wants to make party political points and to ensure that people outside the House are misinformed about the reality.

The reality is that virtually all the people against whom such a civil order could have been made were on the list of 1,000 names provided by NCIS to the overseas authorities in Belgium and the Netherlands. We are pretty certain that, in all but 15 cases, our work has been effective in ensuring that those people did not travel abroad.

The right hon. Lady referred to an offer concerning emergency legislation that she made earlier last month. The Football Association raised the matter with the Government, and I would have brought emergency legislation to the House if I had thought that that would have been worth while and would have amounted to anything more than a gesture. However, the simple fact is that emergency legislation at that stage would not have achieved anything. Indeed, it could have raised expectations that we had some process by which we could identify all the people who had not been identified by then, and taken action against them. That would not have been the case.

As I said, we have done a huge amount of work, through NCIS and the police, to pass to the Belgian and Dutch authorities details about every one of the 500 people subject to banning orders, and about those with convictions for football-related offences. Other information has also been provided and it has been acted on.

I regret that the right hon. Lady now seeks to make rather obscure party points about this matter. Although earlier this month she did indeed make the offer to which

she referred, I note what an official Conservative party spokesman told *The Times* on 30 May. He said:

> What the Government must now do is show that they are prepared to invest in the resources necessary to ensure that everything can be done to track down and convict those who commit football violence.

I do not agree with that sentiment, but the spokesman went on:

> Only once these measures are fully used can we start to assess whether there is a need for further legislation.

That was the opinion of the right hon. Lady and her party one week; she changed her opinion the following week.

Over the years, the Government have strengthened the legislation and the powers available, and we are grateful to the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) for his support of the Football (Offences and Disorders) Act 1999. However, no one in the House or the country should try to avoid the problem that exists. Although our police and intelligence activity has been very effective generally against those who we know are likely to cause trouble, the huge proportion of the people who have caused trouble were not previously known to the police or the authorities as being likely to cause football hooliganism. The right hon. Lady should apply her mind better to making constructive suggestions for dealing with that problem.

Mr. Joe Ashton (Bassetlaw): Will my right hon. Friend impress on those fans who are still in Europe what a very serious situation this is? Is he aware that UEFA will not hesitate to ban England, like it banned Liverpool and every other English club after the Heysel disaster, and that there will be provocation tomorrow from German fans who, having lost, will try to get British fans to riot so that they will be thrown out.

There is no doubt that there are people at the top of UEFA, such as Lennart Johansson, who think that Germany should host the World cup. The decision will be made in less than three weeks. Many in UEFA think that Germany was promised the World cup and should still hold it. However, Lennart Johansson lost the election to Sepp Blatter, whom we support. Some deep political chess will be played in the next 24 hours. If a handful of drunk yobboes respond to any provocation tomorrow, this country could lose the opportunity to host the World cup. Millions have been poured into the new Wembley stadium, but Britain could lose the prestige that hosting the World cup would bring, and all because of half a dozen yobboes throwing pint glasses.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend on what has been done regarding those who have been sent back. Can he impress on the Dutch and Belgian police that it is not enough to turn hosepipes and water cannons on these people, whack a few heads and chase them off the streets? They have to be prosecuted, imprisoned if necessary, and fined, so that some who have quite good jobs are exposed and lose their jobs.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. While I acknowledge that the hon. Gentleman has considerable experience in these matters, I must ask him to put a question, because many others also wish to contribute.

Mr. Ashton: We have no protest or complaint about what the Government are doing, but does my right hon. Friend agree that the seriousness of the situation has gone far beyond a football issue?

Mr. Straw: I note what my hon. Friend says, but he will appreciate that it is not for me to comment on what he describes as the internal politics of UEFA or FIFA.

On convictions, it is plainly better, where possible, for the Belgian and Dutch police not only to arrest people but to charge them with specific offences. Our law does not know, as far as I am aware, of the notion of an administrative arrest. We know of arrest for alleged criminal offences. Our provisions have been designed to ensure that when people are convicted abroad of a football-related offence, they can be subject here to a banning order. My opposite numbers in Belgium and the Netherlands—Antoine Duquesne and Klaus de Vries—are well aware of that and, wherever possible, they will seek convictions in their own courts.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): As this is a statement about Euro 2000, may we first ask the Home Secretary to pass on, through the Minister for Sport, our congratulations to an England team that won on a day when the cricket and rugby teams lost? We hope that the team will go on winning without being distracted by people, whom we all condemn, who are doing nothing to advance the cause of English football.

I hope that the Home Secretary accepts that the best way to deal not just with this game and this trouble but with the future of England's participation in football is to concentrate not on what might have been and on changes to the law that would probably have made no difference in practice, but on what we can do now. In that context, does he accept that there are two things that might usefully be on the agenda? First, I refer to an affirmation of the law, which is that the British, Dutch and Belgian authorities have the power to arrest anybody whom they reasonably believe is likely to commit an offence, and they should use that power, either this side of the channel or the other. Secondly, if the Home Secretary were minded to ensure that all future orders were simultaneously national and international, and if he considered, as a matter of urgency, converting the national domestic banning orders into international orders, he would have support from the Liberal Democrat Benches.

On the basis of the practical experience of the weekend, will the right hon. Gentleman look urgently to his colleagues in Belgium and ask them to follow the Dutch experience, which was good, in banning alcohol in the area of the match and possibly in some areas in Brussels, and to increase the number of spotters? I am informed by law-abiding travellers that, during train journeys in Belgium, people are phoning one another and arranging plans for meeting to cause trouble after the match.

Lastly, let us ensure that the Belgian and Dutch authorities work together to impose cordons, which they are lawfully entitled to do, to exclude people without tickets and without lawful reason to go into certain places where matches are being played.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his constructive approach to what is unquestionably a difficult situation. He asked me four questions. As for affirmation of the law, wherever possible, whether here, in the Netherlands or in Belgium, the police should arrest people and then charge them and have them prosecuted in the relevant courts. That is our approach, too.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether we should make future national domestic banning orders apply internationally as well, along with, I might add, a passport

[Mr. Straw]

condition. Yes, we should give urgent consideration to that. He asks whether we will invite the Belgians to follow the Dutch experience and to ban alcohol. As I said in my statement, we are already asking the Belgian authorities whether they will follow the lead of the Dutch authorities. Alcohol was not banned in the Netherlands, but regulations were laid down requiring the sale only of very low-strength alcohol. That seems to have worked satisfactorily.

As for increasing the number of spotters, I held a meeting this morning with John Abbott and Brian Drew from the National Criminal Intelligence Service. The British police service stands ready to provide additional resources where they can be used effectively.

The hon. Gentleman suggested the imposition of cordons round the main squares—for example, in Brussels and Charleroi. I shall relay that suggestion to the Belgian authorities.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Does my right hon. Friend accept that we should not try to rewrite history about a private Member's Bill last year, the Football (Offences and Disorder) Bill? As one of its sponsors, I urged the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) to be wary of amending it in the way suggested. To introduce a major amendment, which had not been seen by me as a sponsor, was probably not the best way to proceed.

The lesson is that we must examine what has happened over the weekend and say that the Government and football authorities together, recognising that football clubs have tremendous information throughout the country, should take action to ensure that such behaviour cannot be repeated. A Government Bill should be introduced to deal with the matter.

Mr. Straw: I certainly accept that. That was the point of my statement, among other things. We need to examine the lessons of what happened over the weekend. We must take stock and introduce further measures in the light of those events.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): First, I welcome the Home Secretary's comments about international banning orders. When passing legislation, it was Parliament's intention that they would be used against anyone committing a football-related offence. Anything that tightens up that procedure to ensure that the courts use such powers is to be welcomed. It is to be hoped that that need not be made mandatory, but if need be, so be it.

I say more in sorrow than in anger that I am disappointed by the spin that the right hon. Gentleman has been putting during recent days on the question of unconvicted football hooligans and the withdrawal of passports. I, more than anyone else, should know why I withdrew the amendment to the Bill to which the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) referred. It was my proposal, and it was my decision to withdraw it. May I tell the right hon. Gentleman, with all due respect, that he is wrong with the spin that he is putting on this matter?

I did not remove the proposal because some of my hon. Friends made certain speeches on Second Reading. Three Labour Members also spoke about it. Equally importantly, the civil liberties industry was mounting campaigns against the proposal. I feared that certain sections of the media were opposed to it and that there could be serious trouble in the House of Lords. I did not want to lose all the valuable weapons in that legislation just because of that. It would be fair to say that I had the Minister's agreement that it was more important for the Government to deal with that controversial issue. I understood that the Government intended to introduce their own legislation, using their substantial majority, to take away passports from unconvicted hooligans provided that certain conditions were satisfied before a court of this country. I urge the Home Secretary to take that action. The seven months since the state opening has been too long for no action to be taken.

There are apparently 300 convicted football hooligans who can travel to Belgium and Holland because my Act is not retrospective. Had we had that legislation on unconvicted football hooligans, we could have used it on them, because they have a track record of causing trouble. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that, had that legislation been on the statute book, all the people who were deported from Copenhagen earlier this year could have been prevented from travelling to Holland and Belgium now?

Mr. Straw: I note what the hon. Gentleman says, and the House is grateful to him for having promoted the legislation that came into force in September last year. I also note what he said about the problems being not only on his side of the House. I shall not detain the House, but I could if invited to do so. He will be aware that vociferous opposition about the proposal to be included in that legislation was the most intense from his side of the House. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) compared the proposal with systems in the Soviet Union. That was the measure of the Tory opposition.

The hon. Gentleman will also know that it is quite common for Governments of both parties to use what are described as hand-out Bills, as we did in that case, as a vehicle for legislation. None of us anticipated that these proposals would run into such problems. I understand the problems that he mentioned with the civil liberties industry. The House will know that there is a modest proposal to bring our law on the mode of trial into line with that of other European countries and other common law Commonwealth countries. That ran into the most intense difficulties in the other place, such that we had to start again in this place.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of the 300 hooligans who had convictions against them but were not subject to retrospective banning orders. Those were, in the main, people against whom there were football-related convictions. I repeat that, for reasons that the House understands, those people would not be the subject of the civil orders that it was intended to include in the hon. Gentleman's Bill. However, the names of 500 people, including those 300, against whom there are football-related convictions but not banning orders have been communicated on lists by NCIS to the Belgian, Dutch, French and German authorities. As I have already made clear, the provision of that information has worked almost completely to prevent those people from travelling abroad, so we have achieved the same end by a different method.

I must repeat the point to the House, because it is extremely important to our understanding of the problem, that the British Government have done a huge amount with the police and other authorities to crack down on those whom we know are football hooligans either because there is an order against them or because they have football-related convictions. However, the huge difficulty has been in spotting people against whom there are no convictions or who have convictions that are nothing to do with football.

Ms Claire Ward (Watford): May I join my right hon. Friend in expressing dismay at the activities of a minority of so-called fans over the weekend that has brought shame on this nation, and has overshadowed our success on the field. Does he agree that this growing culture of thuggery by a minority of people who attend matches—often without tickets—intent on vandalism and acts of racism starts with the chanting of racist slogans at many matches and in pubs and clubs? I noticed that at the weekend when watching the match in a pub in my constituency. If matters are left unchecked, the situation develops into the violence and completely out-of-hand behaviour that we saw from some people at the weekend. What encouragement will my right hon. Friend give players, clubs, the Football Association and all decent-minded fans to ensure that any form of racism, xenophobia and brutality that starts in the stands is not allowed to go unchecked, for the great majority of good football fans?

Mr. Straw: I entirely share my hon. Friend's abhorrence of such racism and xenophobia. It is the most perverted form of patriotism that any of us has witnessed.

My hon. Friend asked about encouragement. As she will be aware, a major campaign—"kick racism out of football"—is under way in football. I am pleased to be associated with that. Much work is being done by many clubs to ensure that they clamp down on such racism and on the xenophobia exhibited by their supporters and those who attend their grounds. In addition, she will be aware that, under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, we took powers greatly to increase the strength of racially aggravated offences and to raise the penalties for them.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): The Home Secretary disclaims all responsibility, but he knows that, on 22 June 1998, as shadow Home Secretary, I proposed a new clause to the Crime and Disorder Bill that would have given the police extra powers to go to the courts to prevent football hooligans from travelling overseas, even if they had not been convicted of an offence. At the same time, we promised the Government every co-operation on such measures. Those are the facts.

That was two years ago, however. Surely, the failure of the Government is that, during the intervening period, they have done nothing about that; they have not introduced a Government measure. Everyone in the House understands that it must be Government legislation—not a private Member's Bill.

Furthermore, the right hon. Gentleman's comments on intelligence beg the question of whether sufficient resources are being given to the police, who are generally starved of resources—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh, come on."] There is no controversy about that. Do the police have enough good intelligence on which everyone can act?

Mr. Straw: The right hon. Gentleman was indeed shadow Home Secretary in 1998. If he reads the record, he will be aware that, although he made those proposals, they were not in a form that could be accepted. I do not criticise him for that; he knows that was the situation. He also knows that it is by no means always the case that the only vehicle for Government-supported legislation is a Government Bill. That happened under his Government as well as under the Labour Government. Such hand-out Bills are often offered to Members for introduction as private Members' Bills and we are glad to have the co-operation of Members on both sides of the House in that matter. The right hon. Gentleman wants to make those unimpressive party points, but he was a long-standing member of the previous Government who were in power for 18 years and there are big questions about what they did to strengthen the law on such matters.

I shall deal with two further points. The first is on those people with football-related convictions. As I have said to the House on several occasions, we should have preferred the powers that we proposed to have been included in the Bill promoted by the hon. Member for West Chelmsford. However, we sought to achieve the same end by a different route. I repeat the point—Opposition Members really do have to understand it, because it is important in comprehending what has been going on in Charleroi and Brussels—that not only were the overwhelming majority of those arrested and detained in Brussels and Charleroi at the weekend people against whom there was no banning order, but they had no football-related conviction at all. Indeed, in most cases the police held no information about them.

As for the right hon. Gentleman's point about resources, if he wants to bat across the Chamber what happened under the 1992–97 Government when there was a real-terms cut in the resources available to the police, I am happy to do that, too. I should also tell him that at no stage has NCIS or the Association of Chief Police Officers raised with me questions about the lack of resources.

Mr. David Crausby (Bolton, North-East): I am sure that my right hon. Friend will accept that the people involved in the violence are not, in any sense, genuine football fans, in that they have no real interest in the welfare of the game. Does he also agree that those who are most at threat as a result of such hooliganism are genuine football fans? Those who watch the game on television will not be assaulted and attacked in the street; it will be the genuine travelling fans themselves. Will he encourage those fans to play a full part in ensuring that the minority of hooligans who cause such chaos are arrested, sentenced and barred for ever from the game?

Mr. Straw: I share my hon. Friend's sentiments entirely. In 1988, I and my then seven-year-old son were caught up in the most terrible violence that took place between England and Scotland supporters on the way to the home international at Wembley. I therefore fully understand that genuine fans—and often their families—are most at threat directly from such violence. They also pay the penalty when sanctions are taken against English football.

My hon. Friend asked what genuine fans can do. The most important and immediate action that they can take is to provide information to the telephone hotline that NCIS operates. Its number is 0800 515 495.

Sir Brian Mawhinney (North-West Cambridgeshire): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that the Home Office

[Sir Brian Mawhinney]

Minister in the other place yesterday told the media that the Government had done everything that they could—including everything that they could have done legislatively—before the outbreak of violence at the weekend? Will the Home Secretary assure at least me that his colleague was not speaking for him, not least because of the information that the Home Secretary provided in his statement? Hitherto, I have held the Home Secretary in high regard in this respect.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful for the compliment. The Government have done, I think, a huge amount and virtually everything that we could do. I have already set out the measures that we have taken and I repeat, in case the right hon. Gentleman had not taken the point, that information on those against whom there are no banning orders but against whom there are convictions for football-related offences has been provided to the Belgian authorities. I personally discussed the matter in advance of the game with the Belgian and Dutch Interior Ministers and asked that they use that information to exclude such individuals from their countries. They have done that. We have achieved the same end by a different route.

Again, I repeat the point that—this is the huge difficulty that everyone has had in anticipating the trouble—overwhelmingly, those who have been caught up in the trouble are people against whom there was no previous evidence either of a banning order or of their involvement in football-related violence.

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): While I entirely condemn the thuggery and violence that we saw at the weekend, is it not unjust that the English football team and football authorities should be threatened because of public disorder for which they have no responsibility and over which they have no influence?

Mr. Straw: We must, I am afraid, accept the realities. When such disorder takes place—whether we like it or not—sanctions are sometimes imposed either on an individual club or on a nation participating in an event. We are all doing our very best to get across to UEFA the extent of the arrangements that we have put in place; I have spelt them out to the House. Those arrangements have worked effectively to deal with the hooligans who have been convicted and against whom there are banning orders or against whom we have intelligence. However, with the best will in the world, it is extremely difficult to work out what other measures could have been taken that could have identified in advance those without football-related convictions and on whom there was no intelligence to suggest that, when they got to Belgium, they were going to get very drunk and involved in mindless violence.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We must now move on. I understand that the House will return to this subject tomorrow.

House of Lords Reform

[Relevant document: The Report of the Royal Commission on the Future of the House of Lords entitled "A House for the Future" (Cm 4534).]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Before I call the Leader of the House, I remind Back Benchers that there will be a 15-minute limit on their speeches.

5.11 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): This debate provides the House with an opportunity to comment on the royal commission report on reform of the House of Lords, entitled "A House for the Future", Cm 4534. I should like to begin by paying tribute to the work of the royal commission and its chairman Lord Wakeham. It completed a challenging task on time, although many people said that that could not be done, and produced a comprehensive and unanimous report which addressed coherently the issues that it had been asked to examine. That report means that debate on the next stage of the reform of the House of Lords, which was first mooted by a Liberal Government in 1911, has advanced significantly.

Of course, that is the second significant advance, the first being the House of Lords Act 1999. I remind the House that the Government made it clear at the outset that we saw this as a two-stage process and were convinced that the issues would never be addressed at all unless they were addressed in two stages. Three things confirm me in that view. First, it took most of the century to get to stage 1, which rather puts the whingeing about the so-called delay on stage 2 into perspective. Secondly, the debate in the House of Lords on the royal commission report provided a clear indication that many there still regret and oppose the demise of the hereditary principle, which sits rather oddly with the Opposition's claimed espousal of democracy. Thirdly, we must consider the sheer scale of the imbalance of the previous House.

After all the carping about Tony's cronies and all the allegations about packing the House of Lords, even after the departure of most of the 750 Members who were there on the basis of heredity, the Conservative party still has 32 more peers than the Labour party in the House of Lords. However, the Wakeham report may help us to move on to stage 2.

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): Will the Leader of the House confirm that there has never been a majority of hereditary peers in the other place?

Mrs. Beckett: I do not quite know what the hon. Gentleman means. If he means that there has never ever been a majority of Conservatives in the upper House, I am afraid that I cannot cast my mind back across all the centuries of its existence and be confident that that is the case. No one with any understanding of how that House operates would dispute that the Conservative party has always and overwhelmingly held control there.

I want to make it clear at the outset that Ministers are here to listen to the views of the House rather than to announce the Government's settled conclusions. As my

distinguished predecessor, the noble Lord St John of Fawsley, said in another place on 7 March during the debate on reform of the House of Lords:

> No one in their right senses would expect a government to come forward with firm decisions on a Royal Commission before there had been a debate in both Houses of Parliament. That would be quite contrary to the spirit of our constitution.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 7 March 2000; Vol. 610, c. 971.]

I agree with him.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On this occasion.

Mrs. Beckett: Yes, on this occasion: I accept that I do not always do so.

I want to make it clear, however, that the Government are minded to accept the broad outlines of the royal commission report; that is, we agree that the second Chamber should be largely nominated, with a minority elected element with a particular remit to represent the regions, and that there should be a statutory appointments commission. On the more specific proposals, such as the size and method of selection of the elected element, or the precise powers and functions of the House and the appointments commission, we have made no firm decisions and will want to hear alternative views.

We have said, too, that we want to proceed, if at all possible, by consensus, and the unanimity of the report encourages us to hope that it may be found. I hope that today's debate will strengthen that view.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Will the right hon. Lady indicate whether, in seeking consensus, she will be seeking the opinions of the National Assembly for Wales, the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly?

Mr. Forth: Why?

Mr. Wigley: Because of the regional dimension of the report and the need to ensure that we are getting a balanced picture before we come to final conclusions.

Mrs. Beckett: I am not sure that anyone has reached a view about asking for any formal response, but of course the Government are interested in hearing views from all quarters and from all who take an interest in the way in which these matters will be decided.

The first and founding principle that the Government made clear is in the royal commission's terms of reference, and it says that its recommendations must have regard

> to the need to maintain the position of the House of Commons as the pre-eminent chamber of Parliament.

Our reason for that requirement was simple. The position of this House is the cornerstone of our democracy. Through elections to it, the people choose who will represent them in Parliament, and through elections to it in aggregate, they choose who will govern them.

One logical conclusion of that is that there is no need for a second Chamber at all. We do not draw that conclusion. The Government believe that there is a role for a clearly subordinate second Chamber, primarily in the legislative process. There has, of course, been criticism of our insistence that the second Chamber should be subordinate. It has been suggested that the primary purpose of the second Chamber should be not to scrutinise legislation and to ask the Government and this House to think again about individual proposals, but rather to hold the Government to account. That is the function of this House. It must be done by the Chamber that has the power to dismiss the Government. To have two Chambers, each with an identical role in that respect, would be bound to lead to conflict and confusion.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): I completely agree with the right hon. Lady about the proper roles of both Houses, but does she not think that a second Chamber that is subordinate to the House of Commons is wholly incompatible with its being completely elected? If it is completely elected, it will seek parity.

Mrs. Beckett: I entirely share that view, as I will make clear in a few moments. It is for precisely that reason that Lord Wakeham and his colleagues came to the conclusions that they did.

The main purpose, as we see it, of the second Chamber in our parliamentary system should be to make a distinctive contribution to the legislative process. Indeed, the fact that it is distinct and different from that of this House has always been one of the principal claims made on behalf of the House of Lords by those who defended it even in its unreformed state. That, therefore, is the role of the second Chamber from which its functions flow, and we asked the royal commission to look first at the role, then at the functions and only finally at the membership required to carry out that role and those functions.

To make a distinctive contribution, we argue, the second Chamber needs to be distinctively constituted. While understanding the political considerations, it should not be dominated by them. Although it would not be representative in the direct sense that Members of Parliament are representative, it should broadly reflect the economic, social, gender, religious and ethnic make-up of society. It must contain enough expertise to make an informed and non-partisan contribution to debate on any subject. We believe that an elected, or largely elected, second Chamber would not deliver that combination of requirements.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): I am left wondering whether the new second Chamber should reflect the social class composition and perhaps the wealth distribution and educational qualifications of the British public.

Mrs. Beckett: That is an interesting point, on which my hon. Friend will no doubt want to enlarge during his own contribution to the debate.

The Labour party, in gathering its evidence for the royal commission, and the royal commission itself found that a constant theme ran through the representations that they received: people do not want a second Chamber that is a clone of the House of the Commons or that loses the contribution of a non-party political element.

The Government agree with the royal commission's analysis that the most efficient way to ensure the right mix of political, non-political and diverse Members will be to select the appointed majority individually. That will equip the second Chamber for the job that it should do, but it will not undermine the position of this House as the

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cornerstone of our political system. We accept the proposition that a high proportion of the appointed membership of the second Chamber should be broadly representative of political parties and that the balance of that membership should be determined according to the votes cast in the preceding general election.

We believe, and strongly endorse, the royal commission's view that no political party should ever have a majority over all the other elements in the second Chamber. Indeed, I hope to hear a strong and clear endorsement and acceptance of that from the official Opposition today. I have repeatedly pressed for such a declaration; I hope that it will come in uncompromising terms. Not only do we reject the notion that any party should have a majority, but, like the royal commission, we reject the proposal for a wholly elected second Chamber in the same united Parliament. That would be bound to lead to conflict and division.

Mr. Mark Fisher (Stoke-on-Trent, Central): Cannot my right hon. Friend conceive of designing a remit for the second Chamber that makes it complementary to this Chamber, not in conflict with it? If she cannot, does she understand that she is saying that democracy has no role to play in the second Chamber? Where does that leave the people of this country? Surely they have a right to elect people who sit in half of our Parliament and it is not for whoever does the selecting—whether the Government, or we in the Chamber—to determine who should sit; it is for the people of this country to decide who sits in the legislature over them.

Mrs. Beckett: I know my hon. Friend's strong views on the matter, but I simply tell him that, no, I cannot imagine a remit that would not be a recipe for conflict if there were two elected Chambers in a single Parliament. Indeed, I cannot imagine a remit that would not lead to a conflict between Members themselves about who had the right and the authority and who was elected most recently. All that would be a recipe for division and conflict. Of course I accept the case that my hon. Friend makes; I simply tell him that it is my view—I speak for myself now—that, yes, it is true that democracy is given expression by the election of representatives to serve the people, but democracy is not strengthened by adding another body to which people are elected to carry out exactly the same job. That would produce a different combination of democratically elected Chambers and would lead to conflict. I get the impression that there are some who would welcome that and who, in consequence, support it. I do not put my hon. Friend in that category.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Is it not a fact that, under the recipe proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) and other hon. Members who believe in a wholly elected Chamber of whatever sort, they would find that there was an alternative Member of Parliament for their constituencies who would claim to represent them as much as they did and take up the same cases and claim to be able to deal with them better? [HON. MEMBERS: "What about the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly?] The Members of the two Houses of Parliament would simply strive for greater authenticity, without the outcome of a properly representative two-Chamber democracy.

Mrs. Beckett: My right hon. Friend is entirely correct. Following the sedentary interjection by Conservative Members, I would add that the point is that there would be not a Chamber with a different role and remit, but a second elected Chamber in this Parliament—not in another Parliament—and a challenge to the supremacy of the House.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): Why is the United States able to have two directly elected Houses in the same Congress without constitutional deadlock?

Mrs. Beckett: My understanding is that the United States suffers constitutional deadlock repeatedly. However, putting that aside, and although I yield to nobody in my pride in that country and its place in our history, I remind the hon. Gentleman that the United States is an entire continent and has what can only be described as a federal system. We are a united kingdom; we do not have a federal system.

Mr. Forth: Not yet.

Mrs. Beckett: That is a legitimate debating point, but I simply say to him that that is a different matter from having two elected Chambers in this Westminster Parliament.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mrs. Beckett: I shall give way to the hon. Members for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) and for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie), but shall not give way again on this point.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): It will bring the right hon. Lady no comfort to know that I have rather more sympathy with her analysis than she might suspect. However, surely the problem is that the elected Members of a largely appointed House, even if few in number, would assert their authority. Inevitably, there would be a two-tier House, only one of which would have elective authority, with all the problems to which the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) referred. If she wants an appointed Chamber, why does she not seek friends in unexpected quarters and state the case for the logic of making that Chamber wholly appointed and unelected?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. If he has read the Lords debate, he will know that a substantial number of Members, including many Conservatives, made precisely that case. However, the royal commission had to consider a range of issues and proposed a mix of Members. Although I accept that there will be unease about that, the proposal was made unanimously and the Government are not inimical to it.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): The case that the Leader of the House is making against a largely democratic second Chamber appears to rest on the view that there will be gridlock between this place and the other place, but are there not the Parliament Acts? Do not they

lay down the limits to that gridlock and state very clearly what a second Chamber may and may not do to challenge this place? Why does she think that those restraints would be swept away if we had an elected or largely elected second Chamber?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman might have observed that, even without a wholly elected second Chamber, there are those in the Lords itself, as it is today, who question whether we should have quite the same balance in the Parliament Acts and wonder whether the Lords should be able to reject and not merely delay legislation. My case rather than his is being made.

When I said that I would take interventions only from the hon. Members for Teignbridge and for Chichester, I meant that I would take interventions on that point from those who were on their feet and would then continue. However, I did not observe the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson). I apologise and give way to him.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): I find myself in the uncomfortable position of agreeing with the right hon. Lady. As a believer in democracy, I find it acceptable for the House of Lords to be unelected while its powers are extremely limited. Surely that is the point.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, although I do not wish to go into it at length. There is also the issue of the powers of the Lords and whether we are discussing those that they currently have and do not exercise or those that they should have and should exercise. That, too, represents a delicate balance that has to be properly considered.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): I agree with my right hon. Friend entirely, but is not there a problem? If we are to have some elected and a large number of non-elected Members, there could be divisions between them. The elected Members could feel that they had greater authority than the others. Will she comment on how that might change the atmosphere in the second Chamber?

Mrs. Beckett: I am deeply grateful to learn that my right hon. Friend is in agreement with me, bearing in mind his historic role in wrecking previous attempts to reform the House of Lords. He makes a legitimate point, which was closely examined during the debate in the Lords and will, I expect, be discussed in our debate. The arguments are difficult: I believe that those who say that the cohesion of the second Chamber will not deteriorate into two-tier membership have the balance of the argument, but I accept that there is room for wholly legitimate differences of opinion on that point.

On the issue of whether election and the supremacy of the House of Commons are compatible, I am aware of at least one right hon. Opposition Member who not only supports a wholly elected Chamber, but, in consequence, rejects the supremacy of the House of Commons, believing one to be incompatible with the other. The Government share the view that the two are incompatible. On this interesting issue, one finds agreement in surprising and unprecedented places. For the first time ever, I find myself at one with the noble Lord Waddington, who said:

> Of course, an elected Chamber composed of the representatives of the people has a special authority. That is why one does not want two of them.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 7 March 2000; Vol. 610, c. 961.]

Both the royal commission's recommendations of a mixed part-elected Chamber and the Government's response have attracted criticism and disagreement, not least from the media. The main burden of the criticism is that the proposals are undemocratic. As has become evident in today's debate, there are Members of the House of Commons who have a long and honourable commitment to the idea that all Members of the United Kingdom Parliament, whether it is comprised of one Chamber or divided into two, should be elected. They recognise that such a change would have a profound impact on the whole nature of Parliament, including the House of Commons and its relationship with the other place, and I presume that they either welcome those changes as desirable in their own right, or accept them as a price worth paying. I repeat that the Government accept the basic judgment of the royal commission that a largely appointed House, with an elected element within it, provides the range of expertise and experience that a reformed second Chamber would need to add value to the legislative process.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): My right hon. Friend will accept that whether or not the mixed system works will depend wholly on who picks the non-elected Members. It would be helpful to be given some clear information in that respect. Those Members whom I would pick, using my long experience and great knowledge, might not necessarily be the same as those who would be picked by other right hon. and hon. Members.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend's timing is, as ever, impeccable: I was coming to that precise point.

Even with the retention of an appointed element, we accept the royal commission's proposals to reform the process by which such appointments are made, which is known as the process of patronage. We have already begun to do so voluntarily. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is the first Prime Minister to have reduced his powers of patronage over the House of Lords—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] I know that the Conservatives hate to be reminded of that, so I shall repeat it: he is the first Prime Minister ever to reduce his powers of patronage over the House of Lords, with the appointment of the interim appointments commission, which, in the words of its chairman, will be "scrupulously independent and rigorous". We accept that, in stage 2, there should a statutory appointments commission.

The royal commission made many detailed recommendations, both on the nature of the statutory appointments commission and on the precise powers and functions of the second Chamber; it also made more detailed recommendations on composition. The Government are continuing to consider those recommendations—all 132 of them—to determine our detailed proposals. Some of the recommendations relate almost entirely to the internal workings of the second Chamber; some would have a profound impact on the

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House of Commons and on the relationship between the two Chambers; some can be implemented by administrative decisions, whereas others would require possibly complex legislation to effect.

Because of the implications that reform of the House of Lords will have for this House, we suggested in the 1999 White Paper that a Joint Committee of both Houses would be a suitable means of considering the parliamentary aspects of the reform proposals. That is still our view.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Can my right hon. Friend give the House an idea of when the Joint Committee will be established? I expect that she may be about to tell us in her next sentence.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is right. His timing, too, is impeccable. The Government intend that such a Committee should be established, and it will be established in due course.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: If I continue, I may answer the hon. Gentleman's question even before he has got it out. We hope that today's debate will give us a clear idea of how, following publication of the royal commission's report, views have begun to crystallise. It should give us some indication of whether there is any common ground on the basis of that unanimous and thus consensual report on which the Government can build. Does the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) still wish to intervene?

Sir Patrick Cormack: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady. Is she committing the Government to establishing the Joint Committee before the general election?

Mrs. Beckett: I would anticipate that, but after all, it could still be a considerable time away. It is the Government's intention to appoint the Joint Committee, as I said, to examine the parliamentary aspects of the proposals. All hon. Members will recognise that the proposals are bound to have enormous—I would almost say technical—implications, and we believe that it would be valuable to have the views of parliamentarians on those proposals.

The degree to which common ground can be identified during this debate and beyond it is bound to shape the scope and timing of the Government's own response.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: I would have given way to the hon. Gentleman, but I am at the end of my speech. I hope that the debate will be constructive and allow us to proceed with stage 2 of reform.

5.37 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): The right hon. Lady's search for a consensus has got off to a lively start. I join her in paying tribute to Lord Wakeham and his fellow commissioners for producing the high-quality report that we debate today. It has taken our debate a stage forward and it can serve as a launching pad for stage 2.

It was not, in my view, Lord Wakeham's skills as a former Chief Whip that have been so valuable—the sanctions that go with that position were not available to him—but his skill at chairing Cabinet Committees. I recall his ability to resolve a discussion by finding against a colleague, but to sum up in such a way that the colleague thought that he had won. I commend his diplomacy in identifying a broad consensus from a very wide range of opinions in a very short time.

The Government should not just thank the commission, as we do, but should apologise to it. It is as though the captain of the relay team had instructed the runners of the first legs to sprint around the track at high speed, but when the baton was handed over to the captain for the final lap, he relaxed into a leisurely stroll. Wakeham reported—we read in an article in *The Parliamentarian* by Baroness Jay—with a week to spare, but his vision of the first election of regional Members taking place at the next general election looks extremely ambitious.

It is shameful that we have had to wait five months for this debate, and even after that interval, the Government have little idea of what to do next. However, in the case of the Burns report on hunting, they knew exactly how to take it forward even before it had reported. On Lords reform, the Prime Minister told us last week that we would have to wait for Labour's next manifesto to find out its plans.

I am reminded of a speech by Michael Foot at the Dispatch Box when he was Leader of the Opposition. He described a conjurer in his Plymouth constituency who invited a prosperous member of the audience to lend him a gold watch. That was placed on a table. Another member of the audience was invited to lend a silk handkerchief. That was placed over the watch. The conjurer brought down a hammer with some force on the handkerchief. He then announced to the audience that, sadly, he had forgotten the rest of the trick. That seems to encapsulate Labour's approach to reform of the House of Lords.

I shall make four short general points. First, there has been a tendency to represent the debate about Lords reform as a one-dimensional contest with the Commons: if one gains, the other must lose. It is perhaps symbolic of that view that our debate takes place on the day of the annual Lords *v.* Commons tug-of-war, which the lower House should win now that the virile young hereditaries have been banished from the upper House. That is the wrong perspective. The real contest today is not between the Lords and the Commons, but between Parliament and the Executive. In that battle, the Houses are not rivals, but partners.

We believe that any reform should strengthen Parliament as a whole. Much of what the Government have done has weakened Parliament. That is why we set up the Norton commission to examine the way in which Parliament could be strengthened. It will consider the way in which the workings of both the Commons and Lords can be reformed to ensure that Parliament is better able to hold the Executive to account. It will report shortly.

Secondly, it is difficult entirely to ring-fence Lords reform and thus separate it from Commons reform. There is interdependence and interchange between the two

Chambers. The commission is considering conciliation, not ping-pong. Proposals that the Lords should set up a constitutional committee or a human rights committee have implications for the Commons. Some have argued that we should reform ourselves before reforming the upper House. The proposal to elect Members to the upper House has implications, to which I shall revert in a moment.

Thirdly, the current position is unsatisfactory. The Government have asserted that the new House will be more legitimate, more effective, more authoritative and more influential. In the *Parliamentary Monitor* in November 1999, Baroness Jay stated:

> The House will be able to speak with more authority . . . A decision by the House not to support a proposal from the government will carry more weight because it will have to include supporters from a range of political and independent opinions. So the Executive will be better held to account.

However, there is no sign of the Government respecting the new House. When the Government lose, it is just like old times: more threats and more abuse. The Lords has defeated the Government on several issues. It has protected the right to trial by jury; Londoners from a veto on free leaflets from mayoral candidates; the independence of local authorities from central dictation; and children from unsuitable material in schools. The Government must simply accept the legitimacy of criticism from an effective second Chamber and control their wish to dominate our proceedings.

As the Leader of the House said, the Wakeham commission was unanimous. However, the unanimity disguised a disagreement on the most contentious issue—the composition—and avoided a conclusion on some others. If the commission had had more time, and if Lord Wakeham had had more cigars, it might have reached agreement. However, we must recognise that, while it agreed on a House of mixed composition, the key issue of balance was left unresolved.

Mr. Nicholls: My right hon. Friend has reached the crux of the matter. There is no way of deciding who is right in the arguments for and against appointed or elected Members. That is a good reason for doing the bare minimum. It is not possible to achieve a consensus even, I suspect, through the use of a Whip.

Sir George Young: I hope to deal with balance in a moment. While I make no claims to be right, we can try and tackle the issue. If the alternative is to remain as we are, that is unsatisfactory.

I want to consider the two issues that should form the focus of our debate. One is process and the way in which we should we handle the next stage; the other is policy and what we should do.

On process, it is an understatement to say that the Government have not handled the issue very well so far. Matters do not seem to be about to improve. The assertion that, by splitting the process in two, the end is attained more quickly than by doing it in one looks rather tattered. In our debate last year, the far-sighted and right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) opined that we would never reach stage 2. History has reinforced his fears. He said:

> My expectation is that that temporary scheme is likely to become permanent.—[*Official Report*, 9 June 1999; Vol. 332, c. 668.]

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) agreed.

We made it clear that there should be no stage 1 without stage 2. Lord Hurd observed:

> It is customary, in an advanced society, to inform passengers of the . . . destination before they board the train.

Lord Weatherill said:

> before we bulldoze this House we should see the plans—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 14 October 1998; Vol. 593, c. 937-52.]

Angela Smith (Basildon): The right hon. Gentleman seems to advocate the all-or-nothing approach in reforming the Lords. Does not he accept that, at every stage in our history, that approach has led to no action?

Sir George Young: I do not accept that it was right to split the process in two. We think that the Wakeham commission should have been set up earlier so that the House could deal with the problem logically and coherently. We set the pace: we established the Mackay commission, and eventually pressurised the Government into setting up a royal commission.

There is no sign that the Government will handle the future any better than they have handled the past.

> Many suggestions have been made that the government will shelve the royal commission's report.

Lady Jay writes.

> Nothing could be further from the truth.

she assures us. That overstates the case. We can see the long grass opening up to embrace the report. I challenge the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office to end tonight's debate with the words that he used to end our debate a year ago. He said then:

> I conclude with some words from the White Paper, as set out in the executive summary. The commission is "being asked to report by the end of 1999, to enable the Government to make every effort to ensure that the second stage of reform has been approved by Parliament by the time of the general election." That remains our firm intention.—[*Official Report*, 9 June 1999; Vol. 332, c. 743.]

I challenge the Minister to repeat that commitment tonight.

Mr. Kaufman: When we were discussing these very matters in the context of the terms of reference for the royal commission, all its members, including Lord Butler—a former Cabinet Secretary—understood one thing: we, as a royal commission, expected the Government to adhere to the words that the right hon. Gentleman just quoted, stating that the recommendations would be approved by Parliament before the general election. However, no member of the commission—which included Lord Hurd and Lord Wakeham—was for a moment deluded enough to believe that "approved" referred to the enactment of full legislation. We took the view that Parliament, before the dissolution of the current Parliament, would be asked to approve Government policies that would proceed into legislation early in the next Parliament.

Sir George Young: I am not asking the Government to commit themselves to what the right hon. Gentleman believes; I am asking them to commit themselves to what they believe. I am asking the Government to reaffirm the

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commitment that they made last year, when they said that they expected stage 2 to be completed by the time of the general election.

Mrs. Beckett: I think the right hon. Gentleman's memory is at fault. We never said that we thought it would be possible to get all the legislation through by the time of the forthcoming general election.

Sir George Young: I just read out a *Hansard* quote from our debate last year.

Mrs. Beckett: I think that the right hon. Gentleman will find that what we have always said is that we hope the House will have a chance to express a view, and that the direction will be clear. The Opposition pressed us to commit ourselves to the notion that legislation would be on the statute book before the next general election. Indeed, they tried to introduce a sunset clause into the legislation, but that was resisted at every stage.

Sir George Young: I suggest that the right hon. Lady refer to the report of our debate on Wednesday 9 June last year, and to what her hon. Friend the Minister said when replying to that debate. Those are the words that I just quoted.

Not only have the Government not handled the process well, there has been a breach of commitment.

> The rights of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords will be ended by statute.

said the Labour manifesto; but they have not. Nor have the Government set up the Joint Committee promised—not "suggested", as the Leader of the House said—in the White Paper. We were told:

> Once the Royal Commission has reported, the Government will then establish the proposed joint committee of both Houses . . . to examine the Parliamentary implications of the Commission's work. It, too, will be asked to work speedily.

How can it work speedily if the Government will not set it up?

We have already heard qualifications of that commitment. In the other place, Lord Williams qualified it by saying:

> It is idle to think of having a Joint Committee unless the general parameters of agreement in this House have already been established for that Joint Committee.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 7 March 2000; Vol. 610, c. 1031.]

In other words, "If you don't agree with us, you can't have a Joint Committee, and we will stay where we are".

I see a Joint Committee as a means of securing agreement. There is currently disagreement about the way forward within the Government, and indeed within the opposition parties. A Joint Committee could tackle that, rather than being set up after a deal between the two Front Benches.

Against that background, with the Government not making good progress, we come to the debate about cherry-picking—making progress with some but not all proposals. If the Government were making good progress with the report, there would be no need to debate cherry-picking. Although Lord Wakeham asserted that the proposals could not easily be separated, the truth is that they could be, and in my view they now should be. I shall return to that shortly, when I deal with policy.

The Government have set up an Appointments Commission, but not on the basis of what Wakeham proposed. Paragraph 13 of the Wakeham report makes it clear that the commission should be statutory, not voluntary. Wakeham reminds us that the Prime Minister will still be able to control the size and the party balance of the interim House.

If the Leader of the House is firm in her commitment to legislation, the Life Peerages (Appointments Commission) Bill is before the House of Lords at the moment. As she gave, I think, a commitment to a statutory commission, I hope that the House can now make good progress with that important legislation. Therefore, on process, we have a rather unhappy record of delay, diversion and indecision, which is not radically changed by anything that we have just heard.

I come to policy. I thought that Lord Wakeham summarised in a sentence what the second Chamber should do:

> Our ambition for the reformed second chamber is that it should enhance the overall ability of Parliament as a whole to hold the Government to account. It should do this by using its particular strengths to develop arrangements which complement and reinforce those of the House of Commons.

That is spot on. To do that, the reformed upper House needs to be at least as strong and independent as its predecessor. We reject the option in the White Paper of reducing its powers.

The report revealed—perhaps surprisingly—agreement on functions. Indeed, there were not a lot of representations on that, nor indeed much dissent about functions in the recent Lords debate.

In the time available, it is not possible to run through all 132 recommendations, so I shall pick out a few key ones. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) will touch on some others in his winding-up speech, particularly those on the Church and the law. I agree with what is said about the Salisbury convention and the supremacy of this Chamber. I agree on the need for a constitutional committee and a human rights committee, and about no Government having an in-built majority in the upper House. In particular, I agree with Wakeham that it is important that procedures in the upper House are not dictated by Government—we have our own experience of that here. I agree that indirect and functional constituencies are unsatisfactory.

In the context of another debate, it is worth mentioning Wakeham's views on the English question:

> There may well be a separate case for Parliament as a whole to reflect on how business which can be identified as exclusively "English" should be handled in future.

It is also worth recalling that Wakeham said that being a Member of the Scottish Parliament or Welsh Assembly was

> a full-time job. It would leave no time for regular participation in the work of the second chamber.

That must apply with even more force to the work of the first Chamber.

Since the report, life has moved on in one respect, which should qualify Wakeham's conclusion. He asserted in paragraph 11.8:

> The fact is that elections can only be fought effectively by organised political parties which can attract large blocks of voters and who have the resources to organise television broadcasts, publicity, canvassing, public meetings and the like.

The hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) has comprehensively disproved that assertion.

The report leaves unanswered the question of how to get the upper House down to 550—it is now nearly 700—and, indeed, how to keep it at 550 if, after each election, more peers must be created to get the balance right.

At the heart of the debate is the issue of composition. We have recognised that there is a range of views within my party and have said that we are likely to end up favouring a higher percentage of elected Members than model C, which had 195 elected Members in a House of about 550.

On that key issue of composition, it was interesting to re-read the two recent debates: that in the upper House on 7 March this year, and that in the House of Commons on 9 June last year. Summing up the latter, my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire pointed out that the majority of speeches argued for a wholly or largely directly elected House. Looking through the other debate, there was some cultural antipathy to the concept of electing Members. If I were to summarise a rather long debate, I would say that the upper House believes that it is doing a very good job, which it is. Its Members want to go on doing that job and they believe that violent change would undermine them. Many had never stood for election and made it clear that they found the prospect distasteful. Others had stood for election and hoped that they had put the experience behind them. There was an unspoken view that, "We don't want the rough trade from the other end of the building up here."

Reading Wakeham again, we get the same impression of "de haut en bas." In paragraph 11, he pleads for the second Chamber not to be

> a home for yet another group of professional politicians.

Later, he asks us to avoid a

> hunting ground for another tribe of professional politicians.

The issue of election goes to the heart of the debate. Two principal reasons are put forward against elections for the upper House. The first we might call the British Rail argument: elections produce the wrong sort of politician. The second is the "rival mandate" theory.

On the first, there is an issue that we all need to address: how do political parties attract quality candidates for election to the upper House? Lord Longford put the point dramatically in the debate in the upper House:

> We would get the dregs.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 7 March 2000; Vol. 610, c. 955.]

Personally, I accept that many of the people who would be first-class Members of the upper House do not belong to a political party and do not want to fight an election, but, if we believe that 195 or more should be elected, we are not talking about many each time—if they are elected every five years for 15 years—and I note that some of the recent appointments to the upper House are exactly those who sought election to the House of Commons and failed.

I believe that the anxiety about elected Members is misplaced. Behaviour in our House is less a function of the sort of people we are and more a function of the role of a Member of Parliament in a dominant Chamber. When the sort of people we are move from this environment to a different one, our behaviour changes. The greatest demonstration of that are two of my noble Friends who were on the commission—Lords Hurd and Wakeham. When they started, they were down here. When they were here, they behaved like Members of Parliament. However, when they were put in a less partisan, more reflective environment such as the upper House, they behaved like peers. Therefore, there is nothing inherently suspect or inappropriate about people who want to stand for election to the upper House.

Mr. Robertson: My only concern is that, with a greater number of elected Lords, the upper House would become more like the House of Commons, so they would behave exactly the same.

Sir George Young: I am coming to the second leg of the criticism: the rival mandate theory, to which, I think, my hon. Friend is referring. If the second Chamber is elected, it may claim a rival mandate to the Commons.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir George Young: May I develop the argument?

I do not subscribe to that argument either. The role of the second Chamber is clearly defined as complementary but, in the end, subordinate to this one. The powers are the powers given to it by this House, which is pre-eminent, and they cannot be unilaterally changed. The argument asserts that, if the upper House is elected, that settlement might be challenged, but there would be a world of difference between the two Houses.

Members of Parliament are all elected on the same day, on the basis of a party manifesto for one Parliament, to the pre-eminent House that sustains the Executive and contains the Prime Minister. They submit themselves or their successors to re-election. None of those conditions would exist for the upper House, were it to be elected on the Wakeham basis. Therefore, the notion that electing some or even most of its Members could lead to the conversion of the upper House into a rival Assembly is, in my view, unsustainable. Therefore, on policy, although there are still legitimate areas of disagreement—on which, I hope, this debate might shed some light—there is much agreement where progress could be made.

The story of the Government's reform of the House of Lords is an object lesson of how not to set about constitutional reform. They have shot first and asked questions afterwards. They have not thought through the policy before embarking on it. As with their commitment to hold a referendum on an alternative to first past the post, the constitution section of the manifesto is strewn with unkept promises. There was no talk of seeking consensus when they started on Lords reform, but, now they have got stuck, they are looking around for allies.

We are a generous party. We care about the constitution, so we readily give advice on where we should go from here. First, we should set up the Joint Committee to identify the way forward and we should do it now. We heard a very equivocal response from the Leader of the House to the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire. The

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Government say that they want to identify a consensus—setting up a Joint Committee seems a good start.There is a lot of agreement. Many people agree that the new House should be part elected and part appointed, and there is widespread agreement on what its functions should be, so let us do that soon.

Secondly, a statutory appointments commission should be set up—not the non-statutory one, but a proper one, curtailing the huge rights of patronage that the Prime Minister has retained for himself. Thirdly, we should make progress now with many of the non-compositional recommendations in Wakeham, engaging in the horticultural practice of cherry-picking, because the Government have clearly stalled on compositional reform.

Fourthly, the Government should initiate a wider public debate about stage 2, which they have conspicuously avoided. They hope that the problem will go away, but it will not. They must take progress off the back of the Lord Chancellor's envelope, on to the Floor of the House and out into the country.

As on so many issues at the moment, Ministers are like rabbits in the headlights, not knowing which way to turn. The constitution of this country is not safe in their hands. It will fall to a Conservative Government to restore stability and fairness.

6 pm

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): I agreed with the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) on one of his comments, but disagreed with him on another. I agree that, if we are to have a properly functioning two-Chamber democracy that is based on this building, we have to accept that the prime criterion in making change is to make the Government more accountable to Parliament. That criterion motivated the royal commission and led us unanimously to arrive at a report, despite the divergent approaches with which the members entered the royal commission room.

The commission agreed that, ultimately, we were making three different proposals on an elected element—should there be one. I invite the right hon. Gentleman to look at page 188 of our report. I make it clear that, although the three models at the bottom of the page are between recommendation 76 and recommendation 77 on page 189, they are not a recommendation, but possibilities for consideration should it be decided that the electorate should have a voice of one type or another.

Mr. Nicholls: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Kaufman: I am not sure whether I shall have injury time if I give way to the hon. Gentleman, but I will give way.

Mr. Nicholls: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman—who, as always, is most charming and gracious. When he talks about making the Government more accountable, does he mean making them more defeatable during their time in office or making it possible to show even more starkly when they are in error?

Mr. Kaufman: I mean both. In recommending that 20 per cent. of the membership of the second Chamber should be Cross Benchers, so that no party should ever have a majority, we are proposing making it more possible for the Government to be defeatable. However, we also proposed in the report creating a series of new ways in which the Government should be accountable to the second Chamber. The Government are not accountable in some of those ways even to the House of Commons.

I disagreed with the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire when he described the way in which the composition of the second Chamber could be re-adjusted after a general election by the creation of more peers. The royal commission was absolutely clear that the second Chamber's link with the peerage should be ended permanently. My own view—which was supported by a considerable number of commission members—is that the second Chamber should be called not the House of Lords, but, perhaps, the House of Senators.

Nevertheless, the royal commission agreed on the crucial point that the second Chamber's link with the peerage should be ended. We also proposed that, in parallel with that change, the Prime Minister's patronage should be ended totally. I am sure that my royal commission colleagues will forgive me for saying that both those proposals—ending the second Chamber's link with the peerage, and totally ending prime ministerial patronage—came from me. The leaders of political parties should not have a greater voice than anyone else in determining whom the independent appointments commission appoints.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: They will still be able to make recommendations.

Mr. Kaufman: I tell my hon. Friend that the royal commission believes, and proposes, that a very much wider spectrum of the population should be eligible to be appointed by the independent appointments commission—which will be statutory, appointed under the Nolan rules and open to applications from members of the general public, and which will scrutinise every single application. The commission was very clear indeed that we did not want a new second Chamber that would be a subterfuge enabling the Prime Minister of the day, whoever he or she might be, to get away with perpetuating his or her patronage.

Mr. Prentice: Will not the leaders of the political parties—not only the Prime Minister, but the Leader of the Opposition—still be able to exercise patronage and appoint people to the upper Chamber on the basis of their party connections?

Mr. Kaufman: No. My hon. Friend should read the report—the commission ruled out precisely that possibility. We said that the leaders of the political parties, like anyone else, should be able to suggest appointments to the appointments commission, but that the appointments commission need not pay attention to those recommendations. Moreover, we said that it should be open to the appointments commission to appoint not only those who are in political parties, but those who are outside political parties. That includes those who were

suggested by political party leaders as well as those who were opposed by them. Therefore, my hon. Friend, for example, might have a chance.

Mr. Tyrie: Who will appoint the appointers on the appointments commission?

Mr. Kaufman: That matter is dealt with in the report.

Mr. Tyrie: I have read it.

Mr. Kaufman: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman should look at it again, as I do not want to take up too much time dealing with matters that he can read about in the report. We are proposing that the system should be independent and analogous to the system that the House has—with the agreement of all parties—approved for the election commission. We wanted and insisted upon an entirely separate structure.

One of the reasons—in addition to others which I shall deal with if I have time—why we proposed that there should be an independent appointments commission, which would appoint certainly the great majority if not all the Members of the second Chamber, is that we wanted to deal with the inadequacies of the way in which hon. Members are elected. We reach this place after a series of competitions within our political parties, and, subsequently, after competition in elections. Certain balances have to be struck in that process.

Despite the welcome number of new women Members elected to this place after the previous general election, women are still very seriously under-represented in this Chamber. Members of the ethnic minorities are extremely seriously under-represented in this Chamber. Therefore—I say it again, and I hope that my commission colleagues will forgive me—at my suggestion, the commission proposed that there should be gender objectives, so that we have about 50 per cent. men and 50 per cent. women in a new second Chamber. That objective could never be achieved in elections to this place. The commission also suggested that there should be ethnic minority objectives, as selection will not substantially deal with the serious under-representation of ethnic minorities in this place.

One of the independent appointments commission's statutory remits would, therefore, be to address the issue of gender equality. Although the commission decided that, because of the United Kingdom's ethnic diversity, we should not specify an exact proportion of ethnic minority Members in the second Chamber, we believe that ethnic minority representation in the second Chamber should be at least proportional to the United Kingdom's overall ethnic minority population.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Kaufman: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman in a moment, after I have completed reciting my list of the commission's proposals.

As I said in replying to the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), the commission also said that there should be a statutory minimum of Cross Benchers so that no political party could ever have a majority in the second Chamber. We proposed, as the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire said, that party representation—but only party representation—in the second Chamber should be in proportion to the votes cast at the previous general election, and that that proportion should be adjusted over time.

Now I shall give way to the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth).

Mr. Howarth: The right hon. Gentleman has referred to an independent appointments commission, yet he has given a whole list of prescriptions and caveats. It can hardly be independent if it enters life with all those limitations imposed on it.

Mr. Kaufman: It is to be independent of the Government, but not of criteria that would enable the second Chamber to be much more representative of the generality of the population than the current second Chamber or, it must be said—other than in party terms—this Chamber. That is why we suggested that those criteria be laid down. We also suggested that the commission should be appointed according to the Nolan rules to ensure its total independence of the Government. We insisted on that and regarded it as indispensable. When I say "the Government", I do not mean only this Labour Government, although I hope that it will be in office for a very long time, but a Conservative or any other Government.

The issue of composition preoccupies many people, but we wanted also to decide what a second Chamber was to be for. One of the reasons why we came down against an elected Chamber was not only because two elected Chambers would be a recipe for continual conflict but because, if the election for the other place were held at the same time as one for this place, even under a proportional system, the Government who won here would get the predominant number of Members there, and we would not have a balance; and if it were a mid-term election, with a Government who had become unpopular, the second Chamber would always be skewed against the Government of the day. One could never get it right.

That is why we proposed, as one of two possibilities on composition, to have Members appointed in relation to general election votes as regional representatives on general election day, when the maximum number of people vote. The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire spoke about the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone). One of the facts about the latter is that, far from being an independent, he rose all the way through manipulating the Labour party, first from inside, then from outside.

The same goes for the only independent in the Scottish Parliament, who was elected not because he was independent, but because he was Labour, and the people liked him as Labour, but Labour would not choose him. We should be clear about who would get there: they would all come up through the party system and every one of them would be the same kind of puppet of political parties as my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice), myself and all the rest of us.

We proposed greater powers. Because of the way in which the House is organised, there is simply not time for us to scrutinise European legislation and ministerial responsibility in the European arena. That is why we proposed that the second Chamber should have the right to summon Ministers before they go off to a Council of

[Mr. Kaufman]

Ministers, so that they go knowing what a House of Parliament expects of them, and again when they come back, to check on what they have done. We believe that that would make the Government more accountable to Parliament.

We believe that there should be a special human rights committee to monitor the Human Rights Act 1998, which this House, with all the good will in the world, is simply incapable of monitoring.

We looked carefully at the Parliament Acts and decided that one of their major flaws is that, with secondary legislation, all that the other Chamber can do is chuck it out, which it very rarely does, or rubber-stamp it. We recommended a system whereby the Parliament Act delay on legislation would be extended to secondary legislation. That would make the Government more answerable to Parliament.

We proposed that the powers over primary legislation be entirely retained, including not giving the Government what I believe they want: the right to use the Parliament Act procedure with legislation that starts along the Corridor, as well as with legislation that starts here. We deliberately said no. The Parliament Acts were passed to allow the will not of the Government, but of the House of Commons to prevail. We therefore said that the will of the House of Commons only, not the will of the Government through the House of Lords, should be enforceable.

We did not idly reject the idea of a wholly elected second Chamber. Indeed, at least two of the people involved, Lord Hurd and Dawn Oliver, to whom I pay tribute for her marvellous contribution—she came from the Liberal Democrats—came into the royal commission wanting a wholly elected second Chamber, but—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman has had his ration.

Mr. Kaufman: Actually, that rounded off my speech quite nicely.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am delighted to have been of help to the right hon. Gentleman.

6.16 pm

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): It is customary in a debate of this kind, in which we are considering the report of a distinguished body of people, to pay tribute to their work. I find that singularly difficult on this occasion, as I regret that the commission, in its analysis and recommendations, was weak and unhelpful in carrying forward the debate.

As could be expected, the report produced a few ideas of substance and merit, and I hope that the House of Lords, as it is at present constituted, will think fit to give effect to some of the proposals, which could be done without legislation. I refer, for example, to the proposal that a committee be established to scrutinise treaties, which are important and should be considered before ratification. That was proposed by my noble Friend Lord Lester of Herne Hill and some other distinguished peers.

It was also proposed that pre-legislative scrutiny of Bills should become the norm in the other place. That also seems to me to have a good deal of merit. It was proposed that a human rights committee be established—not an original idea, and one to which the Government were committed even before the commission reported. The commission also suggested early publication of important statutory instruments, so that they could be scrutinised by people outside the House. That matter is predominantly for the Government, and I hope that they will act on it.

It was further proposed—this was a departure—to permit Ministers from the House of Commons to make statements in the House of Lords and answer questions there. That proposal has great merit and I hope that it will be acted on. It lies nicely with another proposal from my party, which the royal commission did not take up, that no Ministers should be drawn from the upper House and that it should be a purely legislative Chamber, with its own ethos and power to hold the executive arm of Government to account.

The royal commission recommended—here again, I think that it was right—that the link between the peerage and the second Chamber should finally be snapped. I hope that the Government will act on that, too. Having mentioned those few good proposals, I have reached the end of my praise for the commission's work.

It is right to look back on the context in which the commission was set up. It was not envisaged in the Government's manifesto—indeed, something different was proposed. Following the agreement on the future of constitutional reform entered into by the right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) and myself on behalf of our respective parties prior to the election, it was suggested that we should act in two stages. I differ from the Conservatives, because I think that it was right to tackle the problem of the hereditaries separately and discretely, and to prevent them from participating in the debate about the ultimate shape of the Chamber that would follow.

It was agreed before the election, and contained in the parties' manifestos, that a Joint Committee of the two Houses should be set up to consider the shape and functions of the new, reformed House. The Government recognised when they published their White Paper that such a Committee could play an important role in seeking to bring to bear on the issue both Houses' experience of their workings. As far as I can make out, the Government have not resiled from that commitment, although they may have it in mind to confine the Committee's role somewhat. Indeed, the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) seemed to suspect that too, when he spoke of the desirability of using such a Joint Committee to find consensus on the powers and composition of the future House. I hope that the Government will not stand back from the use of a Joint Committee of that kind to seek to achieve consensus.

Constitutional reform should, as far as is possible, carry the Members of this House across the parties. It should also carry the country, because it is desirable to have stable change that will last.

Mr. Tyrie: A moment ago, the right hon. Gentleman mentioned the deal that was struck between the Liberal Democrats and the Labour party before the election. Now that he can see all the long grass growing up between him

and the creation of a Joint Committee, does he have any regrets about the Liberal Democrats' decision to go along with Labour's plans on Lords reform?

Mr. Maclennan: No, none. So far, so good. The House of Lords has been improved by the measures that have already been enacted. That highly significant development would not have taken place in the lifetime of a single Parliament if the whole question of the ultimate future and disposition of the House of Lords had been embarked upon without prior agreement on the small print. It has been helpful to have had that collaboration up to this point, and I see no reason why it should not be constructively continued. Indeed, I would hope that it could be constructively continued across all the parties, because consensus will make for success.

From interventions that we have had in the debate, it is clear that there is little prospect of consensus on the Wakeham recommendations. Lord Wakeham seems to have been too constrained in interpreting his remit. He has been over-burdened by what appeared to be the generally accepted belief that the reformed House should not seek to displace the pre-eminence of this Chamber after the fact. When I gave evidence to the commission and was questioned on the point by Lord Butler, the former Cabinet Secretary—who is perhaps not the last word on the workings of democracy, although he knows a lot about the constitution—I said that this Chamber's pre-eminence was guaranteed by virtue of the fact that it provides the Government. The Prime Minister comes from this Chamber and it has control of supply, which no one has suggested should change.

This Chamber's pre-eminence is not threatened by the creation of a second effective Chamber of Parliament that does what this Chamber has not done, cannot do or would prefer to be done elsewhere. The reality is that this Chamber would regard many matters thus. I have mentioned already, for example, the treaty power. If the House of Lords were to have that power, it might be argued that that was tampering with the supremacy of this Chamber and its right to consider treaty making. However, I do not criticise Lord Wakeham for being inconsistent in that, any more than I criticise him directly for the multiple inconsistencies with which his report is littered, the most serious of which relates to the issue of election.

Mr. Kaufman: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman agrees with the commission's recommendation—I did not have time in my speech to say that I also agreed with it—of a special procedure under which the second Chamber could examine treaties in a way that this House does not have time to do. However, that has nothing to do with the question of the supremacy of this Chamber. If my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) were here, he would mount his hobby horse about the royal prerogative, because that is what treaties come under.

Mr. Maclennan: I am glad to have support from the right hon. Gentleman whenever he feels able to give it. Indeed, he makes my point that the commission did not focus on many areas in which it would be possible to strengthen the powers of a second Chamber and give it a useful function in our constitution that in no way diminished the effectiveness or operations of this House.

Another example, which my party recommended for consideration, was the system of public appointments, which is also another example of the Government's power to act by way of the royal prerogative. We suggested that, for some significant public appointments with considerable political importance—perhaps, the chairman of the BBC or the heads of executive agencies, such as the Prison Service—it would be desirable that they be scrutinised ex ante, before Ministers impose them on the system. It might be argued that that would remove long-standing powers from this House to scrutinise Ministers with those responsibilities.

Mrs. Dunwoody: If we are to extend such a service, surely it should be Select Committees, as recommended by the Liaison Committee, that have the right to examine such appointments. They have the expertise and the breadth of vision, as well as being politically balanced.

Mr. Maclennan: That is an arguable point, and I do not necessarily quarrel with it. It might make some sense to have a division of labour in such matters. In some areas, it would make more sense for this House to consider public appointments and, in others, this House might be happy to allow consideration to be conducted in the other place. However, this House should not deceive itself that it is capable of doing the full work of oversight of the actions of Government, or that it has shown any ability to discharge adequately the oversight of subordinate legislation, for example. Here again, the need to strengthen the powers of the upper House is palpable, evident and demonstrable, and I regret that Wakeham did so little to take on board that opportunity. The commission suggested that the existing power to reject statutory instruments altogether should be replaced by a diminished power to hold up their consideration or enactment. However, I did not find that to be profound or advanced thinking about how to improve the operation of our legislative process.

There are many internal contradictions in this incoherent report. It is not logically compelling, nor does it show a perception of how things are done in other countries; indeed, it is highly insular in its approach. The main weakness is in its inability to come to terms with the issue of democracy. I find it impossible to divine what the commission thought it was doing in that respect.

In the report, the commission attempted to put forward the case that the recommendations in total would, in some way, make the House of Lords more democratic because the membership as a whole, excluding Cross Benchers, would reflect the balance of political opinion within the country as expressed at the most recent general election and because the regional Members would be proportionately representative of public opinion within their respective regions. The one missing word is election.

We are talking about an appointed agency, although I am not clear who is doing the appointing. There has been a degree of coy embarrassment over that issue. So far, an executive search firm of a distinguished firm of accountants has been asked to come up with some names of people who might themselves be thought suitable to make appointments. This is putting democracy at two removes from the people, upon whom it rests. Perhaps the "Oxford English Dictionary" has the best definition of democracy—government based upon the people, either exercised directly or by agents elected by the people. It is sad that that

[Mr. Maclennan]

is so signally missing from the document. Sadly, that corrupts the whole, and "corrupt" is not too strong a word. It vitiates the strength of the argument that a reformed House of Lords could be more effective and capable of holding the executive arm of Government to account.

It vitiates it because people appointed in that way have no more authority than the man in the street to call in question what is being done by the Government. The man in the street has as much right—although he may not have the soapbox from which to project his views—as anyone appointed for the purpose. The absence of a commitment to democracy in the document is self-serving and oligarchic in its thrust, rather than democratic as it ought to be.

The commission is not even coherent about its views on election. It recommends that there should be an elected element, although there is a signal lack of clarity as to how many or what proportion there should be. It proposes an elected element is because it has recognised—indeed, it cited the experience of taking evidence in Newcastle—that people in the regions and nations would not find their interests acceptably represented by people who had been chosen to do so from the outside.

There was an entirely accurate perception that it had to be people elected from the regions who were to constitute the voice of the regions if that were an important objective. So far as the UK as a whole is concerned, the same argument should appertain. If the voice or the interests of the country is to be expressed, it had best be done by people elected for the purpose.

I fear that the Leader of the House was somewhat distracted by the issue of the dual mandate during her opening remarks. It is patronising and, frankly, wrong to assume that if people are elected for a purpose that is established by constitutional statute and is different from the functions of this House, they are incapable of discharging that role without seeking to arrogate to themselves an entirely different role. Those making that case cannot have studied what happens in other countries or they would recognise the frailty of that point of view.

The Bundestag has two Chambers and the powers of the Bundesrat are totally different from those of the first Chamber—and, it may be thought, not so significant. However, throughout its entire history, the Bundesrat has not tried to claw to itself powers that have been given to the other Chamber. In the United States, there is not a continuing struggle for power or to redraw the lines of duties between the Senate and Congress. If there is a constitutional instrument establishing and defining the new and different roles of the second Chamber, I see no reason why those elected to it will not accept that that is their function and carry it out accordingly.

The argument was been put to me by Lord Butler that we might not get the right people elected into the upper House; we might get the kind of people who would be happy only if they became Ministers in the Government. Therefore, they would be frustrated by their role. That shows the mentality of the ivory tower so to describe the political interests of people of this country.

Many people do not aspire to be members of the Government but are interested in public service. Many people go into local government because they would prefer to represent the interests of their community—and do something about it—at that level. Some people come into this House with no desire to be Ministers, although they are perhaps somewhat fewer than once was the case. However, it is certainly true that not everyone elected to the House of Commons aspires to be the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary or even the Leader of the House.

There is a role for people of a different type from those currently elected to this House in the sort of second Chamber that is envisaged, with revising functions that are amplified by other, new tasks that are appropriate. I do not know about the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), but I strongly suspect that he feels fulfilled at his election to lead the new authority in London; it may even have been his long-term goal. I think that many people would regard election to the sort of deliberative second Chamber that I have advocated to be a highly desirable way of giving public service.

The report is deeply disappointing, especially as its lack of principle and imagination has stalled the process and made progress much harder. However, I hope that the Government will recognise that the job of reforming the upper House remains half done and needs to be taken forward. It is unrealistic to imagine that, even if this Parliament runs its full course—which some suggest is unlikely—we could have the relevant legislation on the statute book before its end.

It has been suggested that that legislation was promised in a debate. I do not know whether it was and, frankly, I never thought that any legislative proposals would surface in this Parliament, although I hoped that they would do so early in the next Parliament. I am not at all clear that it would be right for such legislation to appear in this Parliament: the reform of one of our two Houses is a matter of fundamental importance that ought to be put to the British people in a referendum or general election, with specific proposals for consideration and approval. That opportunity still exists.

If there is to be consensus, we must go back to the drawing board. Regrettably, we have not received much help from Lord Wakeham. A Joint Committee of the two Houses might do better. The proper time to establish such a Committee may not be now, as was suggested by the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young). I can see some attractions in that option, but I can see also that the next Parliament will be more inclined to act on recommendations drawn from a Committee established by hon. Members in that Parliament. There is therefore a valid case for delay at this time. I should be delighted to discuss these matters with other hon. Members, in any forum that they care to choose.

I shall conclude, as this is a short debate.

Sir Patrick Cormack: The right hon. Gentleman has made the longest speech so far.

Mr. Maclennan: Regrettably, my party has few opportunities to intervene in this debate, and I think it reasonable to take a little time. I hope that the debate will have shown the Government that they were right to keep an open mind and to remain ready to listen to arguments from Labour Members, as well as from hon. Members in other parties.

6.43 pm

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): I am glad to have the opportunity to speak in the Commons' first debate on the Wakeham commission report. I do not accept the view expressed by the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) on a referendum. I am not in favour of extending the use of referendums, and I do not want one to be held on this issue.

I fully support the way in which the Government are handling reform of the House of Lords. I spoke in the debate when the first stage of reform was proposed. If stage 1 had not been put in hand, we would not now be going forward to stage 2.

I delivered leaflets when the Attlee Government were in power and stood in my first local council election 40 years ago. The Labour party has said many times that it would do something about reforming the Lords, but managed nothing in that regard in the century just ended. I began to fear that nothing would ever be done. It is outrageous that, for the whole of the 20th century, our second Chamber consisted mainly of people whose sole right to be Members stemmed from what their forefathers had done. Sometimes those events in history were nothing to be proud of.

Moreover, the House of Lords was withering and in serious decline when life peerages were introduced. That change gave it a new lease of life, but it is time to go forward and move in a positive direction.

Recommendation 1 in the report states:

> The new second chamber should have the capacity to offer counsel from a range of sources.

That is very appropriate. Such sources would not face the same constituency pressures and problems that all hon. Members face, nor would they receive the same heavy postbags. They would offer wide expertise from different backgrounds and would be representative of society as a whole. That recommendation is an objective that we should pursue. I believe that the right way to proceed is to replace the vestige of hereditary privilege that still exists, and to remove the final traces of the 100-odd protected seats.

The report says that the Salisbury convention means that the elected mandate and this House will always have the right to determine policy and to implement manifesto pledges. I agree in this respect with the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, who said that the new House—whether it is elected, appointed or part-elected and part-appointed—would accept and perform the role that the House of Commons gave it.

At one time, I feared that that would not be the case, but my study of the Wakeham report and other items has convinced me otherwise. I believe that the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross is right and that Members of the second Chamber will accept that this House has the clear electoral mandate. The second Chamber will have the right to delay and improve legislation, but not to block it and thus thwart the will of this House. That is absolutely crucial.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) said that the second Chamber would have powers to scrutinise secondary legislation. That is an improvement on the present situation, and is a positive and sensible move.

Mr. Fisher: Why does my hon. Friend say that the second Chamber should have an automatic power to delay? Many hon. Members have said that its role is to improve scrutiny and to hold the Government to account, but delay is not part of that role.

Mr. Pike: I can understand my hon. Friend's concern about that, but sometimes a limited amount of delay allows time for second thoughts and is not a bad thing. However, the second Chamber must use any power of delay very warily.

I am a member of the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons. The Committee's first report said that its top priority was to improve scrutiny of legislation. So far, we have failed to achieve that objective. There is a long way to go, as hon. Members still make long and meaningless speeches in Committee that do not really contribute to the scrutiny of legislation. I admit that I have done the same in the past, but we must improve our procedures in that regard.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) referred to the Liaison Committee report. I believe that that also offers positive ways forward that must be debated and considered to improve the way in which this House functions.

Mr. Nicholls: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, with the best will in the world, Governments—no matter of which party—do not like being scrutinised? Therefore, there must be powers of delay—not of blocking in terms of total rejection—to ensure that the Government pay heed to the scrutiny that has taken place.

Mr. Pike: I think that the hon. Gentleman is basically saying the same as I am. I believe that we must try to make Governments, of whatever party, accept scrutiny. I know that the hon. Gentleman had different views when his party was in office. However, we are all parliamentarians, and I strongly believe in the rights of Back Benchers. One of the issues that I keep pressing with regard to modernisation is that we should be able to table written questions to the Executive for 52 weeks a year, and that they should be open to scrutiny, even when the House is in recess.

There are many measures that have to be carried out to improve the way our democracy works. We must ensure that Back Benchers, whatever party they are from, scrutinise the Executive far more than they have done over the years. We have allowed our powers to decline, and we should not allow that to continue. The Liaison Committee report is all about turning back the tide.

We must scrutinise our own procedures. When the reform of the House of Lords goes through, the Government must, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton said, look at Lords' procedures to change and improve them. The opportunity should be used to make the House of Lords and its powers more effective once the reforms take place.

Recommendation 46 indicated that the complementary system of scrutiny of European Union business should continue in the upper House. I believe that that is right. As chairman of the Select Committee on Deregulation in this House, I believe that the House of Lords should continue its joint function of scrutinising deregulation. Not much is going on at the moment, but there will be a new Bill, and I hope that more deregulation measures will be forthcoming.

[Mr. Pike]

Chapter 9 of the report recommends that the judicial role of the House of Lords should continue. I have no great objections to that, but believe that the issue should be debated further. It is not the main issue before us today—the political issues are the most important. However, the House of Lords performs an important legal role, and I believe that the way ahead needs careful thought.

We must also consider the position of the Churches. I am a member of the Church of England, and at present, 24 bishops and two archbishops automatically enter the upper House. If that House is to have a place for Church representatives, why should not Catholics, Methodists, Muslims and Jews be granted places automatically as well?

Mr. Gordon Prentice: Canon law would prevent Catholic priests from sitting in the second Chamber. That is one of the great contradictions, I suppose, in the Wakeham report.

Mr. Pike: I do not accept that that is necessarily so. The late cardinal was offered a peerage and chose not to accept it, and there have been others.

A minister in the Church of England cannot stand for the House of Commons because that is statute-barred.

Sir Patrick Cormack: The hon. Gentleman must accept that the late Cardinal Hume turned down the offer of a peerage for the very reason that the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) gave. The presence of the bishops stems from the fact that we have an established Church. Is the hon. Gentleman arguing for disestablishment?

Mr. Pike: I am not arguing for disestablishment of the Church, and I am certainly not about to get into an argument with the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) who, of course, voted against the ordination of women. However, we have no women bishops, so it is a single-sex issue. He will remember that on an ecclesiastical committee I argued that if women were to be appointed as priests, they should also be bishops. That is the logical outcome. We need to look very carefully at whether other religions should be represented in the House of Lords, and not just the Church of England. It is a big issue, but it needs debating.

With regard to the regions, the report gives us three methods by which people can enter the second Chamber. As everyone knows, my view is that we have seen enough of proportional representation abroad, we have seen it in Scotland, Wales and London, and we do not want any more of it. So let us not have any PR—I am totally against that.

Instead of having appointed positions, I think that we should consider having representatives of specific areas of expertise elected directly to the second Chamber. What about electing a fixed number of representatives to the second Chamber from the trade unions, the Confederation of British Industry and the Forum for Small Business? If we genuinely want people of expertise in that House, rather than appointing them, should we not allow certain organisations, with a specialist electorate, to be put forward?

Mr. Prentice: My hon. Friend reminds me of the situation in Hong Kong, with the functional constituencies, where people represent circus performers. Is he seriously recommending that?

Mr. Pike: My hon. Friend, who represents a neighbouring constituency, takes this issue a bit too far. He is opposed to appointments being made. I am simply saying that if we want a truly representative Chamber, we should consider other methods of election.

We have the opportunity to ensure that the second Chamber is representative of the country in the 21st century and that it can play a vital role in our parliamentary democracy. We need to debate these issues. I believe that the Joint Committee should be established to consider the various options. I disagreed with the idea of a referendum, proposed by the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, but I believe that our manifesto for the next election should contain our proposals for what to do in this respect. In that way, people will know what the future of the second Chamber will be. Then they will be able to choose, and modernisation will mean that this House and the second Chamber will both be able to scrutinise legislation. That will ensure that we do not fall into some of the legislative traps that we have fallen into in recent years.

6.58 pm

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): I am sure that right hon. and hon. Members will have noticed that in recent months there has been a rising level of disillusion with this Government and their principles and purpose. More importantly, there has also been a rising level of disillusion and cynicism about politics among quite a wide section of the population. That is serious, because it damages our democracy. I think that one of the things from which it stems is a lack of the faith that there used to be in the institutions of our constitution, including this Parliament, which no longer plays the effective role that it used to play in holding the Executive to account.

We see this attitude exemplified most often in the low and ever-decreasing turnout in elections. It is no good thinking that the use of electronics or longer voting times will address the problem of the positive refusal of growing numbers of the public to take part in many of our political activities.

I believe that few things are more calculated to make the public cynical and disillusioned about politics than the way the second Chamber of Parliament has been treated so far in the so-called reforms that have been carried out. The House of Lords—the other place—has been reduced to a quite ridiculous situation. It is hard to explain it to people from overseas with an interest in politics while keeping a straight face.

The present composition of the House of Lords, after the earlier action of the Government, has produced an extraordinary institution of 92 hereditary peers elected by hereditary electors on a most peculiar basis to provide a large constituent element of the upper House. The rest is dominated by a huge number of recent appointments made primarily by the Prime Minister but also by the leaders of

other political parties. It must be said that some of these people are of great distinction and merit, but the reputation of all the nominees is of a somewhat uneven quality. As a result, we have a second Chamber that is an extraordinary creation for the beginning of the 21st century.

It is my belief, as it was a year ago—it has been confirmed by the delay that is taking place while we have another debate after the Wakeham report—that the Government began by intending to do nothing further than what they have already done, in getting rid of hereditary peers. We have reached the stage where the Government are not sure whether they like what has happened, so they do not know what to do next.

The Leader of the House told us that she had not come to the Chamber to announce the Government's settled conclusions on this problem. I do not believe that the Government are anywhere near any conclusions. I think that large parts of the Government do not want to do anything further. Fortunately, they have fallen into a trap which I think will make that position difficult to sustain. Our reformed second Chamber regards itself as more legitimate and powerful than it used to be. It is no longer possible for Ministers to do what I did and start making scornful remarks about the non-elected second Chamber when it disagrees with a ministerial decision.

The Government created a second Chamber that is now happily enjoying quite regularly defeating them. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) that so far it has chosen some pretty good issues on which to defeat them. We have a situation where it can be argued that because of the large majority in this place, the more powerful and effective Chamber is the second Chamber—but it has an extraordinary composition. For that reason, Lord Wakeham and his colleagues have sought to advise us on powers and composition.

I do not want to disparage the work of my noble Friend, who is an old personal friend, as are quite a few members of the commission. I acknowledge that the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) and other members of the commission have put in a great deal of hard work to try to guide the public on the subject. I particularly do not agree, however, with their conclusions on the constitution of the second Chamber. I find myself largely in agreement with the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan). There will be others on both sides of the House of all political parties who do not agree with the Wakeham commission's conclusion.

It seems inescapable that the powerful Wakeham commission set out, on the steer of the Government, to try to head everybody off from the plain and obvious solution to what should be the composition of an upper House in a parliamentary democracy such as the United Kingdom. It is obvious that a directly elected upper House is the only one that will have full political legitimacy and the necessary clout properly to hold the modern Executive to account.

Before I engage in the arguments that the Wakeham commission ingeniously advanced to head off the plain and obvious solution, I must say that I happen to think that it will not head off the British electorate eventually. I am fairly confident that the average British citizen will accept nothing less than elected representatives in the upper House of our Parliament holding the Executive to account.

I am usually fairly scornful—sometimes quite disparaging—of the slavish use that is now made of focus groups or opinion polls, but on this occasion I happily suspect that my views are entirely in line with those of a large majority of the public, if it was put to them as an option that we should have an elected upper House.

We must turn to the subtle and diplomatic reasons that the Wakeham commission tries to advance to head us off from a plain and obvious conclusion. The first reason is plainly described as the "central objection" to direct election. It is claimed, at paragraph 11.6, that it will

> represent a challenge to the pre-eminence of the House of Commons.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire that this is not a zero sum game. If we increase the powers of the upper House—I would not increase them beyond where they are, but I would certainly not diminish them—and strengthen its composition by giving it more legitimacy, by making it elected, that does not necessarily diminish the authority of this place.

The 21st century form of Executive is huge and all-embracing compared with older forms of government in this country. Two Houses of Parliament can therefore complement each other in holding it to account. Of course, it is necessary to work out which House is pre-eminent. I shall not repeat arguments that have already been made, but we have already established that position. I am content that we should have legislation to reinforce it. We have the Parliament Acts, and it is important that the second Chamber should have no power over money Bills. It is clear that the Salisbury convention should be reinforced by whatever legislation determines the second Chamber in future.

The only argument against that, as advanced by the Wakeham commission when it confronts the argument that legislation can surely establish the pre-eminence of the lower Chamber in dealing with taxation, public expenditure and Second Readings, is the one set out in paragraph 11.7. It states that

> members of such a chamber—

that is, the upper House—

> would not regard the limits as justified.

So the only reason Wakeham claims that we cannot make sure it is clear which House is pre-eminent—this place has control of tax and public spending, in particular—is that the other House would complain. Perhaps some there would, but as has been said, I know of no international example of a second Chamber rising against a first Chamber and trying to wrest powers from the lower House which the law of the land plainly does not allow. I think that is fanciful.

There are countless examples throughout the world—most notably in the United States but also in many other modern democracies—where there are two elected Chambers, once there is a bicameral system. That does not give rise to deadlock. If the arguments of the Wakeham commission were put to a politician or legislator in the United States, they would be regarded as ridiculous.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Clarke: I shall give way to the hon. Lady in a moment.

[Mr. Clarke]

I cannot imagine the reception that a member of the Wakeham commission would get if he went to Washington to try to explain how important it was to have an appointed Senate instead of the elected Senate to strengthen the democracy of the United States and make it altogether more suitable than the present system. We should not duck the idea of having two Chambers.

I shall give way to the hon. Lady, but I hope that I shall get injury time.

Mrs. Dunwoody: How does the right hon. and learned Gentleman explain the situation that has existed during last half of the Clinton Administration, where specific political moves took place to stymie the "other" Chamber and the President of the United States?

Mr. Clarke: They certainly did. The American political system differs in many ways from ours. The Executive cannot automatically assume that they will have their way. Recent events in Germany have also shown what happens when the Government do not have a majority in one Chamber. These democracies are based on checks and balances. Our democracy is dangerously near being based on the tyranny of the majority, for the time being. We avoid that in this place, but it is constantly a danger. It is not beyond the wit of British politicians to strengthen checks and balances in our constitution by having an upper House with clearly delineated powers, which can achieve a satisfactory modus vivendi with the supreme Chamber, which will be this place.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Clarke: I am sorry, I cannot.

The second argument advanced by the Wakeham commission is that there would be domination by professional politicians if they were all elected. The commission is fearful that we would have the sort of people who want to go through the process of being elected, and they would have political parties choosing them. The commission obviously has in mind a broader and higher realm of people in the other place. The pure election of the sort that we go through here is apparently

> unlikely to produce members with the ability to speak for the voluntary sector, the professions, cultural and sporting interests.

Certainly, direct elections are unlikely to produce quite as many people from theatre and media land as new Labour has produced in the upper House. It may be that there are not enough footballers in either Chamber; I do not know whether they are required.

I regard this, and the language elsewhere in the commission's report, as extraordinarily funny. They are the statements of an establishment trying to explain that the wrong sort of politician may emerge if we go through a process of election. The commission is not daunted by the fact that many of its members went through that process themselves before they got there, but they have apparently risen above that.

If the commission really is fearful that only party hacks would get into the upper House—I do not think that only party hacks get into this House—it could consider a 15-year term or a limitation on the term of office, which would produce a different sort of party politician who would go straight to the second Chamber for a different sort of public service.

The commission also complains about voter fatigue. There is a lot of that about, but my answer would be unitary local government to cut out some of our current elections, and no more referendums. However, I shall not dwell on that, as I do not have time.

The Wakeham commission's conclusions strike me as an establishment solution aimed at producing PLUs—people like us—drawn from the great and the good who can bring an altogether weightier judgment to bear than the representatives of the people might otherwise be able to command. That would have been rejected at most times in our past: indeed, fortunately it was.

Because political patronage has been so discredited in recent years, the Wakeham commission recommends an appointments system with appropriate terms of reference, so that the majority can be appointed by a commission. That independent commission is the most extraordinary selectorate I have ever heard proposed. How we guarantee balance, exactly who appoints it, and how they are accountable to the general public has never been explained to me. These people will appoint more parliamentarians than the electors of Old Sarum were ever allowed to elect. They will appoint dozens and dozens, no doubt with the help of executive appointment people, an advertising agency and a civil service secretariat. The political parties will not be allowed to choose their nominees for the upper House because we might get the wrong sort of politician. Nominations can come from the political parties, but the independent commission will choose which of them go forward.

All these proposals are supposed to drive us away from direct elections, but then the commission moves away from its own conclusions. Its final recommendation is that we had better have some elected people and some appointed by the Executive's selectors. That will be the second Chamber. In the end, it is yet another compromise to try to buy off the democrats in the lower House and those among the public.

The present arrangements for the upper House and the Wakeham proposals for their reform would be regarded as objects of ridicule if they were suggested by the politicians of any other country in the democratic world. This is too important an issue for such a proposal to be allowed to go forward.

7.13 pm

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will be pleased with me, because he tells Labour Members that we should try to forsake tribal politics. I agree with virtually everything the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) and the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) said.

To be blunt, I think that the Wakeham proposals are half-baked; they are risible. It saddens me that the Labour Government are likely to embrace them. If we are to have a second Chamber, it should be a small, directly elected Chamber.

In the next election, the Labour Government will be outflanked by the Liberal Democrats—who presumably will propose some form of elected second Chamber—and,

astonishingly, also by the Conservatives, because the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe and others speak for the majority of Conservative Back Benchers. If I were to advise the Leader of the Opposition—an unlikely prospect I know—I would tell him to go for the fully elected option, because it makes political sense.

In the nation's consciousness there is an understanding that new Labour is associated with fixes. There was a fix in Scotland, as we all know—*[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) disagrees. If he wants to intervene, I shall happily give way. There was a fix in Wales. There was manifestly a fix in London. Are we seriously suggesting that we should go into the next election with our political opponents being able to point the finger at us and say, "This is another new Labour fix"?

I mentioned the Prime Minister. I agreed with him in 1996. I was present when he said at the John Smith memorial lecture:

> We have always favoured an elected second chamber.

Times move on, and we apparently no longer believe in an elected second Chamber. I suppose that I am a living, breathing embodiment of what happens when there is election rather than appointment. I am proud of the fact that I am a member of the national policy forum, which meets next month to discuss our policy on the second Chamber. I was elected to the national policy forum by my colleagues in the parliamentary Labour party. There would not have been a possibility in a thousand light years of my getting on to the national policy forum had membership been determined by appointment. It just would not have happened. Election throws up all sorts of interesting people who would never be allowed to emerge from the undergrowth if it were a matter of appointment.

Angela Smith: When my hon. Friend was elected to the national policy forum by his colleagues, did he state in his manifesto that he supported an elected second Chamber?

Mr. Prentice: I support an elected second Chamber. I say it publicly now. I disagree with my party's position if it proposes to adopt the Wakeham recommendation, which I think is indefensible. If people are appointed to the other place it will be corrupting—the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross used the word "corruption."

Individuals in this place bite their tongues because they look forward to preferment and elevation to the upper House. In "On the Record" yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) said that towards the end of a Parliament, when the general election is called, there is a spate of resignations. Members say that they will not resign and will continue to the next Parliament, but something happens and they resign. The local party is disenfranchised and the national executive committee steps in and appoints someone. Often, the trade-off is that people resign and when the election is called, they are sent to the upper House. We know about such corrosive, corrupting patronage.

Who will be responsible for appointments to the other place? It will be the House of Lords appointments commission. That is another joke. I have a copy of a letter from the Cabinet Office to Ms Judith Richardson at PricewaterhouseCoopers about contracts for assistance in identifying a range of candidates for House of Lords appointments. I do not know how many people applied, but they had to go through a rigorous selection process. The document says:

> Applicants invited for an interview with the selection panel will be expected to give a five minute presentation on the skills and attributes they would bring to the Appointments Commission.

That is pretty testing, is it not?

The appointments commission is in place, and the letter refers to its draft remit for identifying

> persons to be recommended to Her Majesty for life peerages.

They are people who will

> enhance and sustain its standing as an effective part of our constitutional arrangements.

People like Tommy Sheridan—a Scottish Socialist party Member of the Scottish Parliament—would not get a look in. In no way could he be said to be "people like us"—the expression used by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe.

The appointments commission has to consider the impact that any new appointments would have

> bearing in mind . . . the desirability of ensuring that the House includes Members with a wide range of experience, expertise and outlook.

We have heard about the gender, age and ethnic background requirements and the need for identification with different parts of the United Kingdom. In an intervention, I asked about wealth requirements. Fifty per cent. of the population own 94 per cent. of the nation's wealth; thus the remaining 50 per cent. own only 6 per cent. Perhaps there is a requirement that poor people should be represented in the upper House.

What about social class? As we have all those other requirements, would it be so unusual for an upper Chamber adequately and properly to reflect the social class profile of Britain? What about all those people who are Oxbridge educated? Will there be some measure for that? Will there be x per cent. of Members from provincial universities, y per cent. from Oxbridge and z per cent. from among those who have not attended university at all? The whole thing is ludicrous. The more we go into the matter, the more we realise that it is completely unsustainable, logically flawed and politically mad; we should be outflanked. My hon. Friend the Member for Corby is muttering. I am happy to give way to him.

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): We are concerned that we have not understood the force of my hon. Friend's argument. We want to be persuaded as to what he is really thinking.

Mr. Prentice: My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) mentioned the role of the Church in this new constitutional settlement. That is another matter I find difficult to accept. I believe in secular politics and that we should be governed by a secular Parliament. I live with the fact that we have the established Church along the Corridor because of our history, but it would be ridiculous to move to a position in which the Buddhist, the Baptist, the Jain, the Jew, the Muslim and the Sikh have a place in our legislature while Catholics did not because—as I pointed out to my hon. Friend—canon law would not allow it.

Mr. Pike: If Catholics were to elect a lay person, canon law would not have an effect.

Mr. Prentice: That is probably true.

[Mr. Prentice]

On the election of regional Members, are we seriously to suggest to the British people that we want a system that will put Members in the other place for 15 years, with the possibility—the probability—that the appointments commission will appoint them for a further 15 years? That would mean 30-year membership of the upper House. That is ludicrous.

We shall be left with a bloated, elephantine upper Chamber. The present life peers will not retire. They will be invited to consider their position, but they will not retire. Every year, there will be an accretion of Members of the House of Lords. It will grow exponentially: 550, 600, 650, 700. When will it stop? In short, it would not be a Parliament for the 21st century.

I shall argue as passionately as I can at the national policy forum next month that the Labour party should abandon its proposals to embrace Wakeham—they would be ridiculed in a general election campaign—and instead propose a democratic alternative.

7.24 pm

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): The debate has certainly livened up during the past half hour with the speeches of the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) and of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke). They have stated as well as can be done the case for a wholly elected House of Lords.

I am about to make a deeply unfashionable speech in favour—roughly—of the status quo. I believe in the old American maxim: if it ain't broke, don't fix it. I think the system works, so there is a strong argument for leaving it alone. However, I agree with almost all hon. Members who have spoken that the issue is immensely important.

If we go for a wholly elected House of Lords, we shall be making a far more fundamental change to the British constitution than was effected by devolution in Scotland and in Wales. The consequences of that change will ripple for a long time and those in favour of it must acknowledge what those consequences would be.

We should move towards a more US-style of government, even perhaps with Ministers who are altogether outside Parliament negotiating with both Houses to pass legislation. In the case of the previous election, for example, the Labour party would have won; the Prime Minister would have had a substantial majority in this place; but even a wholly elected House of Lords—on that extraordinary 15-year rolling basis—would have been able to block substantial amounts of legislation.

The aspect of the Wakeham report on which I agree completely with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe and the hon. Member for Pendle is the idea that there can be a halfway house—there can be two classes of Member. The report reeks of trying to give a little to everybody; there will be a few women, a few ethnic minorities and a few people who are elected. That cannot be the solution. Either the Chamber must be wholly elected and we must learn to live with the consequences, or we should pretty much leave it alone.

I was in favour of removing the voting rights of hereditary peers—I do not understand how anyone can argue against that. The current compromise whereby about 90 of them retain the right to vote is unsatisfactory. Let us give them all life peerages so that there are no more hereditary voting rights.

When we consider the future composition of the House of Lords, we should first examine what the powers and duties of that Chamber should be. At present, they are to revise legislation; to make the Government think again—inasmuch as the Lords can delay legislation for one Session—and to act as a constitutional long stop: for example, by preventing the Government of the day from lengthening a Parliament by postponing a general election. It is also valuable for a Prime Minister to be able to appoint Ministers who can sit in the upper House; if they do not have to be elected Members of the House of Commons, it gives the Prime Minister a much wider pool of talent from which to draw The Labour Government have made good use of that—as did the Conservatives when we were in office.

I hope that the reformed House of Lords will be called a Senate, because it should be completely divorced from the peerage. If it is to perform the functions I described, it will need two qualities: independence and expertise. The Chamber should be independent of party politics—although it is bound to contain some party politicians. It needs expertise in a range of subjects which for various reasons we cannot provide in this House.

The reformed House of Lords must not, however, compete with this place for supremacy. The democratic voice of the people is heard in this House. At every general election, we elect a Government, but every constituency elects a Member of Parliament whose job is to speak for the interests of that constituency. This House is where democracy is heard. A wholly elected House of Lords would result in significant competition. It would end up being full of party politicians.

How does one get elected? One has to have a party machine behind one—especially if we are talking about big, regional constituencies or a system of proportional representation. It is possible that one or two mavericks—independents—would be elected. However, as the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) pointed out, most such people would already have made their name as party politicians in one of the main parties.

To get elected to the reformed Chamber, one will have to be nominated. That will create competition. When people have been elected, they will want secretaries and research assistants. The higher the salary and the more secretaries employed, the more people will want to do the job of Member of that House. We know what the competition in parties is like to achieve nomination as a candidate for election to this House. That will happen in the other place.

There will be an increasing tendency—a self-reinforcing process—for party politicians to be elected; they will demand more facilities, more staff and more power. When those people—good party politicians with party political ambitions—have got themselves elected to the House of Lords, will they be satisfied with a revising role? Will they be satisfied with holding up legislation for a year? Let us suppose that a majority of 80 per cent. in a House of Lords elected by, for example, a system of proportional representation are against something that the Government want to do. Will that House not be able to set its democratic legitimacy against that of the Government? Of course it will. Its Members will be free to do that and they will do it.

The next instalment in the process of constitutional reform will be more power—not less. A Government could be elected with a substantial majority—as were the Labour Government at the previous general election—and the clear democratic will of the people that they should be the Government, but they would be unable to get their legislation through Parliament.

Mr. Tyrie: It is beholden on people who take the view that my hon. Friend has expressed to explain how the Parliament Acts would be swept aside. After all, the Parliament Acts were created as a result of the only gridlock conflict that we have ever had between the two Chambers. They were designed to end it, and they have succeeded in doing so.

Mr. Maples: As I said, a situation will arise in which the two Houses will be in conflict and there may be a substantial majority in an elected upper House which has equal, if not better, democratic legitimacy than this House. The Government might be at the tail end of their term of office and unpopular in the opinion polls, in which case public opinion could arguably be better represented in the Senate or upper House. That might happen and there might be a crunch, as there will be on other constitutional matters.

Angela Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Maples: No. I hope the hon. Lady will forgive me, but we have limited time and I am sure that she will have the opportunity to make her own speech.

The next stage in the process is the one that concerns me. If the other House is limited to its present powers, the type of people who will want to be elected to it may not be the upmarket politicians whom my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe wants to see in it: it will become a glorified county council.

I completely agree with my right hon. and learned Friend and the hon. Member for Pendle on one point. We cannot have a halfway house. The other House either will be or will not be elected. I do not accept the idea that we can have two classes of Members and that some of them will have a bit of democratic legitimacy while the others do not. The other House should continue to be appointed.

I also agree with my right hon. and learned Friend and the hon. Gentleman about the appointments commission. It is an absolute farce—and completely ridiculous—that we should take away voting rights from the heirs to people who long ago acquired or fought for a title entitling them to vote in the House of Lords, only to give that power to a nominee of PricewaterhouseCoopers.

If we are to have a nominated House of Lords, I should prefer it if the nominations were made by the Prime Minister, who would have to do that in the open. The Prime Minister is answerable to the House and to the electorate, and there have been—and I hope there will be—conventions that govern the use of the power so that it is not abused. Opposition parties should be given a fair crack of the whip and an effort should not be made to pack the House of Lords with Members who support the governing party. The idea of an appointments commission is awful. I would prefer the Prime Minister to continue to have the power of appointment, but perhaps there should be an annual limit on the number of people whom he or she can appoint.

There could be an unwritten agreement between the two sides of the House that the holders of certain offices should automatically be entitled to membership of the House of Lords. For example, former Cabinet Ministers, former Archbishops of Canterbury and—dare I suggest it, Mr. Deputy Speaker—Deputy Speakers could automatically be considered for membership. Certainly, former Speakers have almost automatically gone to the House of Lords. Other people, such as the Chief of the Defence Staff, could automatically be given the right, but it could be made formal or ex officio. The Wakeham commission suggested that an enormous number of organisations would claim the right to appoint a nominee to the House of Lords, but it should be pretty easy to draw the line somewhere and say that some organisations should have their interests represented in the second Chamber.

However, if the power to nominate is given to a commission, none of us will know how it is being exercised. The commission would be answerable to a Select Committee only once every couple of years, but I would prefer the Prime Minister to be answerable to this House for the exercise of that prerogative power.

At present, many different interests are represented in the House of Lords. One could argue that the Church and the legal profession are over-represented, so I do not see why other interests in the country should not be represented—without our compiling the sort of ridiculous rainbow house that the hon. Member for Pendle mentioned. Perhaps the president of the CBI, the general secretary of the TUC and the president of the Royal College of Surgeons should be members of the House of Lords. They would certainly provide some of the expertise and independence that the institution will need.

I do not particularly mind whether the period of appointment is for 15 years or for a lifetime. It sounds much the same to people of my age, although I hope that one is longer than the other. If the other House is to be partly elected, I cannot imagine that anyone will want to be a member for more than 15 years.

I hold strong views, however, on what the other House should be called. It should be divorced from the peerage and it should be called the Senate. Its members should be called Senators, and their wives and husbands should not thereby acquire titles. Its Members should be happy to be Senators in the same way as we are happy to be Members of Parliament. I feel strongly about that point, but I do not particularly care whether the Senators serve for 15 years or more.

I return to my central point: either the other House is wholly elected or it is wholly appointed. I prefer the wholly appointed option and for Members to be nominated. There is a strong argument in favour of leaving the powers and functions of the House of Lords as they are set out in the Parliament Acts. There would then be no strong pressure to amend the Acts, but—if there were—we would be able to resist it. The other House would be able to perform its functions of asking or making the Government think again, delaying legislation that may be unpopular and bringing expertise to bear on the fine print of legislation, which is something that this House is rather bad at doing. It would also enable the Prime Minister of the day to appoint as Ministers people who have not been elected to the House of Commons.

[Mr. Maples]

I can see the attractions of a wholly elected Senate. As the hon. Member for Pendle suggested, I certainly see the short-term political attractions of that for the Conservative party, and that point has not gone without notice. It would be extraordinary if the Conservatives were to outflank the Labour party in making the other House more democratic, but the consequences of that would be very far reaching. We would end up with another 500 or 600 professional politicians, with their staff, research assistants, secretaries and salaries. That would create a process in which those politicians would demand more power and, sooner or later, another constitutional crunch would come in which they would obtain that extra power. If they did not obtain it, the people who would want to continue to be members of the other House would not be likely to be the quality of elected politician that we would like to see.

We have an increasingly presidential style of government. Although the process did not start with this Government, it has got worse under them. The electorate elect a Prime Minister who governs the country and the House of Commons is seen as an inconvenience to him. If we then create a second Chamber that is wholly elected, the Government of the day will have to begin negotiating with that Chamber to get their legislation and business through. Sooner or later, that will create pressures on this House and we shall end up with an American style of constitution. Although there is much to be said for such a constitution, the proponents of a wholly elected second Chamber should recognise that the Government would move away from and outside Parliament, and would negotiate with both Houses of Parliament to get their business through.

I prefer to operate on the basis of the principle, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." The second Chamber works reasonably well with the limited powers that it has. Stage 2 of the reforms should be to remove the voting rights of the remaining hereditary peers, and the power of appointment and patronage should remain with a democratically elected Prime Minister with conventions circumscribing that. However, that power should be out in the open so that we can see how it works.

7.37 pm

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): Having closely followed and been involved in the previous debates on the reform of the House of Lords, in which we made such historic progress, I welcome the opportunity to take part in this debate. It is fascinating that, after those debates, we have not heard anyone—in this House or the House of Lords—speak in favour of a return to the hereditary peerage system.

The hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) said that we should leave the matter well alone and said, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." That argument was voiced a year ago when we debated abolishing the rights of hereditary peers, and my view is that the previous system was broke and did need fixing. The current system needs fixing too.

I join other hon. Members in welcoming the report prepared by the commission. It is a comprehensive document that incorporates an enormous amount of evidence, providing a sound basis for this debate and other debates to come. The all-party nature of the commission, which led to the agreement with which it came forward, gives the recommendations added force. Although I wish to speak at length about some of the detail with which I do not agree, I want to make a couple of broad observations.

One of the points that has irritated me in the debate is the accusation by Conservative Members that the Government have mothballed the crucial second stage of reform. That is ironic and somewhat hypocritical, since those criticisms come from a party that did nothing for many years when it was in office. I am proud that a Labour Government are tackling a fundamental inequality and the elitism and privilege of the second Chamber as previously constituted and as constituted now.

At its heart, the royal commission report recognises the need to create a second Chamber of diversity and vitality and one that is broadly representative of society, bringing together a range of expertise and talents. That point assists the argument of the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon against a directly elected second Chamber.

There is broad agreement that the primary role of a second Chamber is to work with the House of Commons to improve the quality of legislation and to provide effective scrutiny of Government and European legislation. The key, however, is that the second Chamber is subordinate to this Chamber. The more challenging issue considered in the report is how a reformed Chamber can extend its role to give the United Kingdom's constituent nations and regions a formal voice in Parliament, thereby tackling a frequent Opposition criticism to the effect that we need to strengthen the UK's political cohesion.

In considering the role of a second Chamber and how we might extend it, we must be clear about the impact that that might have on the relationship between the two Houses. That is the core of the matter. I am sure that many speakers will agree that any second Chamber must be subordinate to the House of Commons. Indeed, the commission recommends that this House remain the principal political forum, with the final say on all proposed legislation and all major public policy issues. Certainly, when a party is chosen by the electorate to form a Government, the elements of its election manifesto must be respected by a second Chamber of whatever form.

More generally, the second Chamber should be cautious about challenging the clearly expressed views of the House of Commons on any public policy issue. It is wrong, for example, that, in the past, the House of Lords has abused its procedures—and no doubt will do so in future—to delay and obstruct the progress of policies and Bills, such as the forthcoming ban on fox hunting, equalising the age of consent and the repeal of section 28, all of which are issues on which the House of Commons overwhelmingly expressed a view that the House of Lords has delayed and obstructed. I am concerned about the proposal in the report that we should allow the new second Chamber to have its own process and become a self-regulating House.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): Could it not be argued that the House of Lords feels able to obstruct and delay

precisely because it is not elected? If it were elected, it would be subject to the same constraints as the House of Commons.

Mr. Hope: I agree that we should not have a fully elected second Chamber and I shall point out later why that would create enormous conflict between the two Houses and is certainly not the right way forward. We need a House with proper procedures which are open, transparent and set down for all to see. The proposal to leave well alone in relation to the way in which the second Chamber operates is flawed and needs to be re-examined. Reform should leave the second Chamber with sufficient power and associated authority derived from its new legitimacy to introduce amendments, require the Government to reconsider proposed legislation and provide effective scrutiny.

The dilemma about the role of the second House is less about its role—people are generally happy with the way in which the current House of Lords operates, although its procedures need modernising—and more about the legitimacy of its views given its unrepresentative membership. To say that it is not representative and that we can leave well alone simply will not do.

The present gender balance is grossly inadequate, although we have begun to redress that, most significantly with the abolition of the 635 hereditary peers, of whom only 16 were women. Of course, the most startling fact to emerge when we began the process of reform was that almost half of peers in the House of Lords attended one school: Eton. The authority and legitimacy of a reformed second Chamber will in part be determined by the extent to which it is representative in terms of gender, age and ethnic origin. I welcome the commission's recommendation that each gender should have a minimum representation of 30 per cent. However, we should aim higher and have a 50:50 balance. The report talks about steady progress, but I want rapid progress so that the second Chamber reflects society today. I of course endorse the commission's recommendation that members of minority ethnic groups must be fairly represented.

I am especially concerned that in its deliberations and composition the upper House should reflect the younger generation. The House of Lords, through its base in lifelong offices of tenure—life peerages—will inevitably become an ageing Chamber. I draw Members' attention to page 118 of the report, on which there is a graph of the age profile of existing peers. It marks off ages in periods of five years, starting at about the age of 50, and the number of peers gets bigger and bigger as they get older and older. It is simply unacceptable to have a House of Lords that represents only half the population's age range.

Having looked at other second chambers, the royal commission recommended that the second Chamber should not have a minimum age. So Members of a Second Chamber could be 25 or 30, as I believe they should be. The commission should have gone further, and, in addition to discussing gender percentages, should have given targets for getting young people into the House. Too many young people are disillusioned and alienated from politics today. When they switch on the television and see the House of Lords, they think, "Who on earth do they represent? Certainly not me."

Mr. Robertson: I am not sure of its effect on the average age, but people tended to inherit peerages at a much younger age than that at which they were appointed to them.

Mr. Hope: I just wish some of those younger peers had turned up once or twice—apart from on those occasions when they were whipped by the Opposition to push its vote through the House of Lords.

We must make sure that the second Chamber is, and appears, relevant to younger people. Any second Chamber must therefore have adequate representation of young people, over the age of 18 perhaps but certainly under the age of 30. The proposed appointments system allows for that flexibility. The second Chamber should give younger people a real voice in Parliament for the first time and should allow them a genuine role in proceedings so that laws can reflect their interests and so that the relevance of our political democracy is there for all to see.

Mr. Maclennan: If the hon. Gentleman recognises the importance of young people going to the House of Lords, he will have to do something about the Wakeham recommendation that all existing life peers—who constitute the bulk of the membership that he has discussed—should be allowed to stay there in perpetuity.

Mr. Hope: Regrettably, I must agree with the right hon. Gentleman. I do not agree with the royal commission that existing life peers should remain in the House of Lords in perpetuity, but I do agree that new peers arriving after the publication of the report should have only a 15-year term of office. The report says that life peers should have lifelong tenure, but I believe that that is a mistake. If peers are to move forward into the new Chamber, they should all have a limited 15-year term of office. I look forward to hearing the Government's response to that view, which is needed if we are to get a Chamber in which the demographic profile shifts dramatically towards the younger age group and starts to reflect that part of our population.

Mr. Tyrie: If the hon. Gentleman agrees that life peers should be limited to a 15-year period in office, does he support the Government's view that hereditary peers should be allowed to stay on until they die and that other hereditary peers should elect their successors?

Mr. Hope: There is obviously a deep interest in the matter. I am glad that I have sparked an interest in the important issue of having a Chamber that is representative of the country as a whole. The report discusses gender and ethnic minority representation, but does not address age representation sufficiently. There are various ways of achieving that and, as I have said, I am sympathetic to some of the Opposition's suggestions. However, the report missed the opportunity to provide targets to get more young people into a second Chamber so that they are fully represented.

I am aware of the constraints of time, and shall move on to the question of direct elections and whether we should have a fully elected second Chamber. That would be a major mistake, as such a Chamber would carry within it the seeds of its own destruction. Elections to it would be unlikely to attract a significant interest among voters. If they did, there would be the difficulty of the second

[Mr. Hope]

Chamber rivalling the democratic legitimacy of the Commons—the Chamber in which we sit. As has been said, direct elections would be fought on party political lines and, inevitably, a wholly elected second Chamber would duplicate this Chamber. What would be the point of that, as such a Chamber would not fulfil its role of being representative? On the other hand, it could challenge the Commons if it had an Opposition majority which, as was said earlier, would happen if elections to it took place between general elections. Of course, a wholly directly elected second Chamber would not achieve the pluralism that is so important.

What are the options? The commission recommends that the second Chamber should have an elected element. I have reservations about that, but I understand the commission's argument. Indeed, I partly accept its view because the options that it recommends include two other key issues: representation of the regions and democratic authority—to pick up earlier points about a wholly appointed Chamber.

I note that of the three recommendations, option B talks about having two different types of proportional representation: one with partially open lists, and one with closed lists—at the same time as elections to the European Parliament. Rather than getting into an arcane debate about the open versus the closed list system, I simply point out that in my view it would be at best confusing and at worst unworkable to have two different methods in use in the same election.

At present, if the second Chamber has to have an elected element, I would favour one based on model A, which the report calls complementary voting, with Members returned from regional lists in proportion to the party share of the vote at a general election. That would achieve regional representation in the second Chamber, but it would prevent all the problems of Members being elected on a different manifesto and claiming a different mandate at a different time from the party of the day.

Given the years of Conservative domination of the Lords, it is tempting to press for a revised second Chamber which allows, shall I say, left-of-centre political forces to dominate in the 21st century in the way that the forces of conservatism did in the 20th century. However, that would be a mistake. The second Chamber should be, at heart, a revising Chamber, and not an alternative Government or a poodle of the Government of the day. Crucially, if we are to avoid, in a new second Chamber, the one-party domination that the Conservatives have in the existing second Chamber, we require a system of appointment and indirect election that will create political balance and make it impossible for any one party to secure an overall majority.

I welcome today's debate. I have emphasised the need to get more young people into a second Chamber. The commission's report was unanimous; it has huge authority, and I hope that all hon. Members will accept it as both the basis for discussion and a reason to accelerate the process of reforming the second Chamber so that we can make it truly modern and relevant to the 21st century.

7.52 pm

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): The fact that I can say to the hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) that I agreed passionately with some of what he said and disagreed passionately with other things that he said at least saves him from some of the embarrassment that he might feel if I was completely on his side.

That point also confirms that the Leader of the House, who said at the beginning of the debate that she was hoping to find consensus, will find no consensus at all. She will not find consensus among Government Members, and she will not find it among Opposition Members; it simply does not exist. I point out to anyone who feels sorry for the right hon. Lady, who set out in a "little goody two shoes" way to find that elusive consensus, that we have no sympathy for her whatsoever because the most radical thing that she did—abolishing the hereditary peers—was done not through consensus, but out of sheer spite. It was not done to improve the standing of the second Chamber or the processes of government.

When one hears the language that has been used tonight, such as the talk about privilege and the fact that some or all of the hereditary peers went to Eton, given as an argument for doing something to the legislature, one knows that whatever else is on the agenda, improving the constitution is not.

I turn to the first point on which I agreed with the hon. Member for Corby, and in a voice vibrant with insincerity, I shall take it on the chin and say that I am embarrassed about it. He was right to say that a case has never been made for the hereditary peerage system of constituting the upper House. There is therefore an obligation, perhaps on Opposition Members, to make that case, and I am about to make it, if only for reasons of nostalgia.

Mr. Hope: During the debate on the abolition of the hereditary peers' right to vote, I asked every Conservative Member whether they supported hereditary peerages, and not a single one said yes.

Mr. Nicholls: I am so sought after as a speaker, as my friends and colleagues will know, that I cannot attend every debate. However, if the hon. Gentleman thinks that I am trying to be provocative, I point out that I have made at least one speech in the debates about the reform of the House of Lords, and I promise him that I have made this point before.

It is argued that we must get rid of the House of Lords because it is not democratic. I have even heard members of my own party say that, and they have probably said it in the House tonight. That argument demonstrates a complete misunderstanding about the nature of Parliament; it does not consist only of the House of Commons. In our system, sovereignty lies with the Queen in Parliament, and the three estates of Parliament are the Queen, the House of Lords and the House of Commons.

It is true that the House of Lords was not democratic, any more than the monarch is democratic. It is the overall system of government that must be democratic. At the moment, our system is that at least every five years, adult voters can combine, and if they do not like the judgments and decisions made by those who are charged to make them, they can throw them out, as they did comprehensively in 1997.

In a minor digression, I point out that if we ever go into the federal Europe envisaged by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke),

the electorate will no longer have the ability to throw out the people who make decisions on their behalf. However, we are not there yet.

Simply to say that the hereditary peerage was not, in itself, democratic is neither here nor there. One can assess the democracy of Parliament only by looking at it in totality. What, then, is the argument for the hereditary peerage? It is simply that it worked. That system evolved through countless centuries and had a certain legitimacy and acceptance. Those who say that its social composition was wholly exclusive ought to read up on the subject properly and consider the composition of today's hereditary peerage.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Nicholls: It is all very well for the hon. Gentleman to make an eloquent contribution to our deliberations by shaking his head, but if one reads "Dod's" and examines the length of hereditary peerages, one discovers the interesting fact that the average hereditary peerage dies out within seven generations. Traditionally, it was then replaced. That ended when the late Lord Wilson stopped giving out hereditary peerages, and that policy was followed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath).

When one looks at the social profile—if that is what one wants to call it—of the hereditary peers, one sees that although they may bear grand names, many of them have had occupations that, while noble in an ordinary sense, are not spectacular. I can think of people who used to bear famous noble names who include a retired corporation gardener, a retired police sergeant, someone who owns a small grocer's shop and a retired care worker.

The point of that system is that there was a mechanism sanctioned by time, not by logic, for producing a wholly representative bunch of people who were completely incapable of having a party—*[Laughter.]* That shows exactly where Labour Members are coming from. Most people, when they hear an argument that they do not understand, try to think of a logical rejoinder to it, but some of the temporary Members on the Government Benches are obviously incapable of that.

The hereditary peerage, as it stood before it was abolished, contained a social range that was a great deal wider than many people realise, and it was a wholly arbitrary mechanism for producing a body of people who, ultimately, simply could not be whipped or pressurised. In a nutshell, that is the case for it; it is not that if one started out, with a blank piece of paper, to design a country, one would come up with the hereditary peerage. The point of it is the function that it was designed to discharge. I shall come to that function in a moment.

Angela Smith: If the hereditary peerage has such a wonderful social balance and gives such impressive service, could we not argue for a hereditary House of Commons as well?

Mr. Nicholls: Even by the hon. Lady's standards, that was a singularly unintelligent point. I apologise for speaking too fast and overly flattering Labour Members. My point is that we have to look at the totality of parliamentary institutions to see whether they deliver a democratic outcome.

Mr. Savidge *rose—*

Mr. Nicholls: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman in a moment, if only because the debate needs some light relief.

My point is that two of the parliamentary estates are subject to the hereditary process, and if that was the case for all three of the estates, there would be no democracy.

Mr. Savidge: The hon. Gentleman said that the glory of the hereditary peerage is that it is illogical; may I pay the same compliment to his speech?

Mr. Nicholls: That is just about the right comment on the point made by the hon. Gentleman.

As the hon. Member for Corby said, the case for the hereditary peerage was never made, and now it passes into history. Now we have the Wakeham report. To begin with, I thought that I would have to be terribly polite about the report, and I pay tribute to the amount of work that has gone into it. However, the more I read of it, the more troubled I became. I expected that, in the way of these things, it would turn out to be, at best, a curate's egg, but it is a complete dog's breakfast.

I can see all the people on the commission sitting around, saying, "Well, we have to come up with something, but I'm not sure what. What about some of that Committee of the Regions stuff? That's a good idea. Let's have some regional representation." They came up with other ideas, saying, "Well, we'd better have the bishops because some of them are nice old chaps and several of them believe in God, so we'd better keep them in. What about other people? We'll have the Buddhists and the Muslims in there, but isn't that a bit judgmental? Why don't we include communities of faith?" I can almost hear that being said; so many of them speak like that. That was not written by Monty Python; it is in the report. I ask you, what is wrong with being a pagan in this day and age? What is wrong with having no faith? Why should faithless people be deprived of parliamentary representation in the new, marvellous Chamber? Such people are not in there, but everyone else is. The idea seems to be that people can sit around in a peculiar way and fashion a wholly representative institution, almost by drawing lots.

The hon. Member for Corby says that the second Chamber must have a better balance of gender, so it had better be half and half right away. It must not be all white, so it will have black and white, but what about brown? What about the Chinese and the sub-divisions of Asians? All that must be included as well. He means that sincerely, so I do not mock him for it. People have tried completely mechanistically to devise a wholly representational Chamber, but that is a total farce because a totally representative Chamber is already available; it is called the House of Commons.

The people vote for their representatives. If they do not exercise their vote, they should not complain. We cannot pretend that we include an example of every group, but we are literally representative because we have been elected by the adult electors of this country. It is far more

[Mr. Nicholls]

optimistic and intelligent to face up to that fact, rather than to tell others that they are not truly representative because they do not include enough young, old, black or brown people, or whatever. How much more honest to say that the glory of this country's constitution is that we have largely been able to produce a democratic outcome at a general election for a great deal longer than virtually every other nation on earth.

I am wholly in favour of having an upper Chamber, but what is it supposed to do? I am almost more concerned about what it should do than about who should do it. It should have a degree of legitimacy. For the reasons that I have given, the hereditary peerage had a certain legitimacy simply because it was honoured by time if not by logic. That has now gone. The nearest system that might carry some vestige of that legitimacy would be one that was sufficiently close to that which it had replaced to look reasonably familiar to the people of the country as a whole.

The upper House should look reasonably familiar and have some sort of logic, but that cannot be devised on a piece of paper, as Wakeham has tried to do. It should be able to delay, and only delay. I have been a Minister, and I never wanted to change my mind when a policy for which I was responsible was being, as I saw it, messed around by the House of Lords. That is tough—it is just the way of things. We need to be able to delay the Government of the day. That has to be done for a purpose; not so much to give the Government time to think and change their mind, but to embarrass them into doing what they ought to do. If they will not change their mind, they should be told that sufficient pressure will be applied and their actions will be taken in the full light of day. That is what the current House of Lords is remarkably good at doing, as was the previous House of Lords.

I shall not play constitutional ping-pong with Labour Members because they are not equipped to deal with it, as their interventions have shown. They will have to take my word for it, and perhaps look it up in the Library, that the House of Lords, as presently constituted, has given the Government no harder a time than the old House of Lords gave the Conservative Government. That strikes me as being perfectly right. Those who try to counter that argument by suggesting that we must strengthen the upper Chamber so that it can hold the Government to account are not right.

I am worried when my hon. Friends talk about wanting the Government to be more accountable. We use that language in opposition. Although that is slightly unwise, we do so because we have only 160 seats, but that is not a good reason for constitutional change. The idea that we need an accountable system of government in which we can defeat the Government between general elections is profoundly wrong. I do not expect to defeat the Labour Government this side of the next general election.

Mr. Savidge: The hon. Gentleman will not do so.

Mr. Nicholls: The hon. Gentleman makes a subtle and cunning point; he realises that we will not defeat the Government in a Division, but that does not mean that they are not accountable. Indeed, the fact that the Government have such a big majority means that they are absolutely accountable because they cannot put the blame on coalition politics. We hold the Government to account every week. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition does so stunningly effectively every Wednesday, not by winning a Division, but by winning the moral argument. That is what Government accountability should be about.

I am not in the business of trying to devise a system that rejigs the rules to try to make it easier to have a go at the Government when they have been elected democratically with a huge majority. I am in the business of being able to debate and win the moral argument, by having a Chamber up the road that is capable of making it crystal clear that we shall embarrass the Government when they have got it wrong. I am not in the business of ultimately strengthening that Chamber's powers and allowing it to go further than that.

I have said what I want to see in the upper Chamber. I want it to look reasonably familiar and reasonably logical, but I see nothing in the Wakeham report that would enable that to happen. I want the upper Chamber to have the power to delay and embarrass; I do not want it to have electoral authority. That is the point that the hon. Member for Corby made in his speech, and I do not want that to happen. This House, not the other House, is supposed to have the authority. That can be done by having a largely appointed House. The commission is a complete, tawdry fig leaf.

I have enough confidence in my country's constitutional procedures, which have grown up over hundreds of years, to say that those who go to the upper Chamber as life peers should be appointed on the recommendation of the Queen's First Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. That is why I think that the Wakeham proposals are profoundly misguided.

8.7 pm

Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): Listening to the previous speech—entertaining, elegant and absurd, with its glorious eulogy for the hereditary peerage—I finally realised that the danger of this debate, but I hope not its intention, is that it might show such a diversity of views in the House that the Government could conclude that, because there is no settled opinion on such matters, no action is required and no further progress is necessary. Lest that should happen, I hope to make a modestly helpful contribution.

I shall deal with what I take to be the story so far, the key principles, aspects of the Wakeham proposals and the next bit of the story. On the story so far, we promised simply that we would remove the hereditary peers. In fact, we have not removed them. We have not completed stage 1; 92 hereditary peers remain and an absurd process is being created so that they can renew themselves through by-elections. We have not yet done what we said we would do. We are not sure about what to do next; we are of uncertain mind.

Mr. Nicholls: I shall help the hon. Gentleman. In fact, 104 hereditary peers are left; it is a jolly good deal.

Tony Wright: I accept that intervention on technical grounds. The Government have not yet done what they said they would do and are unsure about what to do next. We know that they are not keen on election, but we are not terribly sure what they are keen on. The Opposition

have viewed the enterprise throughout as a kind of political game. They have been keen on whatever the Government were not keen on so that they could try to out-trump and outflank the Government on the issue.

The combination of the Government being uncertain about what they wanted and the Opposition being determined to play games has brought us to this position. That is a tragedy because, earlier in this Parliament, the opportunity existed to create some genuine cross-party consensus on how reform might take place. That is well known; Lord Wakeham has referred to it. That opportunity could have been taken, but was not because of that combination of circumstances. I am afraid that we are paying the price of that now. The royal commission was invented, given an unusual and abbreviated time scale—to which it managed to work—and put in the hands of a great fixer who, allegedly, was to produce a great fix.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) was put on the royal commission, so the dark rumours said, to avoid any flirtation with the elective principle. Well, things did not work out quite like that, as we have heard, and there was not just a great fix, as it happened. Some important work was done. It was not possible to extinguish the grounds for an elective element—that argument was lost. What came out of the commission was different from some of the ingredients that were designed to be put in it, which is greatly to the commission's credit.

I want to say a word about what I take to be the key principles that should inform the debate. Contrary to what has been said from various parts of the House, Wakeham gets it broadly right on those key principles, which I shall describe briefly. Membership of the second Chamber is a job, not an honour. That issue has been the source of endless confusion in the past and it had to be resolved. Wakeham, finally, has resolved it. Without wanting to be difficult, there is no question but that Lord Ashcroft wanted to sit in the second Chamber not because of his desperate desire to take part in Committee proceedings on the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill, but because he wanted a title. Unless we banish that confusion, we shall get nowhere. Wakeham, fortunately, has done that.

The next principle is that strong government needs strong accountability. The second Chamber should contribute to that. This Chamber is good at many things, but awfully bad at accountability. It is good at raw political accountability, but bad at serious scrutiny and serious, continuous accountability. For evidence of that, hon. Members should simply read the Government's response to the Liaison Committee report. If we want an example of how the House and a Government—not just this Government, but any Government—respond to any serious challenge on the ground of accountability, we should consider the brutal dismissal of that report, which asked for more powers for Select Committees. That is the nature of the politics of this institution.

I happen to think that strong government is a good thing, but only if balanced and checked by strong accountability. That is where the deficit in our system has been. We need a driving Chamber and historically that role has always been played by the first Chamber—the House of Commons, which is the Chamber that puts its head on the block. The rascals can always be kicked out of the House of Commons. However, we also need a serious checking Chamber—a controlling Chamber that says, "Will you think again?" We have not had such a second Chamber as ours has never had the legitimacy to enable it to fulfil that role. We need to strengthen the checks and balances and strengthen accountability. That principle is central.

The second Chamber should be neither a rival to, nor a replica of, the first. That has been stated in different ways and both are dangers to be avoided. The roles of the Chambers are complementary. Furthermore, there should be enough election to ensure legitimacy, but enough appointment to ensure independence and expertise. That fundamental balance must be struck. We have a party-driven system and this is a party-driven House. If we simply say that service in the second Chamber—service in public life, indeed—is to be controlled only by those who carry a party card and who stand under a party label in an election, we will disfranchise 95 per cent. of the population and deprive the second Chamber of the independence and expertise that we want it to have. Indeed, if we simply set up a second Chamber that is an imitation or a party clone of the House, we will make overall accountability—the checks and balances in the system—weaker than it is now. I would argue that the secret is balance—a mixture.

I refer to a few of the Wakeham proposals. On powers, Wakeham is clearly right and they should stay broadly the same, although there is scope for more on the constitutional side, perhaps for a constitutional watchdog. Wakeham is absolutely right on the appointments commission. I argued to the first Nolan inquiry that we should set up an independent commission to control all public appointments and end ministerial patronage by taking those appointments away from Ministers. Thank goodness that Wakeham has embraced the principle of ending patronage and setting up an independent appointments commission in relation to appointments to a new second Chamber.

However, Wakeham is wrong on the size and culture of the new institution, which would be far too big, too clubby and too establishmenty. Hon. Members have referred to that, and they are right. The idea that people out on the highways and byways will occasionally drift in to deliberate on the great affairs of state is completely unrealistic. The Wakeham proposal would make the second Chamber 200 Members larger than any other comparable second Chamber. That, too, is completely unrealistic. The second Chamber needs to be tighter, more sharply focused, more collegiate and more full-time, and that flaw in the proposals must be remedied.

The mixed composition is clearly right, but the mix is too ill-defined and the elective element too vague, ranging from 12 per cent. to 16 per cent. to 35 per cent. Those are very different percentages involving very different Chambers. We need a proper balance between election and appointment. I would argue for broad parity, but the mixture must be well conceived, well argued and well thought out and it must meet principles. Wakeham gets the mechanics of election right: the proposals for the organisation of elections and of appointments meet the arguments about the second Chamber being neither rival nor replica as they overcome the disabilities of having two Chambers with the same sort of authority and legitimacy, which hon. Members have identified.

In the language that was used earlier, we need a mixture of rough trade and genteel trade in the way that the second Chamber operates, because one brings legitimacy and the

[Tony Wright]

other brings independence and expertise. However, the mixture is crucial. The denser and richer the mix, the less the threat to the supremacy and the driving role of this Chamber. The two Chambers would be different, but complementary.

The Wakeham proposals have clearly ducked some issues, such as the bishops and the Law Lords. The bishops are in the Lords not because they were thought to have a great spiritual contribution to make, but because they were mediaeval landowners. No other legislature in the world thinks that having judges as Members represents a tenable constitutional principle. Those matters were evaded and sit as unfinished business.

On the next part of the story, much of Wakeham—the new committees and the dispute resolution procedure, for example—does not require legislation, and an appointments commission on the Wakeham basis could be established now. We could also move on the delegated legislation and European Union proposals right away. Indeed, there is no excuse for not moving on all those proposals immediately and we should set up a Joint Committee, based on Wakeham, to move further. We need a proper Government response accepting a mixed solution and a Joint Committee further to explore what that means. We should get agreement on that if possible; the Opposition should stop playing games and be constructive. If agreement cannot be achieved, we should move decisively and unilaterally on the basis of what Wakeham has given us for doing just that.

We were wrong to think that there would simply be stages 1 and 2. Partly because stage 1 is still incomplete, it is clear that there will be stages 1, 2 and 3. Stage 2 is the Wakeham stage. That was well stated by the Constitution Unit, the most independent and authoritative observer of these matters, which serviced the Wakeham commission. It states:

> Given the enormity of the task, and the brevity of the timescale, it is not surprising that the Royal Commission ducked many of the difficult issues, and made only tentative suggestions about what part the Lords might play in underpinning our new constitutional arrangements. The Commission was effectively forced by the circumstances and short deadline into delivering what should be regarded as an interim report. It is a report which is as much about the "modernisation" of the Lords in the short term, and improvements to the transitional chamber, as it is about long term reform.

That is the most sensible judgment that has been made on the report.

We now have the basis of potential consensus on a mixed House, on the ending of patronage and on powers. From those three secure platforms, it is possible to move ahead. We have within our grasp a means of resolving the second Chamber issue, which has eluded the House of Commons and our country for a century. History will be, rightly, unforgiving if, with all those advantages, we do not do what has to be done. What is now needed is a lead from the Government: this is the moment, but phrases such as "in due course" do not match the moment.

8.21 pm

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): Five months have passed since the royal commission reported, and today is our first opportunity to debate the issue, but still the Government have not presented their proposals on stage 2 reform of the House of Lords. There is no excuse for such a delay in improvements to the running of Parliament.

The day after the royal commission report was published, *The Daily Telegraph* reported, accurately:

> Mr. Blair told the Cabinet that the report was a sensible way forward. He is understood to be pleased it recommended the elected element should be a "minority". His official spokesman denied that the Government planned to shelve the report.

Moreover, when the report was debated in another place, Lady Jay, Leader of the House of Lords, said:

> I open this debate . . . with great enthusiasm, confident that because of it we will make progress to achieve full-scale reform of this House far more rapidly in this century than we did in the last one.

She went on to say:

> I hope that there is no one either in Parliament or outside who is sceptical of the Government's intentions to act further on reform.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 7 March 2000; Vol. 610, c. 910-17.]

Bearing those words in mind, why did the Prime Minister last week give the clearest indication yet that the Government have no intention of proceeding with the second stage of reform this side of a general election? The right hon. Gentleman was asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) to

> give an undertaking to the House and to the country that, well before the general election, the Labour party will come clean about what it intends to do by way of long-term reform of the House of Lords;

to which the Prime Minister replied:

> the Labour party will of course make its position at the next election clear in its manifesto.—[*Official Report*, 14 June 2000; Vol. 115, c. 939-40.]

I find that answer peculiar and the sentiments behind it extremely strange.

Such reticence prompts two questions: what is stopping the Government telling us their plans, and why did they have to get rid of the hereditary peers with such unseemly haste when doing so served no purpose, given the lack of knowledge about what was to come after? On the first question, my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) has made the point about the Government introducing politically correct legislation, but finding no time for important constitutional legislation such as House of Lords reform. On the second question, if there is to be no progress toward stage 2 reform until after the general election, how can the Government explain their action in rushing through the House of Lords Act 1999 to remove most of the hereditary peers without telling the House of Commons what they intended to do afterwards?

How disappointed the Government must be, now that it has become clear that the removal of the hereditary peers and the appointment of a flood of new Labour life peers has not made the Government's life easier in the upper House. In making the case for the removal of most of the hereditary peers under the House of Lords Act, the Government were quick to lay the blame for their legislative defeats in the upper House at the feet of Conservative hereditary peers. That was an inaccurate charge. In the old House of Lords, Conservatives had an overall majority neither of all peers, nor of hereditary peers—a fact that I attempted, unsuccessfully, to tease out of the Leader of the House earlier today. The Government would have won several of the votes that they lost if more

of the peers that they have appointed to the Lords had turned up to vote. The current Prime Minister has appointed more life peers than any other in history—191 in only three years, the majority of whom are new Labour acolytes and, in many cases, donors. It is a matter of fact that many of those peers have a poor voting record.

The reforms offer no democracy and no more accountability to the people, and that is something of which the Prime Minister should be mindful. How telling is it that the Government have continued to lose key votes in the Lords after the expulsion of the hereditary peers? The list of lost votes is endless, including on, to name but a few, the Local Government Bill, the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill, the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill, the Representation of the People Act 2000, the Learning and Skills Bill, the Teaching and Higher Education Bill and the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999. Those defeats have happened, not because any one political party enjoys an in-built advantage in the House of Lords, but because peers have drawn on their vast pool of experience and expertise, spotted the fact that key aspects of Government legislation are deeply flawed, and stuck to their guns accordingly.

Other key Bills, such as the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill and the Freedom of Information Bill have disappeared in front of our very eyes, not to be seen again in the other place, because the Government, recognising that those measures are systematically flawed, prefer to lose them than to introduce them in the other place and see them voted down. That has helped to ensure that the Government have such a sorry record that one must question their propriety in terms of their behaviour and representation of the people in the House of Commons. It is clear that Ministers were never principally set on strengthening Parliament or making it more relevant to the people, as their hacking about of the House of Lords demonstrates. The longer the Government continue to delay announcing their plans for the full reform of the Lords, the more they compound their error.

It is absolutely clear that the end result of the full reform of the House of Lords must be to strengthen Parliament as a whole. Ministers have systematically attempted to reduce the ability of Parliament to keep a check on the activities of the Government. They routinely make major policy announcements to the media before doing so to Parliament. They have admitted receiving leaked Select Committee reports in advance of publication. They have massively increased the number of political advisers to Ministers paid for out of the public purse, and they have eroded the political neutrality of the civil service. Now they want to "reform" the way in which the House of Commons operates because it does not suit the domestic requirements of some Labour Members of Parliament.

These developments have been hugely detrimental to the vigour of Parliament, and it is time to reverse the trend. Stage 2 reform of the House of Lords is a key element in achieving that. The second Chamber must be there to undertake detailed and effective scrutiny of legislation, both domestic and European, and of the Executive. It must be able to act as an effective safety valve.

Surely it is logical to say that only after we have decided what we want the House of Lords to do can we decide the best composition of the House to deliver those objectives. To determine its composition before setting the objectives of the House is rather like building a factory and equipping it with machines before deciding what products the factory is to make. None the less, many of those who will decide the fate of the second Chamber have already declared their preferences as to its composition, without setting out a clear vision of what they want the House of Lords to do. Lady Jay is one such person: she announced that she had come to accept the idea of a small elected element in the Lords. One can only assume that that is an endorsement of what has come to be known as Wakeham B—that is, a token presence of 87 elected peers. Is that now official Government policy? If so, why has that preference been stated without the Government setting out their full intentions in respect of House of Lords reform? If it is the Government's preferred option, what further details can the Government give us today, particularly as the Leader of the House says that the Government are still consulting?

What electoral system will be used? Will it be the same closed-list proportional representation system as was used to elect the 87 Members of the European Parliament, or will the Government specifically rule out that method of election? Will the Government accept that it was widely pilloried during the 1999 European elections and, if ever used for the House of Lords, it would simply be a mechanism for Millbank to reward more of Tony's cronies, as we have heard ad infinitum, and one-term Labour Members who may be thrown out of this place at the next election?

I was hugely concerned to hear from an hon. Member, in a discussion that took place outside the Chamber, about the Government's plans for a closed-list style of PR for electing the Lords. That would surely mean more patronage appointments of the type that we have seen during this Parliament—peers such as the noble Lords Bragg, Warner and Haskins, who have been no less disparaging of the work of the upper House than some Labour Members have been about this House.

I shall give two quick examples. The noble Lord Warner said that he had difficulty with the principle that the great majority of Bills in Committee are taken on the Floor of the other place. He stated:

> That simply ties up a large number of people unnecessarily in the House in order to keep the Government on edge by playing the voting game."

Lord Bragg complained about how inconvenient he found the facilities. The *Official Report* of the House of Lords records his complaint about the telephones in the corridor. He said:

> Try to work out a difficult contract with international musicians, as I was doing the other day, while a metre away a noble Lord, whose name will never escape my mind or my mouth, read out in full, fortissimo and with feeling the entire menu of that evening's fare in the Barry Room. . . It was interminable. I abandoned my contractual negotiations, retreated to the Library and came back some minutes later to find all the phones occupied. Miffed!

He continued:

> It really will not do. If we are invited to come here as working Peers, our outside work should also be taken seriously; more and better phones, faxes, e-mails, privacy and the message system.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 10 May 2000; Vol. 612, c. 1591-1604.]

[Mr. Christopher Fraser]

Do peers with such attitudes do the parliamentary process a service or a disservice? Do they allow the proper scrutiny of legislation, or do they do that task a disservice? Are they attracted by the ermine and the title, rather than by a desire to serve their country? That is a question which we must all consider.

That leads me to the topic of the appointments commission. The Government announced in early May this year the names of the members of the appointments commission who will propose new peers. The sad fact is that the commission will be a smokescreen behind which the Prime Minister will continue to wield wide powers of patronage. It will not be an independent body. The Prime Minister will be responsible for appointing the majority of the members, including its chairman—a point that has been sadly missed this evening. I hope that the Parliamentary Secretary can assure me that that will not be the case, but I doubt whether he can.

Both for appointments to the interim House and for any appointed element of the fully reformed House, we should implement the royal commission's proposal for a statutory commission set up by the House of Lords. No mechanism other than a strong and independent appointments commission that is responsible to Parliament will avoid patronage appointments by the back stairs.

A further piece of evidence that leads me to doubt the Government's intentions with regard to full reform of the House of Lords is the fact that their manifesto pledge to establish a Joint Committee of both Houses to consider full reform of the upper House has vanished into the ether.

We have come to realise, of course, that the Government's election pledges were not worth the mugs they were written on. However, Labour's 1997 manifesto was quite explicit on the subject:

> A committee of both Houses of Parliament will be appointed to undertake a wide-ranging review of possible further change and then to bring forward proposals for reform.

Where is it? Is Parliament not to have a say? Is that yet another example of the Government trying to sideline Parliament, or do they have no intention of moving to further reform? Are they content with an interim House which is increasingly being packed with patronage peers appointed by and loyal to the Prime Minister?

The Lord Chancellor seems to think that any such Committee should examine only the procedural aspects of implementing stage 2. That is not good enough. It is surely time that Members of Parliament in both Houses were given the opportunity to propose and consider full-scale reforms of the upper House.

Where is the evidence that there is to be a constitutional Committee of both Houses that will report on the effect of the constitutional changes made by the Government? When will we see that Committee in place? How will it operate? Peers from all parts of the House supported the principle of creating such a Committee, and the Government have accepted it. The *Official Report* records that Baroness Jay commented:

> The Government are attracted by recommendations for a special constitutional Select Committee.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 7 March 2000; Vol. 610, c. 913.]

Why has no such Committee been established? What do the Government fear? What possible excuse can there be for delay in the establishment of such a Committee?

The absence of Government proposals for stage 2 reform of the House of Lords is inexcusable. The longer they remain silent on the issue, the more it appears that they have no intention of introducing further reform, but wish to retain permanently an interim House of career politicians and representatives of what my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition has so accurately defined as "the liberal elite".

Is the Government's objective to extend their own power and reduce the ability of Parliament to hold them to account? If the Government are not to go down in history as a gang of constitutional vandals, stage 2 House of Lords reform must be brought forward to end the uncertainty. After deliberating for five months, the Government must now come off the fence. If they do not, to answer Baroness Jay, yes, there will be many in Parliament and outside who are rightly sceptical of the Government's intentions to act on reform.

8.36 pm

Angela Smith (Basildon): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I have spent many hours discussing the issue and listening to the debate, along with the few other hon. Members present in the Chamber. It saddens me that so many hon. Members were present when we discussed stage 1 and the removal of the right of hereditary peers to vote, but so few of those who were keen to take part in that debate are in the Chamber tonight to discuss what comes next, which is perhaps more important. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) points to the Labour Benches. I make no party political point; I merely suggest that as many hon. Members should be present for this debate as attended the previous debate.

Some hon. Members are critical of the fact that we have reached this stage at all. That was evident from the comments of the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), who explained why he believed that the hereditary peerage should stay. There is also the argument that we should have all or nothing—we should have stage 1 and stage 2 now, or nothing. That view has prevailed so many times in the past, but produced no reform. By waiting to achieve everything, we lapse into inertia and do nothing.

Today, I came across a copy of the *Daily Mirror* from June 1927, with the headline

> MPs battle over Lords Reform.

The article stated that agreement in the Conservative party on the reform of the second Chamber was as far away as ever. It mentioned attempts to water down proposals to placate the younger members of the party, including Mr. Duff-Cooper and Captain MacMillan. Even in 1927, after attempts to secure the agreement of everyone, nothing happened—and we are still waiting for change.

Mr. Tyrie: Although there was no consensus in the Conservative party, the vast majority of the party, and certainly the leadership by that time, had moved to the view that some form of elected solution would be required for the second Chamber. Furthermore, by that time the Labour party was firmly committed to the abolition of the House of Lords—a position that it has held intermittently ever since.

Angela Smith: How times change. Here we are, in 2000, still debating the issue of hereditary peers. It is right that we move forward and abolish the right of hereditary peers to vote, and then move on to the next stage.

I have never said that I considered it an important political point to remove that right; I think it right in principle. My intention is not to undermine or fail to recognise the contribution that peers have made. I believe that it is wrong in principle for people to have the right to vote in our legislature on laws that govern the country, purely on the basis of what their ancestors had done or the position that their ancestors held. However, hereditary peers still sit in the House of Lords. The legitimacy of the House of Lords has not increased.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: Given the powers that the hon. Lady ascribes to hereditary peers and accidents of birth, how did Baroness Jay manage to secure such enormous influence over the affairs of our country?

Angela Smith: Baroness Jay was appointed to her position on her merits, not on those of the people who came before her. Unless we move forward now, the legitimacy of the second Chamber will be compromised.

We have reached the halfway stage and we are looking forward to the next step. By and large, I welcome the Wakeham report, although I have criticisms of it. It constitutes an important way in which to move forward and inform Parliament. Several hon. Members do not support the concept of a second Chamber or the need for a bicameral system. On balance, I do not share that view. However, I hope that their lordships do not consider the view of this House to be static, and do not believe that they can do anything they wish and continue to be supported as an institution by the House of Commons. The role of the House of Lords is vital in our perception of the system as a whole.

We are not considering the way in which the House of Lords operates with this Government, but the way in which a second Chamber will operate with any Government. The consequences of our deliberations tonight could last for as many centuries as the previous set-up. We must therefore legislate with great care because the impact will be felt for many years.

The House of Lords should not be bent on unconditional support for or confrontation with any Government. Conservative Governments have reeled off long lists of defeats of this Government by the House of Lords. That is irrelevant. If we want to play such games we can visit the Library, where we will find that 80 per cent. of defeats by the House of Lords were under Labour Governments, whereas 10 per cent. or fewer occurred under Conservative Governments. The House of Lords has therefore been partisan. However, that is not relevant to the way in which we proceed.

We want a House of Lords that will consider issues on their merits. That does not mean that it should be non-political or non-partisan. The commission's report deals with that. It is strange that Members of the House of Commons are so frightened of having politicians in the House of Lords. Perhaps they are frightened that politicians will know the tricks of the trade.

A House of Lords that operates under the criteria that the Wakeham report outlines will have more confidence and legitimacy than it has at present. I worry about the future of the second Chamber, and I lean towards the views of my colleagues who argue for no second Chamber when I read that individual Members of the House of Lords have stated that they will try to wreck one Commons Bill not because of its merits or otherwise, but because of a Government policy that they do not like. Lord Kimball was reported as having met Conservative peers to draw up tactics to wreck the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill in revenge for the Home Secretary's announcement of a free vote on hunting in the House of Commons.

If Members of another place want to tackle each issue on its merits and vote for or against it, that is a matter for them. However, to argue that they will wreck legislation in revenge for an unrelated action by the House of Commons brings the second Chamber into disrepute and makes some of us wonder whether we should have a second Chamber. Liberal Democrats are often criticised, perhaps unfairly, for pavement politics. Such language from the House of Lords smacks of the kid who takes his ball away, and is more akin to playground than pavement politics. Lord Wakeham is trying to distance the legislature from that. Such behaviour tests the patience of us all.

If we are to have a truly democratic system of government, we must impress on the second Chamber that its role must be clearly defined. As I said earlier, their lordships should not regard support for a second Chamber as unchallengeable. The politics of the playground simply strengthen the argument of those who would remove any second Chamber.

I do not believe that we should do away with the second Chamber because of differences about the way in which it should be constituted. Some hon. Members have suggested that the difficulties and pressures on deciding our next actions mean that we should do nothing. I do not accept that. The time is right to act, but there are difficulties.

Lord Wakeham and his team tried to marry the old with the new. That creates difficulties. In some ways, it would have been easier to abolish the House of Lords and establish a new Senate. However, this House believed strongly that while we wanted to change some traditions of the House of Lords, we did not want to throw the baby out with the bath water. This House emphasised the importance of tradition. The difficulties in the report arise from trying to marry such difficult concepts.

The House of Commons has faced more gradual modernisation through general elections. We undergo a process of evolution not revolution. Considerable attention, not always wanted, has been focused on the fact that there are more women in this Parliament than ever before. Perhaps more importantly, hon. Members' backgrounds have changed dramatically in the past 100 years. My hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) commented on that earlier. Paying Members of Parliament a salary has opened the way for those who would have been denied a seat in the House of Commons because they had no private means. The change in the franchise made a difference to people's eligibility to stand for election to the House of Commons and who could vote for them. Those changes, together with changes in the education system, have given people from different backgrounds the confidence to stand for election to local authorities and the House. Change has been gradual, and I am sure that it will continue.

We are now trying to bring the House of Lords up to speed. That can be done only through legislation. The starting point for any deliberations is the role of the

[Angela Smith]

second Chamber. I have already endorsed many of the recommendations in the report. I was interested to note that the commission accepted the principles of the Salisbury convention and believed that they should continue. I endorse that, but I am not convinced that we should proceed by convention in a second Chamber of the future. I accept the principles of the Salisbury convention, and perhaps they should be enshrined in working mechanisms. If they are wrong, they should not be retained. Sometimes, the withdrawal of the Salisbury convention has been used as a threat. That is inappropriate.

The report clearly identifies the way in which a second Chamber should operate. We must also consider who should be members of the second Chamber. I am comfortable with a mixture of regionally elected Members and appointed Members from the appointments commission. I accept the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) and the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) about the problems of a fully elected second Chamber. We must not appoint Members of a second Chamber as an honour; they must fill working positions. I do not accept that we diminish the legitimacy of the second Chamber by having a mixture of people who are appointed and people who are elected. I am not considering the legitimacy of individual Members, but that which the process gives to the Chamber.

Mr. Love: Does my hon. Friend perceive any tension between the elected and the appointed Members of a new second Chamber?

Angela Smith: I hope that there will be no personal tensions because we are considering the body as a whole. There could be tensions if we elected Members on a constituency basis; they would perhaps feel that their remit was different.

I welcome the time limit that the Wakeham report sets out. No Member of the second Chamber should have a position for life. That would be untenable. Appointments should also clearly be seen to be outside the patronage of the Prime Minister of the day.

I want to consider the election process briefly, and models A, B and C. I oppose proportional representation. The lessons of the European elections are now being learned. Members of the European Parliament are becoming distanced from their electorate because of the way in which they were elected. Who knows who their Member of the European Parliament is? Most people do not. However, there are also problems with models A and B, which the Wakeham report outlines.

Under those models, Members would have an allegiance to a region. While local knowledge would be useful in deliberations, those Members could view themselves as elected representatives for their regions. Model A suggests that political parties would select or, more likely, appoint regional Members, depending on the vote that each party got at the general election. If the purpose is to ensure greater representation for each region by party, the opposite would happen in practice. If regional parties were unrepresented in the House of Commons, that would be compounded by under-representation in the House of Lords. The deficiency also applies to model B, although, if directly electing Members, voters will have the opportunity to vote differently for different Parliaments. All three models have deficiencies. On balance model B may be preferable, but I am not convinced that it is perfect or, indeed, right.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright) mentioned the size of the second Chamber. The only purpose of a Chamber of 550 that I can see is to reflect the composition of the House of Commons. Surely we want a Chamber that is completely different from the House of Commons. I feel that if we are to give any legitimacy to a second Chamber, it must be radically reformed. Many of the necessary proposals are in the report, and I think that the mixture of elected representatives from regions and appointments works; but the process must be completed. The Government will stretch the tolerance of the House if progress is not made. It does not take a mastermind to see that it is a case of "We've started, so we'll finish."

8.51 pm

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): I felt that all the arguments advanced by the hon. Member for Basildon (Angela Smith) pointed in the direction of a largely elected second Chamber. If her conclusion had not been in favour of going along with the Wakeham report entirely, I would have felt able to agree with everything that she said.

Angela Smith: I am sorry if I gave the hon. Gentleman that impression. I certainly do not support a majority elected second Chamber. I think that the mix of elected and appointed Members is right, but I think that we need a much smaller Chamber.

Mr. Tyrie: I know that I might be given injury time if I responded to the hon. Lady's intervention, but I had better not.

We should have had this debate three years ago, before we had any legislation at all. We should have tried to work out what the end point would be, and then proceeded with a single measure of reform. It is regrettable that that has not happened. After all, although the Government do not seem to have a view now, they came to power with a clear aim: they wanted to get rid of the hereditaries, and to introduce democracy in the second Chamber. The Prime Minister was firmly on record as wanting that personally.

Since the Government came to power, the Executive have squirmed into avoiding any check on their authority. That is why we saw the Blair-Cranborne deal, whereby Labour Members were lined up to vote for hanging on to the hereditary peerage. Just under half the regularly attending hereditaries are in the House of Lords still, despite the passage of the first Bill. Extraordinary arrangements have been put on to the statute book. When an hereditary Labour or Liberal peer dies, the couple who remain can go and work out over a cup of tea who should fill the vacant slot. That is on the statute book as we speak. It is a farce. It is an absurdity, which does no credit to the Government or to Parliament.

Since coming to office, the Government have also tried to lose the commitment to democracy. That is why we had the Wakeham report in the beginning. It seems to me that our only hope of protection against Executive power

lay in the possibility that Lord Wakeham would surprise us all, break the habit of a lifetime, and do something that the Executive did not want. Unfortunately, however, he did not do that.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Tyrie: I hope my hon. Friend will forgive me if I make some progress.

There is a lot of detail in the Wakeham report. I agree with some of it, but I take issue fundamentally with one crucial recommendation, which relates to composition. Many others have mentioned this.

Bicameralism—and I am a convinced bicameralist—will work only if the second Chamber has the moral authority to exercise the powers that it has. I believe that the electorate will accept that only if they have had a hand in putting the people there. They will not accept legislators' acting without their being able to participate in some way in putting those legislators in place.

Lord Wakeham offers us only an appointments commission. The commissioners, in their turn, will be appointed by the Executive. In other words, the Prime Minister's shadow will be hanging over the appointments commission.

If we go down that route, we shall create a self-perpetuating oligarchy of the great and the good, best thought up on the playing fields of Eton and nothing to do with a Parliament in the 21st century. Could a Chamber created almost entirely by an appointments commission ever mobilise public opinion sufficiently to be able to ask the House of Commons to think about a measure again? I very much doubt it. We shall be creating a toothless Chamber.

I find it amazing that people think that, in the 21st century, we can go down any route other than the largely democratic route. I am not even sure that Lord Wakeham really believes it. He sometimes hints that he is trying to do the bidding of the Executive—that he is devising something that is the creature of the Executive.

The report's own defence for an appointed House gives the game away, in paragraph 11.11. Lord Wakeham's argument is that elections do not throw up people who—I am almost quoting—are truly representative: who are capable of speaking with authority on, for example, constitutional matters, or on philosophical or moral issues.

Lord Wakeham seems to be arguing that elections would not provide people representative of all sections of society. That is an absurd notion for a royal commission to come up with. If it applies to a second Chamber, why does it not apply to this place? Why do we not have appointments to the House of Commons? The logic would be absurd if it were not slightly dangerous; if this were not a strongly established democracy, I would be worried about its resonance with the arguments once advanced in the former Soviet Union in favour of getting rid of bourgeois democratic structures throughout eastern Europe. Indeed, it was an essential tenet of Marxist-Leninist doctrine that one man, one vote did not generate true representation, and that the only true way of securing representation of a whole society was for the party—the dictatorship of the proletariat—to appoint a Chamber on the people's behalf. That would ensure that every section was represented: peasants, workers and such like.

Are we really expected to take paragraph 11.11 seriously? If any hon. Members doubt what I have said, they should have a look at it later. It is astonishing nonsense. It is not only a wholly undemocratic proposal: it is an authoritarian one. Lord Wakeham knows that; so do most people.

When people are asked what they think, they overwhelmingly say the same—in opinion polls, for what they are worth, which I think is not a great deal, and in focus groups, which are probably worth slightly less still. At least three quarters of the population always say that if there is to be a second Chamber, it should be largely or wholly elected. A clear majority Conservative Members now want a largely or wholly elected second Chamber, and I believe that a majority of Labour Members probably want the same, given the reaction to an early-day motion tabled some time ago. A fair amount of pressure was put on Labour Members not to sign, but a large number did so.

There is one legitimate argument against democracy—only one. It is ultimately a unicameralist argument. It is the argument that there would be a titanic clash between the two Chambers, which would put the country into gridlock and thus prevent any effective government. However, that argument ignores the Parliament Acts. It ignores the fact that there has been only one clash this century. That clash was to define the very rules that would prevent a clash ever happening again.

The Parliament Acts make it absolutely clear that the second Chamber cannot interfere with money Bills, and they limit the power of delay to one year. The second Chamber cannot ultimately challenge the supremacy of this place. It can ask this place to think again only for one year.

It is beholden on those who advance the argument that elections would generate some unsustainable tension between the two places to demonstrate why they think that the Parliament Acts would be torn up. They were created when the House of Lords had no restraint at all. It could have carried on ignoring such restraints. In a democratic age, the source of the Government will be the ultimate source of supremacy and that source will continue to be this Chamber.

A high proportion of the arguments that I wanted to make tonight have already been made, notably by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke). I shall not repeat all the arguments, but I strongly commend my right hon. and learned Friend's speech to those Members who are in the Chamber now who did not hear it. I add only a few further points. With a bit of luck, I will sit down before my allotted time.

My Front-Bench team has moved a long way. I am delighted about that. Not all my hon. Friends have yet come with me. In time, a few of them who have been marching firmly in the opposite direction may yet change their minds on what is an important issue for Parliament.

I agree with the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright)—I am sorry that he is not in the Chamber—that there is scope for some consensus on the crucial issue of the composition of the second Chamber, but only if the Government do not stop it forming. If there is one thing that I have noticed in the debate, it is that the Government seem to be firmly against any proposals that would create a second Chamber capable of giving them any trouble—a second Chamber with enough moral authority to ask them to think again.

[Mr. Tyrie]

I fear that the last ditchers against meaningful reform of the second Chamber are sitting on the Treasury Bench. It seems that they are becoming the forces of conservatism. That is why we have heard that the Government are to drag their feet on the setting-up of the Joint Committee. That is what I fear was meant when the Leader of the House said that we would get round to setting it up only "in due course."

9.1 pm

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): First, I urge that we should have joined-up thinking on reform of the other House. Okay, it is a Government phrase, but it is one that the Government should apply to the matter. We should ensure that the reform of the other House is considered with the reform of the House of Commons and with the other constitutional changes that are being made. Secondly, I accept the general point that seems to be accepted by Wakeham: the House of Commons should have supremacy over the other House, so that we have a balance of powers without the type of gridlock that has occurred in the United States, Australia and other places.

There seem to be two ways in which the House of Commons can have supremacy over the other House. One is to make the other House less legitimate. I had better say that rather than illegitimate because, contrary to the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), I thought that illegitimacy was one of the ways in which people used to get into the other House, particularly in the time of Charles II. The other way is to limit the other House's powers by statute.

Wakeham chose to make the other House less legitimate. That was a mistake. If making it less legitimate makes it less legitimate for it to overrule the House of Commons, it also surely makes it less legitimate for it to interfere at all in the doings of this House.

However illegitimate we make the other House, it does not mean that its Members will believe that they are in an illegitimate position. For heaven's sake, even last year, there were hereditary peers who did not realise how illegitimate their position had been ever since "Iolanthe" was written. The hon. Member for Teignbridge still does not. There are Members of the present other House, which was criticised so eloquently by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), who do not recognise that they are in an illegitimate position because of the present system of appointment.

Other reasons were given for having a predominantly appointed House. It was said that it could be more representative of regional, vocational, ethnic, professional, cultural and religious variations. Of course, the commissioners were aware of the danger that they could be appointing just a quango, but they had a solution: it would be appointed by a superquango. They were aware of the danger that it could be an assembly just of the great and the good, but they solved the problem because it would be the great and good appointed by the very great and the very good.

Therefore, we have the very great and the very good commission appointing the great and the good upper House for all time. Who will appoint the very great and the very good commission? It will be appointed by the great and good upper House, for all time. What could have been more accurate than the comment of the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie)? It is a recipe for a self-perpetuating oligarchy. It is replacing an old boys' act with an old pals' act. It is replacing a House of privilege with a House of privilege.

What was wrong with the old hereditary House of Lords? Well, disproportionate influence was given to the establishment—to the forces of conservatism, with a small "c"; I leave aside those with a large "C"—and to wealth and power. There was uniformity of opinion, but it was a uniformity of opinion that was at odds with public opinion.

What would be wrong with the proposed new upper House? Almost all the same things would be wrong with it. Of course, there would—just to palliate it—be a small elected component. The common people will be allowed to vote—to have a slight influence—once every 15 years, provided that they do not move house. If they do move house, they might get to vote more, or possibly less, than once every 15 years. In other words, the average person who does not move house might reach the age of 30 before having a vote—to have even a slight influence on a slight bit of the upper Chamber.

Why are elections to be held only once every 15 years? That will be done—to paraphrase paragraph 12.16; these are not the exact words of the report—so that Members elected in that manner are not influenced too much by the common hoi polloi. There were times reading the report when I wondered whether the commission had been presided over by Lord Wakeham or by the ghost of the Duke of Wellington.

What is that bizarre formula designed for? It is designed to protect the supremacy of the House of Commons. Why should we do that? We should do that because this place has the representative legitimacy of election in a participative democracy. If that is good enough for the Commons, why—as was so eloquently asked by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe—should it not be legitimate for the other place?

My own preference is for a democratically elected second Chamber, elected on the basis of proportional representation, to balance the current House of Commons. I do not believe that the risk of gridlock is unavoidable. I also do not believe that there is a risk, as the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) suggested, of an elected upper House not being subordinate to this one. Those risks could be dealt with in statute.

If we were to do that, some people would immediately start shouting that it was the result of control freak tendencies and an elective dictatorship, and the reduction of checks and balances. However, if we combined legitimacy with the current powers of the House of Lords, we would create a second Chamber that had too much power relative to this Chamber. The old House of Lords did not exercise all its powers precisely because it knew that it had limited legitimacy. However, I believe that if we were to limit, de jure, the powers of the new House to those that, de facto, were exercised by the old House, we could retain a reasonable balance.

I believe that one would also have to reform the anarchic Standing Orders of the other place, so that excessive powers of delay were not available for small unrepresentative minorities wasting time. Such powers

should reside primarily in votes of majorities in the other place. Some people might feel that similar reform could be made more widely in Parliament.

I should like, ideally, to have a proportionally elected and representative second Chamber to balance the lack of proportionality in this House. Currently, Governments can be elected with absolute majorities and can be re-elected with the support of about 42 to 43 per cent. of those voting in a given election. Currently, because we do not have fixed Parliaments, elections tend to be held at times that are favourable to the Government, so Governments are often re-elected who have mid-term the support of only about 30 to 40 per cent. of the electorate.

Against the background of a Government who have only minority support, the second Chamber can delay controversial, partisan legislation, or the Government can decide to compromise with other parties. Such an arrangement could be good for this country, and it could perhaps have preserved us from the worst excesses of, for example, the poll tax and the peculiar ping-pong over privatisations and nationalisations in previous decades. It could also create a reasonable balance between the majority and minority parties without giving excessive power to either.

Mr. Paterson: Does the hon. Gentleman believe that the balance of power between the legislature and the Executive should be shifted in favour of the legislature?

Mr. Savidge: The hon. Gentleman is raising some of the issues that should be addressed in a fuller debate. Although the overall subject of constitutional change needs to be examined, in this debate, we are concentrating on the House of Lords.

I should prefer, ideally, proportional representation elections for the second Chamber. I am a pragmatist, however, and recognise that we must deal with the art of the possible. I also recognise that the forces of conservatism are applied most strongly in matters of constitutional change.

I believe that the initial changes to the House of Lords that we made last year, such as abolishing its hereditary element, were historic. However, I also believe that the great Reform Act was an historic change, and recognise that it took more than a century for full universal suffrage and proper enfranchisement of all adults to evolve. I recognise that, although the Act got rid of the rotten boroughs, there were still some pretty eccentric constituencies right until the second half of the last century.

In the same way, in local government reform, it took a long time to get rid of aldermen, deans of guilds and other unelected officers, and to risk having full democracy. Four out of five items in the chartists' charter would now be accepted by almost everyone in the House and are accepted as part of our national constitution, but very few of them lived to see it.

There will probably be compromises and we will end up with a spatchcocked second Chamber to make allowance for those who believe that we must retain the involvement of the Church—with religious and secular representatives—of the Law Lords or of experts of various kinds, and that we cannot do that by having witnesses or advisers to Committees, be they Select, Standing or pre-legislative.

People will also be desperately anxious to preserve Cross Benchers and independents. I recognise that there is a need to balance the fear of the slavishly uncritical apparatchiks—not so much wage slaves as page slaves—with independents. As somewhat of an aficionado of "Any Questions?", I find that the independents on the programme can be the worst bigots of all. In some other parliaments, the so-called independents are the worst for vested interests or pork barrel politics. Let me immediately exonerate the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell), who is a very honourable exception.

If we are to have such people, let us go against what the report suggests and have voting and non-voting Members. If we have to have a compromise, let voting Members be in strict proportion to votes cast for political parties. The hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon said that it could be useful for us to have the president of the Royal College of Surgeons in the second Chamber. If so, it would be for his expert arguments on medicine, not for the votes that he would cast on any other issue, on which he might be totally prejudiced.

If the voting strength in the second Chamber is proportional, there should be less need for proportional representation for this Chamber—less need for Jenkins. If proportionality is recognised in what may well be a spatchcocked Chamber, let us not spatchcock this Chamber, which is what Jenkins is trying to do by retaining constituencies, but making up for it in other ways. Let us at least not go ahead with that at present.

We have, rightly, had massive constitutional change and we have brought in various different proportional systems to a point where it is possible that the electorate are getting slightly confused. It would do no harm to delay considering proportional representation for this House until we can at least learn from the experience of other elections. At most, let us consider from Jenkins whether the alternative vote or first past the post should be used while retaining the constituencies.

In summary, I want to see joined-up thinking over our constitutional change, especially across the two Houses. I want this House to have supremacy over the other Chamber. Personally, I would like a second Chamber elected by proportional representation. Certainly, its voting strength should be proportional, to balance this House. For the immediate future, I would like this House to retain constituency elections, by the alternative vote or first past the post.

9.14 pm

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): I pay tribute to the work that went into producing the report, although I regret the fact that it was necessary. I regret that this debate is necessary, despite the excellent speeches that have been made from both sides of the House.

The Government have a record of leaving a constitutional mess. With devolution, we still have the West Lothian problem, with which we have to wrestle to try to recreate the fairness and balance that used to exist in the constitution. We are also wrestling here to find a solution to a problem that need never have existed. When we voted on whether to retain 91 peers in the ridiculous mishmash House of Lords that we now have, I voted against that and would do so again. In an ideal world, we would not start from here, but the fact that the House of Lords and the constitution of this country have been

[Mr. Laurence Robertson]

around for such a long time makes them different from the constitutions in other countries. Therefore, direct comparisons with, for example, the USA are not really relevant.

The House of Lords has many strengths that have perhaps not been brought out in the debate. The independence of mind of many of the peers, although they sit technically as Conservative or Labour, has often been demonstrated by the fact that they have voted against measures put forward by this Government and by the previous Conservative Government.

Mr. Love: Can the hon. Gentleman explain why Members of the House of Lords are so much more independent under a Labour Government than under a Conservative Government?

Mr. Robertson: I do not think that that is the case, but I shall not try to explain why because I am short of time.

As I said, the House of Lords has many strengths. I am sure that hon. Members listen to, and read the reports of, debates in the House of Lords, the quality of which is sometimes superior to the quality of debate in this House. We should not discard that strength.

People might ask how I can justify the continuance of a House of Lords that is not democratically elected, if I believe in democracy. I can do so because, as has already been pointed out, the House of Lords has virtually no powers. It can delay legislation and send it back here to ask us to think again, but at the end of the day it can do no more. Therefore, I do not mind that it is not elected, so long as—as my hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) said—the whole parliamentary package is democratic. Ultimately, the democratic will of this House is always supreme, which is why I can accept an undemocratic House of Lords.

What are we trying to achieve when we talk about democracy? Electing people is democratic, but do we represent the views held across the country? I sometimes wonder whether this House achieves that. Many views are held in Labour constituencies that are not represented by the elected Members for those seats. The House of Lords, in its present form and perhaps in an evolved form, can provide a greater representation of some of the wider views found in the country.

What would we achieve by having a second elected Chamber? Lord Wakeham is a former Conservative Chief Whip and at a meeting I attended, he expressed concern about the whipping arrangements in Parliament. He did not want to reproduce in the House of Lords the whipping arrangements that prevail in the House of Commons, and we should not let that point pass without serious consideration.

If we had now a House of Lords dominated by elected Labour Members who were whipped as such, where would be the check on the Labour Executive in this House? It would not exist. Alternatively, if we had a Conservative-controlled House of Lords of elected Members who wanted to show their strength, we could have gridlock. I do not accept that the Parliament Acts would be safe in such circumstances. Rather, we would leave ourselves vulnerable to the discussions in smoke-filled rooms between certain senior Members of this House and certain senior Members of the House of Lords. Where would we have gone? What would we have achieved?

As time is short, I will finish by making a suggestion. For all its faults, I suggest that we continue with an appointed House of Lords. I am concerned about how those appointments would be made. I am concerned about quotas and would seriously object to them, although I would want to see every opinion in the UK represented. I would balance that by bringing in, on an elected basis, people from organisations; the heads of Churches, charities, employers' organisations and trade unions could provide a balance that might then restrict the powers of the people who would make the appointments.

It is not an easy question to answer. Speaking as someone who will never inherit anything, I think that we should have carried on with what we had. There is an argument for that, but we must now look forward.

9.21 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) for curtailing his remarks to allow me to speak. He asked what had been achieved by the Government's emasculation of the other place. The answer is absolutely nothing, except mayhem and confusion all over the country.

The institution may have been unique, and possibly eccentric, but it nevertheless commanded respect across the country. It was a repository of a great deal of wisdom and it knew its place. It could only go so far in challenging the principal democratic authority in this country—namely, this House.

That was all torn up by the Prime Minister in the name of so-called modernisation. The Prime Minister is guilty of an act of vandalism and the country will ultimately pass that verdict upon him. He will go down not as a great reforming Prime Minister, but as a man wholly without principle and vision. It is regrettable that, in the name of modernisation, the destruction of one of our institutions has taken place.

I am sorry that I have not participated in the whole debate, but I have been here for a good deal of it. The one feature of the debate has been that there is no consensus on an alternative. There have been all sorts of views expressed, but no consensus. That is why it was so irresponsible of the Government to introduce the measure that removed so many of the hereditary peers from the other place without putting something else in their place.

There is not going to be a consensus on the way forward. There will be no national coming together, despite what the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright) said. There will be no coherent, agreed view on the way forward for the second Chamber. There is no enthusiasm in this country for unicameralism, and people do not believe that this House should be the only authority in the land. However, people are increasingly alarmed at the way in which the Government are trying to ram their policies through both Houses—here, where they are heavily whipped, and in the other place, which the Government are packing with large numbers of the Prime Minister's friends.

Mr. Paterson: Does my hon. Friend realise how bad the Prime Minister's friends are at turning up to the House

of Lords? We heard earlier about young hereditary peers not turning up. Many of the most famous cronies such as Lord Bragg are bad attenders; Lord Bragg missed half of the possible votes in 1997–98. Lord Simpson voted six times out of 157 opportunities, and Lord Sainsbury 38 times out of 161. How can friends of the Prime Minister be imposed as legislators if they do not turn up?

Mr. Howarth: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point, but friends of the Prime Minister merely follow his example. After all, he never turns up to vote in this place.

Mr. Savidge: Has the hon. Gentleman also noticed how bad Lord Ashcroft is at turning up in this country?

Mr. Howarth: I had not noticed that, as my noble Friend is available more or less whenever I want a meeting with him—and, sad to say, I do not have millions to contribute to the coffers.

There is no consensus on the future. The key question is whether members of the second Chamber should be elected or appointed. My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) advanced the case for election extremely effectively, although he did not persuade me entirely. However, people who think that a wholly elected upper House would not wish to arrogate to itself powers enabling it to challenge this House are living in cloud cuckoo land.

Regardless of the electoral arrangements, Members of the second Chamber will be elected by the same people who elect us. They will therefore claim an electoral authority and a mandate, just as we claim the mandate here. The existence of legislation to limit their powers and ability to challenge this House will not dampen their ardour for greater powers that will put them on a par with us. The result will be gridlock.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge) suggested having voting and non-voting Members of the other House. The hon. Member for Basildon (Angela Smith) suggested that some should be elected and others not—a proposition also advanced by the hon. Member for Aberdeen, North.

The Wakeham report proposes that representatives in the second Chamber should be drawn from various regions of the United Kingdom, but states that that would not result in a federal Parliament. That seems to be a contradiction.

In believing that an elected second Chamber would want to challenge this House, I am conscious also that the proposal for an appointments commission is seriously flawed. The hon. Member for Aberdeen, North said that the very good and the very great will appoint the good and the great. That memorable expression will probably survive, and it is an accurate representation of what would happen.

The right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) said that the commission should be restricted when it came to the sorts of people whom it should appoint. He said that it should take note of ethnic, gender and religious balance so that everyone would be represented. Such a huge prescription would be impossible to fulfil, and the result would be a complete farce. I do not believe that the appointments commission will work.

Ultimately, some form of appointment may be the only answer but, like my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson), I can see that it might be appropriate to have as Members of the second Chamber people who represent a particular walk of life or activity. Conservative Members are very much taken with the idea that members of the Women's Institute might prove a formidable voice in the other place, as of right.

Sir Patrick Cormack: They would make a very good House.

Mr. Howarth: They would indeed—an upper House, too.

After five months, we are no further on in terms of finding a solution to replacing the upper House. Ultimately, the nation will grieve that this Government have more or less destroyed the hereditary system. They have taken away from Parliament and the governance of the country men and women who were committed to a sense of duty and to service. They carried out their responsibilities with enormous dignity, and had a huge amount of knowledge that they placed at the disposal of the nation. They were cheap, and they turned up to take part in the affairs of state of this country. I for one mourn their loss, and the fact that there is no alternative in place is an indication of how bankrupt the ideas of this Government are.

9.30 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I am particularly glad to have the opportunity to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth), for two reasons. First, it is not inappropriate that the final speech from the Back Benches in this interesting, if somewhat curtailed, debate should come from one who was such a stout defender of the former House of Lords. It is also appropriate that we should end with a tribute to those who served there not because they sought to serve there, but because they saw it as their duty, and who rendered signal service in many cases.

The other reason that I am glad to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot is that he, like me, has in the past been a Member of Parliament for Cannock. Indeed, it is 30 years ago to the day that I learned that I had been elected as the Member of Parliament for Cannock. I still have the honour of representing a very large chunk of that constituency for which I was elected, but there was redistribution later, and my hon. Friend had his first parliamentary incarnation as the Member of Parliament representing Cannock and Burntwood. Moreover, another Member of Parliament for the area took part in the debate—the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright)—and made an interesting and thoughtful speech.

Trying to sum up a debate such as this is not easy, because where does one find the common threads? The Leader of the House talked about consensus. I completely understand why she has not heard all the debate. With her normal impeccable courtesy, the right hon. Lady let us know that she had to attend to other business. Had she been here—and the hon. Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping) will brief her on this—she certainly would have heard a wide array of views; yet three or four things stand out from this debate.

[Sir Patrick Cormack]

The hon. Member for Basildon (Angela Smith) said how sorry she was that the debate was not better attended. I agree with her entirely. This has been a very important debate, and it is a pity that more colleagues from both sides of the House were not here. My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) said that he thought that the debate was three years too late. I believe that he is right. We should have had a debate on the principles of House of Lords reform at the very beginning of this Parliament. If that had been followed by the establishment of a royal commission, by now we could have been within sight of consensus.

My hon. Friends the Members for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) and for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) both talked about our not having a blank sheet of paper, and we must all bear that in mind. We are not devising a constitution from scratch—we are building upon something. I believe that the Government have not handled this well, to put it mildly, but it is in the interests of the country that we now work together to create something that really will serve the people of this country through the coming century.

I will come to the wide range of views in a moment. However, there were one or two matters on which there was a degree of consensus. First, there was a general desire to see the Joint Committee established. A number of hon. Members referred to that. The right hon. Lady said that it would happen in due course, but most of those who commented on that remark, from both sides of the House, did not find it good enough. We believe that that Committee should be established, and established very soon. As the hon. Member for Cannock Chase said, there are matters that it can consider on the basis of a degree of consensus.

There has not been tremendous disagreement on the powers that the second Chamber should have. They should be broadly in line with the powers that it constitutionally enjoys at present, but it should be free and unfettered in the use of those powers, and not feel inhibited and restrained, as it has sometimes in the past. The hon. Gentleman made that point.

Coming through the debate has been a recognition that in the other place there is a degree of expertise and public service that we would be much the poorer without. Those themes have featured from time to time during the past few hours.

When we came to the Wakeham commission, however, not a vast number of Members gave an unrestrained welcome to it. The right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) is not in his place, and he explained why—he is celebrating his 30th anniversary of election to the House. I had to opt out of my dinner but he was able to go to his. I feel slightly envious. However, the right hon. Gentleman would say that, would he not? He was the deputy chairman of the Wakeham commission. He filled that role with his normal skill and aplomb, and he made a spirited defence of the commission.

The hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) seemed to be broadly in agreement with the commission, although he made some churlish remarks about the way in which the House of Lords currently uses its powers. He seemed to want a toothless poodle to be replaced by a children's parliament, if I got him right.

The hon. Members for Burnley (Mr. Pike) and for Cannock Chase were both broadly sympathetic to the Wakeham commission, but they set it in the context of parliamentary reform. It is important that we recognise that we are considering one House of a bicameral system. We ignore that at our peril.

When we come to those who opposed the Wakeham commission, by Jove, what a galaxy of talent we have. Apart from the speeches of my hon. Friends the Members for Tewkesbury and for Aldershot—it sounds like the beginning of a refrain from a Shakespeare history play—we heard from the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan). By Jove, that was a vicious attack. The right hon. Gentleman is well known as a musician, but this evening he forsook the clavichord for the claymore, and we had a vicious assault on the Wakeham commission. I am sure that when Lord Wakeham reads it tomorrow, he will quake.

My hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge defended the present system with those qualities of gentle tolerance and sensitivity for which he has become so well known in the House. He did so most eloquently. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) attacked the Wakeham commission from an entirely different standpoint because he wants full-blooded elections. He wants an entirely elected second Chamber.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) also attacked the Wakeham commission, but from a different standpoint again. He wants the status quo, but he wants to call the second Chamber the Senate. He also wants the Prime Minister to retain the powers of patronage rather than to see them bestowed upon PricewaterhouseCoopers, which he thought was the alternative.

The hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice), with that emollience which has endeared him to members of the Government Front Bench, said that he thought that the Wakeham commission's report was half-baked and just another new Labour fix. The hon. Gentleman is in his place and acknowledges that I am quoting him accurately. He will be able to bring out his own edition of how to lose friends and not to influence people when he retires from the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester said that the electorate will accept only a directly and fully elected House. I have seen little evidence of electoral demand for reform of the second Chamber. That was the position before the general election, during it and since. Nor have I seen much disapproval of the other place. However, my hon. Friend made his case, as he always does, with erudition and force. It is a case that must be listened to carefully.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge) wants to have a proportionally representative elected second Chamber. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Mr. Fraser) made some discerning comments about the role of the second Chamber, but he believes that we must move towards reform in the near future.

All those disparate views show that there is no consensus either in the House or in either party. Speaking for my own party, it is clear that there are gradations of view at all levels. Those who advocate a full-blooded, wholly elected Chamber—whether Labour, Conservative

or Liberal Democrat—must face the logic of moving towards a system with a separation of powers, fixed terms for Parliament and a written constitution. There is a perfectly valid and legitimate case for that. We do not have such a system in this country at the moment, but I believe that the logic of the argument of those who want a wholly elected second Chamber leads inexorably in that direction.

I also think that we have to answer certain criticisms when we talk of a directly elected House, which is why the present tendency of the official Opposition is to have a form of mixture. What about the Cross-Bench element? Most people would agree that parliamentarians who are independent of party make a special contribution to the other place.

Mr. Tyrie: Will my hon. Friend explain why we would need a written constitution if we were to have an elected second Chamber? I did not quite catch that point.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I shall explain that to my hon. Friend in detail later, but I cannot do so in the next three minutes. If we are to have two Chambers, to redistribute their powers, and to move towards a fixed-term Parliament, it would be logical to enshrine all that in a constitutional framework, so we would move towards a written constitution.

It is important to have an independent element in the other place, such as the Cross Benches. Most people agree that it makes a unique and special contribution to our parliamentary deliberations. A number of hon. Members on both sides of the House have touched on the position of the established Church and the representatives of other religious faiths. Is there to be a place for them in a second Chamber? I believe that there should be, and that they represent an extremely important constituency. I also believe that we must face up to what we do with the Law Lords. Are we to have a separate supreme court or is it to continue as part of the second Chamber?

All those issues should be addressed by the Joint Committee, which I hope will be appointed very soon. If it is a broadly based Committee—we know nothing, as there have been no discussions on its size, composition or terms of reference—it must be able to address all those issues within a timetable that is not too constraining, and that enables it to report back to both Houses before the end of this Parliament. Otherwise, the promises that have been given are meaningless. I hope that when the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office winds up the debate, he will give us a clear indication of the timetable.

The word "legitimacy" has been tossed around a lot. I hope that no one in the Chamber would suggest that our present system is not legitimate. Throughout the world, the Westminster system of democracy has been and is admired, and we should be very conscious of that. Up until now, our system has included an unelected second Chamber. Whether we change it is for this House and the other place to decide—principally this House. Do not let us connive at undermining our own legitimacy in the process.

However fast we move towards stage 2—a degree of impatience has been expressed on both sides of the House—what we have at the moment as our second Chamber must be regarded and recognised as such, and we in this place should do all that we can to ensure that it works effectively. We should not snipe at that Chamber in a rather derogatory way, if it asks us—as it has every right and indeed a constitutional duty to do—to think again.

There is much work ahead. I hope that we shall be able to get down to it soon. Although some disparate views have been expressed, I hope that the debate was sufficiently encouraging to the Minister for him to announce the setting up of a Committee in the near future.

9.45 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): Let me begin where the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) left off. He referred to the impatience for change. There has also been impatience for this debate; hon. Members have pressed for it. The date was changed once for the convenience of hon. Members. However, the debate was worth waiting for; it was lively at some times and thoughtful at others. It is fair to say that there is unanimity neither between parties nor within them.

On occasions such as this, it is customary to praise the royal commission. We were told that the royal commission had been set such a tight timetable that it would never deliver. However, it has done so and we have had the opportunity to discuss its report this evening.

The welcome for the report has been slightly dismissive at times. The report was described variously as "ridiculous", "extraordinary", "bizarre", "deeply disappointing" and "a dog's breakfast"—and that was only from those Members who had the opportunity to speak. I am very conscious that at least two hon. Members sat through the debate and were unable to make speeches—my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) and the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson). However, they both made their views known in sedentary and sometimes active interventions.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), who was a member of the commission, gave us some insight into its work. He described how individual members of the commission had changed their views and how, in the end, the report was unanimous and consensual.

It is important to realise that hon. Members, too, have changed their views. There have been substantial changes in the views held by Opposition Members. I remember both the Conservative manifesto, which stated that there would be no radical change for the upper House, and the comments of some hon. Members who supported the hereditary principle. There were dim and distant echoes of that this evening from the hon. Members for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) and for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth)—

Hon. Members: Just dim.

Mr. Nicholls: I urge the hon. Gentleman to ignore the ribaldry behind him and to say that, whatever else he thought about my contribution, it was neither dim nor distant.

Mr. Tipping: That shows that there is a long way to go before we reach consensus. However, as my right hon.

[Mr. Tipping]

Friend the President of the Council pointed out in her opening remarks, the important point is that we should seek consensus on the matter.

The comments made during the debate make it clear that we shall not achieve consensus on all the issues. The highlight of the debate has been the relatively narrow focus on the composition of the upper House—from the elected element called for by some Opposition Members to the wholly appointed House advocated by others.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: The hon. Gentleman talks about consensus. I am deeply suspicious about this call for consensus before anything more can be done. I remain suspicious that the Government intend to do absolutely nothing further about reforming the House of Lords. Surely, having come this far, they are committed to turning the Chamber into one that is defensible. They should state their view and defend it. Why can we not have the Joint Committee—the next step? Must we wait until a consensus emerges before we can take that next obvious step—on which we are all agreed—of setting up a Joint Committee to discuss the proposals?

Mr. Tipping: I would never call the right hon. and learned Gentleman a consensual politician. His attitude on Europe does not command consensus among Conservative Members. However, he will have to wait, because I am determined to spell out the way forward at the end of my speech. Let me remind the right hon. and learned Gentleman that significant important changes have been made. After a century of dithering, we have first-stage reform. We set up a royal commission; it reported on time; the House has had an opportunity to discuss its report; and we have set up an interim appointments commission. Change is occurring and it has been driven through by this Government and Labour Members.

Mr. Tyrie: The Minister promised that he would tell us the way forward at the end of his speech. Could he not tell us now?

Mr. Tipping: Let me do that, because there may be an element of consensus between us. I thank the hon. Gentleman for the opportunity to see today the pamphlet that he has published. I would like him to sign it, because there are elements in it with which I agree and that would work across the House. The hon. Gentleman asked me the way forward, so I shall spell out where we have come from and where we are going. We said that we would reform the House of Lords in a two-stage process—as the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) said, "So far, so good." The agreement was that reform would be carried out in two stages. We have got rid of the hereditary element, we have set up the royal commission and an independent appointments commission and we are going to go further.

The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) asked specifically about the Joint Committee. In a sense, the royal commission has done much of the work of the Joint Committee. The right hon. Gentleman asked for a public debate, but what was the process of the royal commission if it did not engender a public debate? It went out and sought evidence. The fact that the debate did not take off may mean that it is not the top delivery issue for some people—that it may not be the most significant issue for people on the doorsteps of Hampshire and Nottinghamshire. However, we have had that debate.

The right hon. Gentleman said that he wanted the debate now, but then qualified that by saying that he wanted the Joint Committee soon. I am not breaking any confidence when I say to the House that he has had at least one opportunity for an informal discussion on the way forward. His colleagues in the other place have also had the opportunity to talk about the way forward. The right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross said that he was willing for discussion and that he would meet us any time, anywhere and any place. "Barkis is willin'," he seemed to say. We will set up the Joint Committee soon.

We have had the debate tonight and we have listened to it. It would have been nonsensical to have a royal commission report and not to have given the House the opportunity to debate it. We have heard the debate tonight. I say to the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire that we shall approach him over the next few weeks about the Joint Committee. The hon. Member for South Staffordshire made important points about what it should consider, and we shall talk to him about it. We shall try to reach a consensus about the size of the Committee, its timetable and its terms of reference. One of the important points that the hon. Gentleman made was that the Joint Committee would have implications for this House, too.

We must consider carefully how the Wakeham report will work in practice to involve people from the rough trade, as it was called, in the discussions. We are therefore going to have discussions with hon. Members about the way forward with the Joint Committee.

Sir Patrick Cormack: The hon. Gentleman could never be accused of being from the rough trade. Does "soon" means before the summer recess or after it?

Mr. Tipping: We shall have discussions with hon. Members over the summer. We shall work hard to set up the Joint Committee which will do the kind of things that the right hon. Gentleman has asked that it should do.

Mr. Maclennan: In the Labour party manifesto, the Minister spoke of the matter as part of a process to make the House of Lords more democratic. Is he prepared to say tonight that the Government firmly intend to make the House of Lords more democratic?

Mr. Tipping: Being democratic does not necessarily mean having elections. Let me say directly to the right hon. Gentleman that this Chamber is the important place for democracy, as it is elected by the people and it is from it that the Government are elected. This Chamber is the primary Chamber for democracy.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the role of the second Chamber. Tonight, there has been consensus that that role is complementary. The second Chamber is not a clone of this Chamber, but adds value to it. There seems to be consensus on a whole range of issues. Clearly, there are differences, but there is consensus on a possible way forward for the second Chamber. The right hon.

Gentleman and his party advocate a large elected element in the upper Chamber. Indeed, I believe that they used to advocate a totally elected upper Chamber. However, having read the report of the debate in the other place, that is clearly not the position of some of the right hon. Gentleman's senior colleagues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright) gave a balanced speech in which he said that we should not waste this opportunity for real change. We are going to take that opportunity. Members on both sides of the House who say that we are not going to move forward will be bitterly disappointed. They said the same about stage 1, on which we delivered. We shall deliver on stage 2 as well.

The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire did not advocate a totally elected Chamber, but the mixed model recommended by my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase. My hon. Friend talked about parity of numbers. I listened carefully to the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire, and shall examine *Hansard* carefully tomorrow. The right hon. Gentleman seemed to be advocating a mixed approach, which included an elected element of more than 197 Members in the upper House, which is more than is proposed in option C in the report. However, he left the way open for the remaining Members of the Chamber to be appointed by an independent statutory appointments commission.

Although some Members said that we would not, we have set up an interim appointments commission, which is meeting. We are determined to set up a statutory appointments commission that is truly independent and takes the power of appointment from the Prime Minister and gives it to a body that is something akin to the proposed electoral commission. That notion of an appointments commission is on a par with that of the National Audit Office and the Comptroller and Auditor General, which is above suspicion.

In conclusion, there has been widespread agreement, although there has been some disagreement. We are determined to build on the Wakeham report, find consensus and deliver on stage 2.

It being Ten o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Cruickshank Report

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

10 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I am delighted to introduce an Adjournment debate on a subject—the future of the banking industry and, in particular, the Government's response to the substantial tome produced by the regulator, Mr. Cruickshank—that, in its own way, is as important as that which we have just discussed.

There are two reasons to seek an Adjournment debate: one—the most common—is that Members are interested in matters affecting their constituencies and the other is to initiate a debate on an extended parliamentary question of the sort that causes irritation to the Chair if posed at Question Time. Essentially, I want to ask one question: what is the Government's response to the Cruickshank report and what do they propose to do?

I felt moved to initiate the debate for two reasons. The first is that the report has been published for some time—about 90 days, I think. The Minister gave a holding reply on 30 March and the Chancellor revealed in the Budget statement his important decision to consider the small business aspects of the Cruickshank report, but I understand that the basic findings have not yet been the subject of a Government announcement of any sort. The second is that, unusually, the report's author—a Government appointee—has taken the step of airing his frustration in public.

In an article in the *Financial Times* some weeks ago, Mr. Cruickshank remarked:

> References to legislation look distinctly watered down . . .

He appeared before the Treasury Committee a few weeks later in a slightly more cheerful mood and suggested that he had had it from what he called the horse's mouth that the Government would proceed early to primary legislation. Unless I have missed something, the House has not been told that we are proceeding early to primary legislation. It would be useful to have clarification of what he meant and, indeed, of what the Government intend.

The report contains a lot of interesting technical detail, but it might be useful to summarise what, from a policy standpoint, are the central issues and what we must understand to understand where the Government are coming from. The banking industry is enormously important and the report's striking opening line tells us that the profits of the big three banks are each separately larger than the combined profits of all the big supermarkets. This is a big industry that makes a great deal of money and has an enormous impact on the efficiency of the economy as a whole. That was the report's starting point.

Out of that powerful analysis, Mr. Cruickshank produced several striking conclusions. First, the retail banking industry is unlike any other. It is a network, and one competing firm depends on its competitors to handle its products efficiently. In other words, the whole is a lot greater than the parts. The banking industry has a lot in common with the Post Office, the gas pipeline network and the electricity grid. Unlike retail stores, those are not typical industries and a special system in which to manage them is needed.

[Dr. Vincent Cable]

A traditional way to manage such industries is to rely on public ownership, which is still used for the Post Office, but that has never been used for the banks. The alternative is private ownership with a regulator. That model has been adopted for telecommunications—there are some similarities here—and for the gas pipeline and the electricity grid, but this country does not have such a system of regulation for banking. In a way, that is the crux of what Cruickshank says.

The second point, which derives from the first, is that there is no effective competition in banking. There is a lot of competition and there are lots of banks—indeed, a lot of internet banks are coming into the industry and they compete in a sense—but competition is not fully effective. The reason it is not fully effective is that although an internet bank, for example, can handle some transactions immediately, it still relies on the banking network to take the usual three or four days to clear transfers of money. In that sense, there is a limit on how much competition it is possible to have in the banking sector.

Because competition is not effective, what Cruickshank, in his most powerful and telling conclusion, deliberately calls "excess profits" are made. When challenged by the Treasury Committee to define what he meant by that phrase, he had a robust answer. He used, not a casual, flippant phrase, but a phrase with real meaning which came from his having carried out a clear analysis of the comparison between the performance of banks and their returns to shareholders and those of other companies quoted on the stock exchange. Over a 10-year period—a long period—the banks earned substantially higher returns than the stock market as a whole. I believe that the relative figures are 26 per cent. internal rate of return compared with 21 per cent.; there is certainly a substantial difference.

The banks' answers are several. First, they say that profits go up and down, and that they are cyclical—but Cruickshank's report shows that they are not cyclical; 10 years would be an extremely long cycle. Secondly, the banks say that, although they are making money, there is lots of competition. I have already answered that point: competition is constrained by the existence of a network.

The most crucial element in the banks' argument is that banking is just another business: the banks are doing their job and are responsible to their shareholders; if they earn a high rate of return, they are clearly exceptionally good at business. That being so, they ask why they are being criticised. The answer is that a bank is not just another business: not only is banking a network, but it has what Cruickshank describes as the old regulatory contract, whereby the banks enjoy several privileges that other companies do not have, the most powerful of which is the lender of last resort facility.

Unlike the Bank of Credit and Commerce International and many other companies, Barclays bank will never go bankrupt. It might not be written down formally, but the Minister knows and we all know that the Government would rescue Barclays—that is what the lender of last resort facility means. The shareholders will never be bankrupted because the profitability of the institution is underpinned by that guarantee. For that reason, it is not right to say that banking is a normal business that, because it happens to be well run, earns exceptionally high profits.

Banks should not be earning exceptionally high profits. That, Cruickshank's most powerful conclusion, is not derived from an ideological position—I suspect that Mr. Cruickshank is a great believer in free markets and approaches the issues from that end of the ideological spectrum. None the less, his conclusion on that point is definite and precise.

A third conclusion of Cruickshank relates to a more specific distortion—abuse, if you like—of the system, which is the payments system and the problem of automatic teller machines. The report contains an excellent analysis of the costs of ATM transactions. Cruickshank and banks such as Nationwide and the Co-operative bank which have opened their books have shown that the cost of an ATM transaction is about 32p or 35p; at the margin, that cost is even less and it is falling over time, yet, over the past year, leading players in the Link system have attempted to charge customers far more.

Events have moved on since Cruickshank published his report. Under pressure from public opinion, the banks have backed down to some extent. Customers are no longer faced with the alarming possibility of being charged £2.50 for a £10 transaction; the banks are talking about imposing only one charge, not two; and mainstream banks are saying that the charge would be about 50p, rather than £1. In that sense, the problem is receding, but an issue of principle remains, which is that there is absolutely no reason why banks should levy a charge at all. Their costs are covered through settlement transactions and derived through the pooling of costs. They do not need to charge the customers directly. The charging of customers entrenches the monopoly position of the biggest banks.

I hope that by 1 January next year, the position adopted by the Nationwide building society and the Co-operative bank will be copied by the rest, but if it is not, and if the banks are still insisting on making charges that are substantially in excess of their costs, it is essential that the Government—it is a matter for the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, rather than for the Treasury—use the existing powers against what is essentially cartel behaviour. The Office of Fair Trading is already pointing to two sections of the Competition Act 1998 that could be used.

The final point in the analysis, before I deal with the conclusions, is that the Cruickshank report demonstrates how business consumers and personal consumers are disadvantaged by the way in which the banking system operates. In the case of business consumers, it is clear. Very high rates of return have been earned by a small bank. Four banks have an 80 per cent. market share for small business. The Government were right to move quickly to initiate a Competition Commission inquiry into that aspect of banking. I am pleased that that was done.

There are substantial implications for bank consumers generally. The argument is complex, but important. It is often pointed out that British banking is quite efficient; the Cruickshank report shows that. Cost are relatively low, and charges are not high by international standards. However, the consumer suffers in several respects from the operation of the network system and the monopoly power inherent in it.

For example, one of the consequences shown up particularly effectively by the Treasury Committee through its questioning was the slow rate at which

cheques are cleared. The three or four day clearance rate is very slow by international standards. It is not simply a matter of frustration on the part of consumers; there are hidden costs. If one is running an overdraft and one cannot clear it for several days, banks can earn substantial interest income through their overdraft charges. That is a major source of their profits, and it is maintained by the fact that the clearance system is inefficient and slow. The banks acknowledge it to be slow.

Similarly, the fact that the banks have such a grip on the market helps them through the linkage between current accounts and all sorts of other products. We know that there is a great deal of linkage, quite apart from the fact that British bank consumers seem to find it extraordinarily difficult to change banks. The statistic emerged a few weeks ago that people in this country were more reluctant to change their banks than to change their wives or husbands. People are fixed in their banking habits, which entrenches the power of the established market leaders.

In the remaining few minutes, I shall deal with the report's conclusions and ask the Minister how the Government intend to deal with them. The first and most important conclusion, to which we have not yet had a clear response, is that precisely because of the way in which the banking industry is structured—the network and the monopoly in it—there must be a regulator. Cruickshank calls it Paycom.

Various alternative ideas have been proposed. The British Bankers Association suggested that in order to reduce the number of regulators, the Bank of England should perform that task, but that is probably a return to the past. There is the question of how Paycom would fit in with the Financial Services Authority, which I know has been causing the Minister sleepless nights for the past year.

None the less, there is a clear recommendation that the network should be regulated. The Government's response to the question of who will regulate it will be the most important outcome of the debate. Cruickshank believes that the Government are committed to early primary legislation on the matter. I should be grateful to have that confirmed.

Secondly, on automatic teller machines, I hope that the Government will confirm that they are willing to use Competition Act authority. The Office of Fair Trading has pointed out clauses under which the banks can be referred, and I hope that they will be referred, to make it clear that such behaviour will not be tolerated.

Thirdly, one of Cruickshank's key recommendations was the clarification of the role of the various regulatory authorities. An issue in which the Minister has been heavily involved is defining the relationship of the FSA to banks. That only partly overlaps with the Cruickshank mandate, but it would be helpful to know the Minister's view of that, now that legislation has been enacted.

A more important issue is the role of the competition authorities in bank mergers. As I understand its conclusions, the Cruickshank report states that all prospective bank mergers should be stopped by referral to the Competition Commission. I may have misunderstood that conclusion, but that appears to be its substance. At least one merger is currently going through. It would be useful to know how the Government intend to deal with it. Surely new mergers between the big players can be stopped until a proper system of regulation is introduced.

A little anomaly exists. The hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) has been involved in financial legislation for many years, and will know about it. The House of Commons has a slightly odd feature; it has to approve bank mergers. Some of us have been involved in fun and games and have tried to act as a brake on them. It would be useful to ascertain the Government's view of the use of that residual power of the House of Commons in the framework that we are considering.

My final point refers to the most striking headline of the Cruickshank report—the £3 billion to £5 billion excess profits. What will happen to them before the new regulatory system is in place? Do we accept them as part of nature, or should the Government do something about them? There are a couple of options, which are not in the Cruickshank report, that the Government should explore.

One option is to say to the banks, which are not in a competitive market in the normal sense, "You're running excess profits as a result of an abnormal position in the market. We think that you have social obligations to maintain a proper branch network, and to bring advantage to disadvantaged consumers. That's part of package and goes with continuing to enjoy regulatory privilege."

Another option is for the Government to decide that they do not want to confuse the banks' objectives with social obligations, but that for a year or two, until the new regulatory system is in place, it would be appropriate to have a levy, and to subtract some of the value for the benefit of the community at large. That is a radical conclusion, which is not in the report. However, it tackles a question that arises from the report: what do the Government do about so much excess profit?

10.17 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on securing the debate. I welcome the opportunity to set out the considerable progress that the Government have made in implementing the Cruickshank report on competition in United Kingdom banking. I also welcome the other two hon. Members who are present—my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) and the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb). We do not always have others with us in Adjournment debates, and I am pleased that this debate has attracted a wider audience.

The Government welcome the Cruickshank report and its conclusions. We are committed to acting on the recommendations to improve competition in the industry and services to consumers. The report contains numerous recommendations—55 in total. The Government have made several announcements of their implementation of the most important ones. For example, on the day of the report's publication, we announced that we would refer the supply of banking services to small businesses to the Competition Commission. On the following day, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced in the Budget that the Government would legislate to open access to the payment systems, and that the Financial Services Authority had been asked to report to him in three months on the way in which it intends to respond to the recommendations. Since then, we have actively followed up those and other recommendations. We hope to publish a formal response to the report shortly. The hon. Member for Twickenham was keen to know the timetable for that.

[Miss Melanie Johnson]

It may be helpful if I set out in a little more detail the Government's progress on dealing with the various recommendations in the report, and outline the next steps forward.

On money transmission, we have announced that we will legislate to open access to payment systems and to oversee access charges. The Cruickshank report highlighted several examples of consumers, retailers and businesses failing to get a good deal from their banks. The Government are determined to tackle those competition concerns.

In some parts of the industry, the mere publication of the report has produced a welcome change in behaviour. The hon. Member for Twickenham attributed that change to consumer pressure, but I believe that it is due to a mixture of public and Government pressure.

For example, Link has decided to open up its automatic teller machine network to non-bank ATM providers. Such providers are interested in providing not just ATMs in more diverse locations, but innovative services beyond merely handing out cash. That is a welcome development. As for the important issue of charging for ATM withdrawals, Link has banned double charging—the charging of both a surcharge by the ATM owner and a so-called disloyalty fee by the consumer's own bank. It has also reformed its wholesale charging structures.

Moreover, we are seeing the development of competition in regard to cash machine charges. Some banks have already announced that they will impose no direct charges, while others have announced moves undercutting the proposed charges of their competitors. The Government welcome such competition, believing that it is the key to giving consumers effective choice and innovative services at a fair price.

Other parts of the industry have been slower to respond to the report. The Government have challenged the banks to improve transparency of charging, to base charges on economic costs, and to open up money transmission systems. We hope that they will make progress on their own, but in the meantime, the Government have had discussions with the Office of Fair Trading about what measures can be taken under existing legislation. The OFT is bound to investigate the Link and MasterCard schemes in the United Kingdom following formal notifications under the provisions of the Competition Act; it is also considering what action, if any, it may take in relation to the other payment schemes. Authorities elsewhere in the world are examining the issues in their own jurisdictions. For example, the United States Department of Justice began a court case against MasterCard and Visa last week, and similar issues are being examined by the European Commission.

As for United Kingdom legislation, my officials have already started work on firming up the Government's proposals. More than 40 organisations have been asked for their views on the report's recommendations to establish a licensing regime. Discussions have taken place with a wide range of market players, and more than 15 meetings have been held or are due to be held. That does not include separate discussions with the Bank of England, the Department of Trade and Industry, the Financial Services Authority and the OFT.

The Government recognise the complexity of the issues involved in legislating—there is a great deal of detail to be worked through—and are committed to widespread consultation on the details. The objective is to create a regulatory framework to foster competition which is sufficiently robust to tackle the competition concerns, but not so onerous that it stifles innovation or discourages companies from entering the market to provide payment services.

Commenting on the response to the final report, the hon. Gentleman suggested that the Government might have been seen as backtracking on their commitment to legislate. I assure him that that is not the case. As the hon. Gentleman said, in evidence on his report to the Select Committee on the Treasury, Don Cruickshank said that he was absolutely clear that the Chancellor had made it plain that he would legislate, and that consultation with the banks had already begun.

Let me deal with the recommendations affecting consumers and retail markets. The Government welcome all attempts to improve transparency, to increase the provision of information, and to ensure that consumers have effective avenues for redress. We strongly support the view expressed in the Cruickshank report that, if we are to promote competition, it is essential to educate consumers. Many of the issues involved are the FSA's responsibility, and it has been asked to report on how it intends to respond to the recommendations by the end of this month. We therefore look forward to receiving its response very shortly, and it is intended that that response be published alongside that of the Government.

The report also addressed the important issues of financial exclusion and the provision of basic bank accounts. In his Budget speech, the Chancellor challenged the banks and the Post Office to work together to offer basic banking services for all. Similarly, in April I issued a challenge to all the major banks to have basic accounts up and running by October. In a modern economy in which opportunity is open to all, it is not good enough if banks cannot respond effectively and meet that simple challenge.

I am glad to say that the signs are encouraging. At a recent hearing of the Treasury Committee, the chief executives of three of the high street banks said that they either already had such accounts in operation, or they would be introducing them later this year. Similarly, I understand that the Post Office is working up proposals in that area. We shall be interested to see those in due course.

In relation to small businesses, the report found a concentrated market in which a few players were earning supernormal profits. As I mentioned, those issues have been referred to the Competition Commission for investigation. It has been given 15 months to report on whether a monopoly exists and, if so, whether it operates against the public interest. The investigation is well under way. I understand, for example, that the former members of the banking review team, including Don Cruickshank, have given formal evidence to the inquiry. The Government look forward to receiving the commission's report on that important issue later next year.

The Cruickshank report looked not just at the supply of banking services to small businesses, but at the provision of equity. It contained a number of recommendations on debt

finance and venture capital, many of which were addressed in the Budget. The report also recommended that the Government should make further moves towards a low, simple, capital gains tax regime. In the Budget, we announced that we were cutting capital gains tax to encourage entrepreneurial investment, to reward risk-taking and to promote wider share ownership among employees.

The report contained a number of recommendations about increasing transparency in banking supervision, getting the institutional incentives right, delivering effective competition scrutiny and eliminating regulatory distortions. I know from his remarks that those issues are of considerable interest to the hon. Gentleman.

The Government have addressed many of those issues through the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, which received Royal Assent last week. That is key legislation, which the Cruickshank report acknowledges has brought greater clarity to financial services by introducing a single regulator: the Financial Services Authority. The Act contains specific provisions on promoting consumer understanding and ensuring that the authority takes proper account of competition issues. The banking review was encouraged by the FSA's work to ensure a consistent risk-based approach across different regulated firms. As with the consumer recommendations, the Government hope to receive the FSA's response on the issues raised in the report shortly.

The hon. Gentleman raised a question about bank mergers. Last year, the Department of Trade and Industry issued a consultation paper. It is looking at the issue, particularly the test that should be used in assessing whether a merger should go ahead. That matter is receiving further attention by the Department of Trade and Industry.

On the next steps, the Government have already made considerable progress in implementing the Cruickshank report's recommendations. The report is very detailed; it runs to 334 pages, with seven chapters and nine detailed annexes. The issues are complex. It is important that the Government give all the recommendations proper consideration. Much work has been going on beneath the surface as officials and affected parties get to grips with all those issues.

In line with the recommendations in the report itself, the Government are keen to ensure that their proposals meet the principles of proportionality, non-discrimination, transparency, flexibility and accountability. We hope to make further announcements shortly. I hope that that reassures the hon. Gentleman that the Government are making every effort to respond to the competition problems identified in the Cruickshank report, and that progress is already being made on a number of issues identified in the report.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 20 June 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

Order for Third Reading read.

To be read the Third time on Tuesday 27 June.

GREENHAM AND CROOKHAM COMMONS BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Tuesday 27 June.

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Central Southern Africa

1. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield): When he next plans to meet leaders of central southern African countries; and if he will make a statement. [125204]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is in Feira attending an important meeting of the European Council and has asked for his apologies to be given to the House.

Tonight, I will be flying to South Africa to attend a meeting of the World Economic Forum in Durban, where I expect to meet leaders from other central and southern African countries. I visited Zambia in May. I will visit Mauritius on the way home and Angola in early July.

Mr. Winterton: I fully accept the reason why the Foreign Secretary is not able to be here and am delighted to learn that the Minister of State is flying to South Africa later today. What discussions has he had with states in central southern Africa about the desperate situation in Zimbabwe and about the presidential elections in particular, which are imminent? What views have the central southern African states put forward? Does he agree that it is essential that the Opposition party in Zimbabwe, the Movement for Democratic Change, has an opportunity for free and fair elections?

Does the Minister further agree that the only way in which that wonderful country, which has such tremendous potential, can make progress is if all the peoples who comprise the population of Zimbabwe—black, white and others—can work together to ensure a prosperous future for the country? People are desperately concerned about the elections. Can we have an assurance that they will be free and fair?

Mr. Hain: I agree with all the hon. Gentleman's points and acknowledge his long-standing interest in the region. We have had detailed discussions with all the African leaders, who share our concerns about the desperate situation in Zimbabwe.

The whole world has been appalled by the violence and terror unleashed by the Government of Zimbabwe. Britain has repeatedly urged that the people of Zimbabwe have the right to make their choice freely and fairly, but we will not pre-empt the verdict of international observers. Indeed, the leader of the Opposition there has said that to do so would be irresponsible. Only President Mugabe can end the intimidation by instructing those responsible for it. He owes it to his country to ensure that the election results reflect the wishes of the people of Zimbabwe.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Although clearly we cannot pre-determine what the election monitors will be able to say about the elections in Zimbabwe, is my hon. Friend satisfied that sufficient observers have been allowed to go to Zimbabwe to look at the parliamentary elections this weekend, and that a full report will be able to be made available in the House and throughout the country as soon as those elections have been held?

Mr. Hain: My hon. Friend raises an important point, which is crucial to the fairness and freeness of the elections—the presence of observers from foreign countries. There are now more than 300; we would have liked more. Obstructions are still being put in their way. It is still not clear whether the 20,000-plus internal monitors will be able to get access to the polling stations, to inspect the registers and to carry out their duties. All those matters will need to be followed carefully and closely; indeed, we are doing that.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Does the Minister agree that we should not be surprised about allegations of obstruction and intimidation in relation to the monitors? Indeed, the surprise would be if there were no such allegations in the light of the events of the past few months.

Is it not the case that those of us who are concerned about the future of Zimbabwe have to put our trust in the courage and determination of the people of that country to choose their own Government? Finally, if ZANU-PF were to win the election, how could Zimbabwe remain a member of the Commonwealth? What price the Harare declaration if the Government in Harare simply ignore it?

Mr. Hain: The right hon. and learned Gentleman makes an important case. I agree with much, if not all, of it. It is vital, first, that the people of Zimbabwe are able to determine their own destiny in choosing whichever party they vote for; and, secondly, that the policies adopted after the elections by whatever Government take

office take the country forward, rather than continue to send it down the drain, as unfortunately has been happening in recent times.

Mr. Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central): In the light of the previous question, does my hon. Friend agree that, if President Mugabe, in defiance of democracy, continues to allow his supporters to act in a way that subverts the democratic process and, at the end of the elections, ignores the results given by a people who will speak for themselves—the outcome is not for us to determine—the Commonwealth will have to send a strong signal throughout the Commonwealth and, in particular, to democrats in Zimbabwe?

Mr. Hain: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say, as the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) mentioned, that the Commonwealth has taken a close interest in Zimbabwe's future. The Harare declaration is very clear on all those matters. The Commonwealth ministerial action group, having considered the crisis in Zimbabwe, will no doubt have to consider what happens after the elections. We await the outcome of the elections to determine what the Commonwealth should or should not do.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): Is it not already transparently clear that the elections cannot be free and fair, and that the only way in which ZANU can win them is through the wholesale rigging, gerrymandering and intimidation that we have already seen? The only light in this dark period of that young country's life has been the raw bravery and undimmed determination of those Zimbabweans, both in the MDC and more widely, who simply refuse to see their country stolen from them.

Is not the overwhelming need now for the international community to make it clear that if Mr. Mugabe insists in clinging to a position that he has now defiled, he will become an international pariah, unwelcome to travel abroad; his regime, as the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) said, suspended from the Commonwealth; aid to his regime stopped; and his own stolen overseas assets seized? Would not anything less be a betrayal of those very brave people who are fighting for their country?

Mr. Hain: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that the situation in recent months has been extremely serious, and I acknowledge the fact that, some months ago, he visited the country to see that for himself. It is very important that, with the elections only days away, we choose our words very carefully, and that, as he said, the people of Zimbabwe have the courage and determination to go to polling stations and choose whom they want to vote for, freely and fairly. We support them in their right to choose their own Government without intimidation, without violence and without the terror and all the other things that have occurred in the past few months and made the situation so desperate for that country.

Sri Lanka

2. **Mr. David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire): If he will make a statement on the conflict in Sri Lanka. [125205]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): We are deeply concerned about the tragic situation in Sri Lanka, particularly the events in the Jaffna peninsula, and the danger to the civilian population. We call upon the Sri Lankan Government and the LTTE to cease hostilities and begin negotiations immediately. We fully support Norway's efforts to facilitate peace talks.

Mr. Taylor: But, as a power with some historic responsibility and influence in that region, are we doing enough? Tens of thousands of Tamils and Sinhalese have been slaughtered with European weapons. Does the Minister agree that the controls on the munitions merchants who are dealing death in Sri Lanka are woefully weak? Should there not be an international arms embargo to prevent that tragic conflict turning into a bloodbath? Is that not an ethical foreign policy?

Mr. Hain: I understand the point that my hon. Friend is making. The bloodshed and violence are appalling, and they are fuelled by the arms coming into the country. Of course, Sri Lanka has an elected Government who have a right to defend themselves. We shall review our own policy on arms exports, as we are doing, case by case, to determine whether it complies with our very clear criteria that those exports should not be used for either international oppression or external aggression.

The real priority, however, is to begin negotiations between the Government and the opposition LTTE. We are working tirelessly—with the Norwegians, with the Indians and with others—to achieve that, and we shall continue to do so.

Finally, Madam Speaker, may I acknowledge your own close interest in the island, which is much appreciated by the people of Sri Lanka?

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): What assessment has the Minister of State made of the alleged link between the International Federation of Tamils, in the United Kingdom, and the so-called Liberation Tigers, in Sri Lanka?

Mr. Hain: We are aware of the activities of various representatives of the rebels in Sri Lanka, and of course we take a close interest in those activities to ensure that they conform with British law. We shall continue to monitor the situation.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): As the Minister has already mentioned, Norway and the United States are playing a role in trying to facilitate talks between the two sides in the conflict. What more can the Government do to end 17 years of civil war in Sri Lanka, which is estimated to have resulted in more than 70,000 deaths, and help to ensure that that country is now on the road to peace?

Mr. Hain: It is one of the unresolved regional conflicts that must now have the world's immediate attention to achieve the engagement necessary to promote negotiations and, ultimately, a lasting peace. My view is that the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka must be respected, but so must the rights of the Tamil community. Some form of autonomy, in the form of devolved government and perhaps with greater powers than have

been proposed by the President and her Government so far, may be the way forward. Meaningful negotiations should be instituted immediately following a cessation of hostilities to achieve that objective.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Does the Minister agree that the vast majority of Tamils live with the Sinhalese in the south of the country, and the solution that he has just suggested is therefore rather strange? Does he agree that one cannot be evenhanded in a situation in which the Government of Sri Lanka have constantly offered deals to people in the north and called ceasefires, only to have them broken by suicide bombings? It is difficult for the British simply to say, "Let's be evenhanded between the two sides."

Mr. Hain: It is not a question of being evenhanded. The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point about the elected Government in Sri Lanka, and we respect them and have an excellent relationship with them. However, with many such problems, as we have seen on our doorstep in Northern Ireland, in the end one needs to pursue negotiations and achieve compromises to promote an ultimate peace. It is not for Britain to specify what that peace settlement would look like, nor to specify any form of devolution or autonomy that might result, and I was not doing so.

Middle East Peace Process

3. **Mr. Jim Cunningham** (Coventry, South): What recent discussions he has had with the Government of Syria on the middle east peace process. [125206]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed the peace process with Dr. Bashar al-Assad in the margins of President Assad's funeral in Damascus last week. I myself discussed it with the Syrian Government during a visit to Damascus last month, and remain hopeful about the prospects for peace.

Mr. Cunningham: Given that Israel has now withdrawn from Lebanon, does my hon. Friend agree that if the Syrians could be persuaded to withdraw wholly or partially from the area it would achieve two things? First, it would achieve the unity of Lebanon and, secondly, it would give a shot in the arm to the peace process in the middle east.

Mr. Hain: My hon. Friend makes a strong case and there should, of course, be no foreign armies in any country. That was the problem with the Israeli occupation over so many years. Nevertheless, I remain optimistic as a result of my discussions with Dr. Bashar al-Assad and with the Foreign Minister in Damascus last month. If negotiations can be resumed, there is a real prospect of a peace settlement with Israel that would no doubt include the presence of Syrian troops in Lebanon. The major priority is to get the negotiations over the Golan going as soon as possible.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Would not one contribution towards the building of trust between Syria and Israel be for the new Syrian regime to clear up the mystery of its long-term sheltering of the architect of the holocaust in wartime France, Aloïs Brunner, in Damascus? Will the Government make representations to the Syrian regime that would indicate to it that it cannot expect to be taken seriously in the search for peace as long as a war criminal of that magnitude is sheltered in Damascus?

Mr. Hain: I shall certainly look into that matter and write to the hon. Gentleman. The Government have a clear record on the issue of the holocaust and that is why we declared a national holocaust day, the first one of which will be next year.

Mr. Ivan Lewis (Bury, South): Now that Israel has left southern Lebanon and we have a new generation of leadership in Syria, will my hon. Friend do everything in his power to make it clear to the Lebanese and Syrian Governments that they should prevent Hezbollah and other terrorist organisations from launching terrorist attacks on the northern towns and cities of Israel?

Mr. Hain: Yes, indeed, and I raised precisely those points with Foreign Minister Shara when I was in Damascus last month. It is also important, now that the UN has declared the international boundary a clear boundary and has said that Israel has withdrawn back across that border, that everybody respects the peace process and that the Lebanese Government also engage constructively with the United Nations to make sure that that peace settlement sticks as a result of Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon.

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): Given the clearly expressed desire of Bashar al-Assad to bring new technologies to his country, and given the new leadership that is now in place in Syria, can the Minister assure the House that the Government will seek to be at the forefront of any help in liberalising Syria's currently command-focused economy?

Mr. Hain: Yes. This is proving to be a consensual Question Time so far, although I do not hold out too much hope for the remainder of it. I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Indeed, my discussions with Dr. Bashar al-Assad revealed a Syrian leader—although his father was still alive and still President then—with a lot of vision and a modern outlook. He knows Britain well and he knows the global culture well. He is well placed to lead Syria forward, not just in respect of information technology and deregulation and liberalisation of the economy, but, indeed, the modernisation of the economy that is so desperately needed, and to take an active part in the peace process and allow Syria to come into the international family of nations as a respected partner, rather than display a hostility to that international family, as it has in the past.

EU Enlargement

4. **Mr. David Crausby** (Bolton, North-East): What recent discussions he has had with his opposite numbers in EU member states and applicant countries concerning the enlargement of the European Union; and if he will make a statement. [125207]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed enlargement of the EU with his opposite numbers from the EU member states at the Feira European Council yesterday and today. They agreed that enlargement is essential if we are to spread peace, stability and shared values throughout the European Union. Britain is a strong advocate of a swift and successful enlargement of the EU. Both I and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary also frequently discuss enlargement with our counterparts from applicant countries. Since taking up my appointment, I have met most of the Foreign Ministers and chief negotiators from the applicant countries.

Mr. Crausby: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Specifically, has Turkey made any real progress towards the Copenhagen political criteria? How realistic are the prospects of Turkey ever becoming a full member of the European Union?

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Not very good, after last night.

Mr. Vaz: As my hon. Friend will know, we are keen to have Turkey in the European Union, no matter what its football team does. We feel it is important, as we confirmed at Helsinki, that it should be a member of the European Union, but, of course, the process of membership is, as my hon. Friend has suggested, very tough. Turkey will have to take part in the various accession agreements, prepare itself, meet the Copenhagen criteria and go through all the necessary negotiations and discussions that will be expected. I shall not put a date on Turkey's membership of the European Union. That is a matter for Turkey and the negotiations that are going on at this very moment.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): Does the Minister agree that there is absolutely no need to give Brussels new powers of taxation as a prelude to enlargement? Will he take this opportunity to say that Her Majesty's Government would regard any continuing attempt by the Commission and other member states to include these very wide-ranging powers that they are seeking in the treaty as an obstacle to enlargement and a cause of delay? Will he rule out the need for any new powers of taxation for Brussels in the new treaty? Does he understand that it is no use the Prime Minister returning to the House saying that he has a settlement on the withholding tax if he grants Brussels more powers in the treaty of Nice which would allow it to introduce it by the back door?

Mr. Vaz: What a sad person the right hon. Gentleman is! I am sure that he would like to join me in congratulating my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the work that he has done at Feira. He will know that the tax package has now been agreed. Six months ago, the right hon. Gentleman and other Opposition Members criticised the Government for being isolated on the withholding tax. I am pleased to tell the House that agreement has now been reached because of the negotiating skills of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. Therefore, the proposal to impose the withholding tax on the City has been defeated. All the other EU countries supported the line taken by my right hon. Friends the Chancellor, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, which is that there should be an exchange of information.

The Government's position on tax and the treaty is clear. We will not give up our veto on tax. We will make it clear that we will act on taxation policies in the way we have always acted—that is, that we will take a hard-headed look at what is in Britain's national interest. Tax remains one of the core issues that we will not give up on.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Has my hon. Friend met any Foreign Minister from anywhere in Europe who believes that it is possible to enlarge the European Union without changes in the decision-making process and in the size of the Commission? If no such view exists, why does he believe that the Leader of the Opposition is calling for a referendum on matters such as the reweighting of votes in favour of larger nations such as Britain, which manifestly is in this country's interests?

Mr. Vaz: Of course, the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Foreign Secretary can only dream about going to European Council meetings, whereas my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Foreign Secretary are there at this moment. They support enlargement because it is in Britain's interests. We will have a single market of 500 million people. I am sorry that the official Opposition's policy is that they would have vetoed the intergovernmental conference and the treaty of Nice. I should have thought that they would have supported enlargement and the entry of Poland, Hungary and the other applicant countries into the European Union.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): With reference to enlargement, do the Minister's contacts, especially those with the Governments of eastern European countries, persuade him that those countries are making enormous efforts to meet the target dates proposed by the European Union? Is the Minister confident that all other European Union member countries are as enthusiastic as Britain is about being able to reciprocate? Is he adhering to target dates of entry?

Mr. Vaz: The negotiations are going extremely well. One of the reports received by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister at yesterday's Council meeting was on the enlargement process. We believe that it is for the applicant countries to set their timetables in relation to the negotiations. For the Luxembourg Six countries, for example, only two chapters of the acquis remain to be opened, so progress is on-going.

It would be wrong for us to set an artificial timetable and deadline that we know would not be met, although we in the European Union must be ready with our timetable. That has been set by the IGC, and I am very pleased at the progress made yesterday and today. We are on target to complete the discussions and negotiations during the French presidency. We are confident that we can complete them by 31 December this year, and that as a result we will be ready to receive new members at the end of 2002. It will then be up to other countries to decide the target date for entry that is suitable for them.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): Does the Minister sense, as others have sensed and as the right hon. Member

for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) just suggested, a cooling of enthusiasm for early enlargement among current EU member states? Would it not be a scandal if the European Union failed in its high duty to embrace the whole family of European nations? Given that the single biggest roadblock to successful enlargement negotiations is a common agricultural policy that is morally, socially, economically, financially and environmentally indefensible, why did the Government not spend their time at the Feira summit seeking changes to give more control to member states, instead of trailing sadly behind the Commission's plans to create a single European super-state?

Mr. Vaz: The right hon. Gentleman has a cheek. When he was Minister at the Foreign Office, he gladly went along with the common agricultural policy, but now that he is in opposition he wants to change it. We have made our position on the CAP clear, which is that it needs to be reformed. If he read the Foreign Office website, he would know that the Luxembourg Six opened their discussions on the agriculture chapter last Wednesday. Those discussions will be the subject of tough negotiations, and we will follow their progress. The truth is that the Conservative party changes its policy every week. Last week at the Dispatch Box, the right hon. Gentleman said that the Conservative party would veto the IGC and therefore stop enlargement. Is that still the case?

Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty

5. **Mr. Malcolm Savidge** (Aberdeen, North): What discussions he has had with his US and Russian counterparts following the conclusion of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty review conference. [125208]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): We continue to maintain close contact with both the United States and Russian Governments on nuclear non-proliferation issues.

Mr. Savidge: I congratulate my hon. Friend and Her Majesty's Government on the role that they played in the success of that conference. May I urge the Government to work together with other nuclear weapons states to fulfil the spirit and the letter of the obligations entered into there, particularly on the test ban and anti-ballistic missile treaties and on progress with nuclear disarmament?

Mr. Hain: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It is true that Britain played a pivotal role in achieving a successful outcome to the non-proliferation treaty conference. We did so because after my speech in New York, I had discussions with the new agenda coalition—in particular the Irish, the New Zealanders and the South Africans—to say that we would work with the P5 nuclear states to try to achieve a common position. For the first time, an absolutely unequivocal declaration was given by the five nuclear states, Britain included, to work for the worldwide elimination of nuclear weapons, and for progress on all the other issues to which my hon. Friend referred, including, crucially, the comprehensive test ban treaty and the fissile material cut-off treaty; and we will work vigorously to achieve entry into force of both treaties.

Sir David Madel (South-West Bedfordshire): What is the Government's current attitude towards the United States national missile defence programme?

Mr. Hain: The Government's stance has been well stated. We are waiting to see what proposals the United States has for national missile defence and then we will make a judgment. I was, however, encouraged by the discussions between Presidents Clinton and Putin in Russia only a few weeks ago in which they agreed to discuss this matter and see whether they could find common ground. It is vital that whatever is done, the anti-ballistic missile treaty is not damaged but kept alive and in force, and that Russia and the United States continue to reduce their nuclear stockpiles and to co-operate, whether NMD—which is an untested, unproven system—develops or not.

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): Does the Minister agree that while welcoming any Russian initiatives to bring about nuclear disarmament, we do not support Russia's plans to re-use plutonium taken from warheads to make so-called MOX nuclear fuel? Does the Minister agree that that would be both dangerous and environmentally damaging?

Mr. Hain: Yes, indeed. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's long and close expert interest in this matter. We remain very concerned about the use to which nuclear material is put in Russia, because a huge amount of it is available. It is important to world peace that the use of such material is properly monitored and regulated.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): The Minister knows that on national missile defence, the American Administration have made an informal request to know what the Government's position will be on upgrading the radar tracking facilities at Fylingdales and Menwith Hill. The House will want to know what the Government's response to that has been to enable the United States to deploy NMD if it decides to do so. Will the Government arrange to have an early debate in the House on this issue, which is of huge importance and comparable with the deployment of cruise missiles in the 1980s? The House will be keen to know on which side of the debate Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament members such as the Minister will be.

Mr. Hain: I remain on the Government's side of the debate. Indeed, I speak for the Government on these matters, and am doing so at present. As for the Government's attitude to national missile defence and any proposal that has not come in any specified form from the Americans so far, the difference between us and the Conservatives is that they will say yes to anything, even before they know what it is. The system has not been tested; it is vulnerable to decoys and all sorts of other technological devices. I urge the Conservative party to be cautious here. If and when the Americans decide to proceed with the system, we will consider it.

As I have said, we shall urge negotiations with the Russians to achieve consensus. How can we adopt an

attitude, as the Conservative Opposition have done, to a system and a policy that are not at all clear, and on which the Americans have made no decision?

UN Security Council Membership

6. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle): What estimate he has made of the time scale for the permanent membership of the UN Security Council to be changed to include a country from south Asia. [125209]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): Britain continues to press actively for early enlargement of the UN Security Council to include permanent seats for countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, as well as for Germany and Japan.

Mr. Prentice: That is good news; the UN should be reconfigured to reflect the realities of the modern world. There are those who believe that India is a strong contender for permanent membership of the Security Council. Will my hon. Friend make it clear that there can be no question of countries joining the Security Council as permanent members when they are in default, if that is the word, of UN resolutions? They must come into full compliance before they can even begin to be considered.

Mr. Hain: My hon. Friend is right. As the second largest nation in Asia, India is a strong contender for any enlarged Security Council. It is ultimately a decision for the Asian group, and not one in which Britain will have the final say. Many matters will be taken into account when the decision is made, including those to which my hon. Friend referred. Other countries in Asia, including Indonesia and Pakistan, for example, will also put their names forward and make strong claims, and India's claim is undoubtedly strong.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): What is the Government's criterion for qualifying for permanent membership of the UN Security Council? Is it a country's population, its geographical position or its compliance with UN resolutions? Surely the Government must have some view about their role in putting forward the case for new countries becoming permanent members of the Security Council.

Mr. Hain: We have a very clear view, and we are leading the discussion in New York on enlargement of the Security Council. The present Security Council reflects a world that is long gone. It needs to be modernised and updated, and that is a policy that we are pursuing.

Our policy is to have five new permanent members—Japan, Germany, one from Asia, one from Latin America and one from Africa. There will also be four new non-permanent members, one from Latin America, one from Asia, one from Africa and one from eastern Europe. That is a clear policy, which would result in a Security Council that reflected the realities of the modern world.

Pakistan

7. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): If he will make a statement on Britain's relations with Pakistan. [125210]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): Britain has close and long-standing ties with Pakistan and we continue to urge General Musharraf to produce a complete timetable for the transition to democracy.

Fiona Mactaggart: I thank the Minister for that reply. Is he aware that members of the settled Pakistani communities in Britain, who had high hopes of a Labour Government, are concerned about the issue that was raised on the previous question, and feel that the legitimate concerns of Pakistan are being ignored as a result of our pressure that Pakistan, rightly, should move swiftly towards democracy? Does my hon. Friend agree that if they feel like that, and Pakistan feels isolated, that represents a real threat to peace in south Asia?

Mr. Hain: I agree with my hon. Friend that a Pakistan that feels isolated, embattled and beleaguered could find itself reacting accordingly, and that would be dangerous. I welcome the opportunity to place on the record the fact that we value our strong and historic friendship with the people of Pakistan. That friendship continues, although we rightly condemned the coup last year—there is no such thing as a good coup. Nevertheless, we want to see Pakistan develop, succeed and returned to democratic rule, and we will work with the Pakistani people and their representatives to achieve that, as we are now doing.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): When General Musharraf considers the franchise, would it not be appropriate for him to move towards a single electoral list for the restoration of democracy in his country? In that case, minorities such as Christians, Hindus, Ahmedis and Parsees may get a fair deal. Will Her Majesty's Government press for an early lifting of Pakistan's blasphemy laws, which cause great offence to minorities and are often an incitement to violence against them?

Mr. Hain: My hon. Friend—*[Interruption]*—I mean, the hon. Gentleman; this consensus has gone too far. The hon. Gentleman raises important points, with which I agree, about minorities in Pakistan. We shall press for the lifting of the blasphemy laws—indeed, we already have—and we shall consider the proposals for a new electoral registration system. On that and other matters, we have offered the Pakistani regime co-operation to help eradicate corruption from the judiciary, and to modernise its system of government and the civil service, which has also been deeply corrupt and inefficient. Offers of assistance have been made, and we hope that they will be taken up. We genuinely want Pakistan and its people to succeed.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): The future of Kashmir is a burning issue for many Pakistanis in my constituency, and the vast majority believe that the Kashmiris should decide their own fate. Should we not use the United Nations to promote a plebiscite before we discuss whether there should be new UN representation?

Mr. Hain: As I have said, the issue of an enlarged Security Council is quite different from matters that may

or may not be occurring in Pakistan or India, even if those matters might influence the Asian group's decision about its representative. That is a matter for the Asian group, not Britain, to decide.

The crisis in Kashmir continues, and we remain actively engaged in seeking to resolve it. We want India and Pakistan to resume the Lahore process, which resulted from the courageous decision of the Indian Prime Minister to travel to Lahore. The discussions provided a breakthrough, and it is unfortunate that the subsequent Kargil incident in Kashmir—the author of which was General Musharraf—has, along with last year's coup, set the process back. We continue to urge both Delhi and Islamabad to get together to resolve the matter. It cannot continue as a festering sore, threatening stability in the region and the human rights of those in the area concerned.

Eritrea

8. **Mr. Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington): If he will make a statement on the situation in Eritrea. [125211]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): Since May 1998, Eritrea and Ethiopia—two of the world's poorest countries—have been engaged in a senseless and tragic war that has caused an appalling number of casualties. We welcome the proposal for an agreement on the cessation of hostilities, recently brokered by the Organisation of African Unity in Algiers, and we shall work to support its early implementation.

Mr. Brake: I thank the Minister for that response. Everyone hopes that the agreement will succeed. Does he agree that the main issue is policing the buffer zone? Are 2,000 peacekeepers enough? Is he aware of any European Union country having offered troops, and if so, how many? Is he aware of any contingency plans made by the UN in case the conflict resumes, causing the peacekeepers to be withdrawn?

Mr. Hain: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has asked serious questions about the problems in the Horn of Africa, which has been desperately hit by drought and other problems. The war must end. The United Nations is actively engaged in seeking to promote peace and stabilise the region, and Britain is working closely with the UN and supporting the Organisation of African Unity's proposals and the efforts to ensure that Ethiopia and Eritrea never again enter into that pointless war.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): Will my hon. Friend ask the Department for International Development to make it clear that one condition for aid must be that it is not provided to countries waging war on their neighbours?

Mr. Hain: I agree with my hon. Friend. That is precisely why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development made it clear that she would not enter into a strong bilateral aid and development programme while war was being waged and with no guarantee that resources from Britain would not, at least indirectly, continue that war.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): If it is right to withhold aid from Ethiopia in case the money is squandered in Eritrea, why is it wrong to withhold aid from Zimbabwe, where we spend $27 million, much of it squandered on Mr. Mugabe's revolting private war in the Congo?

Mr. Hain: British aid to Zimbabwe is used, for example, to tackle the huge problem of HIV and AIDS. None of it is spent in the Congo. We have strongly condemned President Mugabe's strategy of using aid for that purpose, which is entirely wrong and has resulted in a British arms embargo. Britain is supplying £9 million worth of food aid to Ethiopia and Eritrea—the second largest contribution after that of the United States—and that will continue. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is not suggesting that victims of AIDS in Zimbabwe, or victims of starvation in Ethiopia, should be denied aid—or is that a new Conservative policy?

St. Helena

9. **Mr. Bob Russell** (Colchester): What plans he has to visit the island of St. Helena to mark the 500th anniversary of its discovery. [125212]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. John Battle): Regrettably—I am tempted to say—I have no current plans to visit St. Helena.

Hon. Members: Why not?

Mr. Russell: I invite the Minister to think again. I am advised that no Minister has ever visited St. Helena, and that the party on 21 May 2002 will be a good one. Does the Minister agree that the Government should be represented—and that it would be even better to deliver the news that citizenship had been restored?

Mr. Battle: The hon. Gentleman chairs the all-party St. Helena group—I understand that he takes an interest because St. Helena is the patron saint of his constituency. However, it takes about seven days by boat to get to St. Helena, and seven days to get back. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hooray."] I will not volunteer to be sent; indeed, I am not so presumptuous as to book now for a passage in May 2002. We are co-operating in supporting the celebrations. The Foreign Office is contributing towards a new museum and national archive that will be completed in time for the anniversary, and I know that that is welcomed.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): I am sure the Minister knows that one famous person who went to St. Helena never returned. I have a suspicion that that person was poisoned by the people looking after him—but I am sure that the food has improved greatly since then. I am certain that St. Helena and many other British dependent territories are awaiting publication of a Bill to give them UK citizenship. When will such a Bill appear?

Mr. Battle: My hon. Friend raises a serious point. Under the British Nationality Act 1981, most St. Helenians are

British dependent territories citizens, but they believe that they have a special claim to British citizenship. Preparations for an overseas territories Bill are well advanced, and we hope to make a slot available in the legislative timetable as soon as possible. Such legislation would affect all overseas territories—there are no special circumstances affecting St. Helena that would justify a separate Bill. We are working energetically on the legislation, and will meet all our commitments to the overseas territories.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I was about to suggest that the Minister should take the boat journey to St. Helena, so as to understand something of the sense of remoteness that the people of that island feel. But as it is not the wish of the House to give the Minister a prolonged holiday, what steps are the Government taking to minimise St. Helena's isolation and improve its communications?

Mr. Battle: St. Helena is remote, and access is mainly through passing ships that call in. There have been problems with its economic restructuring, but as a result of the efforts of both Governments, employment projects—by encouraging people to come here—have helped to reduce unemployment in St. Helena. We keep in close touch through our high commission, and get to St. Helena when we can. If any hon. Members would like to visit the island, we will happily make sure that they have a safe passage.

BBC World Service

10. **Miss Anne Begg** (Aberdeen, South): If he will make a statement on his Department's support for the BBC World Service. [125213]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): The BBC World Service has the full support of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Objectives for the World Service are agreed between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the World Service, and progress is regularly reviewed. Funding for the World Service is via a grant in aid from the FCO. There are close and frequent contacts between my Department and the World Service at all levels—and I am assured that one can hear the World Service even in St. Helena.

Miss Begg: I am sure that my hon. Friend is aware that the World Service now has its own internet service, BBC Online. That site is proving very popular, and since January last year its use has tripled to 24 million page impressions a month. Will he assure me that funding will be available so that that valuable service can continue to grow, and continue to be the most popular audio news service on the internet in the world?

Mr. Vaz: I assure my hon. Friend that the World Service has many influential friends in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I know that the Ministers responsible have had frequent meetings with Mr. Byford and his staff. Of course we shall do all that we can to support their work. As my hon. Friend knows, when the matter was last considered in 1998, the World Service received an additional £44.2 million for its £177 million budget. She also knows that 151 million people a week listen to the World Service, and more are getting involved in it because of internet access. I assure her that we are very sympathetic to what she has said.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): With friends like the Foreign Office, who needs enemies? I might say:

> how short-sighted it is to cut the funding of one of the greatest assets of Britain, which should be one of the best investments that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office could make in foreign relations.—[*Official Report*, 10 January 1996; Vol. 269, c. 203.]

Those are not my words, but the words of the current Foreign Secretary when he complained about World Service funding in January 1996. Will the Minister therefore explain why, under the Labour Government, funding for the World Service has been cut so that it is worth less in real terms than the funding in 1996 when the Foreign Secretary criticised the Conservative Government? Is not that abysmal situation for our World Service yet another example of the Government saying one thing and doing another?

Mr. Vaz: I am sorry that the hon. Lady prepared her question before she heard my answer. I am sure that she listened carefully to what I said, but in case she did not, I repeat that in 1998 there was an increase of £44.2 million in the World Service budget for the following three financial years—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Lady stops talking and listens for one moment, she will realise that that was an increase, not a decrease. We fully support the World Service and will consider sympathetically all the requests that it makes—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady might listen to the answer.

Mr. Vaz: I think that the hon. Lady is preparing her question for the next Foreign Office Question Time, but she is doing it a bit early. If she listened to Ministers' answers, it would help her enormously.

Plan Colombia

11. **Ms Rosie Winterton** (Doncaster, Central): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of Plan Colombia; and what assistance Her Majesty's Government are giving to it. [125214]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. John Battle): The Foreign and Commonwealth Office hosted a meeting on Monday 19 June to help to examine ways in which the international community can help the Colombian Government to take forward the difficult peace process, and we invited non-governmental organisations to participate and give a presentation at the meeting. The meeting paid particular attention to the need to improve human rights and the rule of law, to prevent further degradation of the environment and to combat illegal drugs production and trafficking.

Ms Winterton: Will my hon. Friend indicate exactly how Plan Colombia will help the Colombian Government in their fight against the drug barons, who are funding the activities of guerrillas and paramilitaries? What are the

United Kingdom Government doing to encourage other countries to assist the Colombian Government in their battle against the drug barons and the activities that go with them?

Mr. Battle: Our purpose is to address not only drug trafficking but the whole social and economic development of Colombia, which is what President Pastrana requested when he visited in April. I ought to make it plain that no assistance has been given by any EU member state or ourselves under Plan Colombia, and no pledges have been given. We shall discuss a range of proposals with EU countries and others at a conference in Madrid on 6 and 7 July. However, as everyone present on Monday agreed, our purpose is to address the fact that there may be a window of opportunity for the international community to support the peace process as a whole.

We are especially interested in specific social and economic proposals, which means that we must examine how any plan gives strong emphasis to supporting human rights in Colombia and pays clear attention to the issue of paramilitaries, sending strong messages about impunity, kidnapping, and collusion between armed forces and paramilitaries. There is also a need to ensure that the economic and social development of Colombia works for the ordinary poor people of Colombia in the long term. That is our aim and the purpose of the process, which we have taken the initiative to push further forward. It will be a long-term process, and we hope that it will continue and be sustained in Madrid with our partners.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): The Minister will be aware of many well-sourced allegations of collusion between the Colombian military and the paramilitary forces that are killing civilians, including those at peace communities such as Apartado. Does the Minister agree that it would be appalling if any assistance from the UK to the Colombian Government under Plan Colombia were to be given via the Colombian military—perhaps in spite of the wishes of the Colombian Government—who might then be found to be assisting the paramilitaries in carrying out civilian killings? Will the Minister assure the House that the Government will make the matter a priority in their negotiations, and will seek to extract guarantees that such events will not happen?

Mr. Battle: The answer is yes. Amnesty International and others have recorded some 24,000 murders in Colombia, so the level of violence is intimidating and, frankly, incredible. We have made it plain that we should support the efforts of the Colombian Government to get a grip on paramilitaries. I want to emphasise the fact that the purpose of the discussions is to suggest that in returning to decent civilian administration, Colombia needs to engage rather more at ground floor level. Indeed, we have encouraged it to engage with NGOs locally.

The Colombians present at yesterday's meeting took on board both those messages. Certainly, Colombia needs to get to grips with the paramilitaries and involve NGOs in the future development of any plans, as it is vital that NGOs' interests in the design and implementation of those plans are now brought to the forefront.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Is the Minister saying that Plan Colombia and support from other EU countries was not covered at the summit in Portugal today? Will he assist the House by telling us what plans there are to find alternative agricultural crops for Colombians to harvest?

Mr. Battle: I gather that the matter was mentioned at the margins of the Portugal summit. However, a conference in Madrid has already been arranged for 6 and 7 July to discuss what is broadly described as Plan Colombia. We are trying to see how to extend support for that plan and ensure that is clearly focused on the alleviation of poverty, as well as other social and economic objectives.

In response to the hon. Lady's question, I would add that we need to consider appropriate development of alternative crops. In the past, unsavoury alternatives were suggested in some cases. That is not the way forward, and we must consider crops that enable ordinary farmers to earn a just living, to go to market and to feel that they are not blighting the world. Sadly, most of the cocaine that gets on to the streets of Britain's towns and cities comes from Colombia, and it is in everyone's interest to come up with alternatives and make them work.

Mr. Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): In my hon. Friend's discussions on Plan Colombia, will he continue to argue that it should be centred on the protection of human rights, and should not simply become a US-led military strategy?

Mr. Battle: I absolutely agree. My hon. Friend has visited Colombia and takes a great interest in such matters. We look forward to his continuing contribution to our conversations and discussions, and I completely concur with his comment.

China (Human Rights)

12. **Mr. Norman Baker** (Lewes): What recent assessment he has made of his policy of constructive engagement with China in terms of human rights, with particular reference to Tibet. [125215]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. John Battle): The bilateral human rights dialogue with China enables us to discuss in depth and critically a wide range of human rights issues, with particular emphasis on Tibet. We continue to press the Chinese to allow greater freedoms in Tibet, and to engage in a dialogue with the Tibetan people, including the Dalai Lama, on a long-term political and peaceful solution there. We welcome the small steps towards opening up Tibet; we have recently persuaded the Chinese to accept the visit of the all-party group on Tibet.

Mr. Baker: That all sounds very grand, but has not the Foreign Office policy been an abject failure? While the Chinese have been signing lots of bits of paper, the human rights situation in Tibet has deteriorated markedly.

The Chinese Government calculate that trade is more important to the UK and other western countries than are human rights, which can be jettisoned. Will human rights be a consideration when the World Trade Organisation makes a decision on China's entry? Will the Foreign Office provide funds to support the all-party group's visit to Tibet?

Mr. Battle: I make it plain that it is not, and never has been, Foreign Office practice to supply funding for visits made by all-party country groups. Our conversations with the Chinese have had some impact; for example, we have now arranged for the Foreign Secretary's death penalty panel to consider the abolition of the death penalty in China, and now have to determine only the date of the panel's visit. We persuaded the Chinese to allow the all-party group to visit, and it is up to those involved to make the arrangements. We managed to get them to co-operate with the International Committee of the Red Cross on prison visiting.

Progress is pitifully slow. Only this morning, I invited Ambassador Ma to my office to make another representation on a human rights case. We shall certainly not be fearful of making such representations, but it is better to engage so that we can make them, rather than facing a shut door.

Point of Order

3.31 pm

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Have the Government indicated to you whether they will be responding to the request by my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) for a statement on the fate of Major Andrew Harrison? Following his release from capture and torture, he is still in an area controlled by rebels in Sierra Leone and, as our troops withdraw, the House will want to know of his fate.

Madam Speaker: I have not been informed that any Minister is seeking to make a statement or to make any response today. The hon. Gentleman knows that if a statement is to be made, it is usually on the Annunciator by lunchtime.

Subscription Television (Prevention of Monopoly Sports Broadcasts)

3.32 pm

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prevent providers of subscription broadcast services from acquiring sole rights to live broadcast of sporting events.

Why is Sky television prepared to pay £1.1 billion for three years' broadcast rights of premier league football? Why has Sky made a joint arrangement with the BBC for rights to FA cup matches and England internationals for three years which is worth £345 million? The answer is, of course, terribly simple: it wants to be a monopoly supplier of live football to British fans. Soccer fans have nowhere else to go. Like sports fans everywhere, they are prepared to pay large sums to watch their sporting heroes. Sky's sporting package now costs over £300 a year—three times the licence fee.

I know how irrational soccer fans can be because I am just as irrational in making decisions about how much money I am prepared to spend to watch cricket. It may be that English cricket, soccer and rugby fans are a breed apart. We will still be coming back for more, however England performs. The sad fact is that Sky knows that and is earning a fortune from the monopoly position that the House is enabling it to enjoy. The time has come to protect the interests of the consumer who is at the mercy of a monopoly supplier.

As I have implied, I have an interest to declare. I am a consumer of Sky's sporting package, and the Bill was prompted by that personal experience. It seemed to me, when dealing with Sky to establish or repair the service, that the arrangements were wholly inflexible and designed to suit its interests, and not mine. Sky gave appointment days rather than times for engineers, and made dates to suit its schedule, rather than mine—and that was after waiting ages on the telephone and in addition to the unfailing ability of the service to collapse when one really wanted to watch it.

It is clear that I am not alone. The Scottish *Sunday Mail* consumer affairs columnist wrote in April:

If I had to nominate the worst company in Scotland for customer service, the dubious honour would go to Sky Television. By a mile.

He recounts tales of people being overcharged, the Sky digital system not working, technical bungles and lamentable customer service, and complaints about delayed installations, engineers not turning up on agreed dates, extra installation fees and mistaken disconnections.

One correspondent successfully arranged to have the engineer turn up on her day off work. She said:

We waited all day. When I phoned Sky, they told me it had all been cancelled but couldn't tell me why. Surely this is no way to treat new customers? I would like to be connected because they still have my £80. But after six months, I don't know what will happen.

Surely, she could take her custom elsewhere—but, in effect, she cannot. The product—live English cricket, premier league soccer, live home rugby internationals—is Sky's, and Sky's alone. It can be obtained via ONdigital, but the price will be the same or higher than that charged to Sky's customers. However, people should not expect Sky to tell them that, even in response to a direct question when they telephone Sky's customer services.

[Mr. Crispin Blunt]

Millions of British people have proved to be such enthusiastic sports fans that they will pay the subscriptions to watch those events live. Sky alone has 8.6 million subscribers, and the number is rising fast. That represents subscription income of about £3 billion a year. Our legislation has put fans at the mercy of a monopoly. That monopoly has the potential to exploit the interest and enthusiasm of those fans for its own gain. Without competition, the monopoly is exercising its power, as shown in the price that it demands and the often rotten customer service that it delivers.

The Bill is a vehicle to protect consumers from exploitation. It is a limited measure, in which it is acknowledged that a variety of interests have to be balanced. The owners of the rights to the sports have a right to try to maximise their income. There is a national interest in ensuring access to such great sporting events as part of the glue of common experience that holds a nation together. There is also a national interest in ensuring that sporting opportunities are developed for all. Incidentally, the owners of the sporting rights believe that the voluntary code of the Central Council of Physical Recreation, which involves investing at least 5 per cent. of the revenue from the broadcasting rights into grass roots sports, discharges that responsibility—but I do not; that target is feeble.

The viewers also have interests, which were acknowledged when the Broadcasting Act 1996 was considered in Committee. The then Minister of State, Department of National Heritage, Iain Sproat, said:

> it is no use saying, "We completely disregard viewers' interests. We shall allow whoever has the most money to buy up all the sports and to show them to the 18 per cent. of people who have cable or satellite." A balance has to be struck.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee D*, 11 June 1996; c. 564.]

My hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) took a leading role in trying to protect viewers' interests then, and I am grateful to him for his support in this effort to improve their lot. I am delighted that he and hon. Members from both sides of the House agree that we got the balance wrong in 1996.

The revolutionary rise of satellite, cable and digital multi-channel television has brought exciting opportunities. Benefits have already flowed from the competition between terrestrial broadcasters and the satellite broadcaster. There has been a substantial increase in sports coverage in terms of transmission time, the type of sport and the variety and quality of coverage, but the deck is now stacked heavily against the terrestrial broadcasters and the pockets of the viewing public.

My Bill would build on the framework of the 1996 Act; it would add another dimension of competition, which would protect viewers' interests and further enhance the quality of coverage. It would do that by abolishing monopoly rights to broadcast listed events by subscription broadcasters. It would introduce horizontal competition in the broadcasting of those events, as well as vertical competition to secure rights to broadcast them live.

My Bill would ensure that unless a category A broadcaster—that is, those channels to which access is universal and free—has the rights to broadcast a listed event live, at least two different subscription broadcasters must have the rights to broadcast the major listed sporting events live. Those paying subscription charges for satellite television have the right to expect some competition and to have at least some ability to shop around for the leading sporting events.

Cricket test matches, the cricket world cup, the open golf championship, the Ryder cup, non-finals play at Wimbledon, the rugby world cup, the six nations rugby tournament—which involves the home countries—the Commonwealth games and the world athletics championships could all be prised from terrestrial live transmission and placed with a monopoly subscription supplier, yet they are already listed as events meriting access for the wider public.

English football is the biggest television sport on the planet and the premiership is at its heart. I believe that premiership football should be subject to the competition and choice that my Bill would provide, so I would like that popular championship to be added to the group B list. However, under the Bill, that would remain a matter for the Secretary of State. All that the Bill seeks to achieve is a choice for enthusiastic sports viewers. It is time to protect the public from a monopoly supplier.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Crispin Blunt, Mr. David Amess, Mr. Joe Ashton, Mr. Martin Bell, Mr. Bruce George, Mr. Nick Hawkins, Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith, Mr. Eric Illsley, Mr. Andrew Reed, Mr. Desmond Swayne, Mr. Nicholas Winterton and Tony Wright.

SUBSCRIPTION TELEVISION (PREVENTION OF MONOPOLY SPORTS BROADCASTS)

Mr. Crispin Blunt accordingly presented a Bill to prevent providers of subscription broadcast services from acquiring sole rights to live broadcast of sporting events: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 21 July, and to be printed [Bill 144].

Opposition Day

[14TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Football Hooliganism

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

3.42 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I beg to move,

That this House condemns unreservedly the actions of hooligans purporting to support the England football team at the Euro 2000 championships; hopes that there will be no repetition of these actions and that UEFA's threat to expel the England team from the tournament will not be acted upon; notes that UEFA and others have criticised the Government's lack of action to tackle football hooliganism; further notes that proposals to stop unconvicted hooligans from travelling to international matches were brought forward by Opposition honourable Members during proceedings on the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and the Football (Offences and Disorder) Act 1999 but were not taken up by the Government, despite the Minister for Sport's statement that such powers were necessary; calls on the Home Secretary to explain the inaction and delay that has characterised the Government's approach, despite the undertakings given by Ministers to bring forward their own proposals; and calls on the Government urgently to take the action it has promised for two years to tackle the problem of the thugs who are a disgrace to this country's proud footballing tradition.

Members on both sides of the House will deplore the violence that has been seen on the streets of Brussels and of Charleroi over the past few days. The hooligan element—who may describe themselves as football fans, but are nothing of the sort—are a disgrace to this country. They have brought shame to it and to our national game. They have, very sadly indeed, detracted from the magnificent win that our team managed against Germany, which we hope to see repeated on many occasions.

I pay tribute to our team, who have played their boldest and their best, and to our law enforcement agencies, including the police, the National Criminal Intelligence Service and those in Belgium and the Netherlands who have worked so hard to ensure that the scenes that we witnessed did not deteriorate into something worse. I also pay tribute to the work of the Football Association and the England coach, Kevin Keegan. They have rightly called on the hooligans to back the efforts made by the team on the field of play and to cease their actions off it. We must all hope that the scenes witnessed last week are not repeated, either tonight or in coming days, and that UEFA's threat to expel the so very well performing England team from the tournament is not acted on.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Has the right hon. Lady noticed that for England's games, the Belgian police prepared for a riot and allowed the sale of double strength beer whereas the Dutch police prepared for a party with pop music and half-strength beer, and by encouraging the use of a drug that has a calming effect? The expectations of both police forces were fulfilled. Should not the Belgian police take a leaf out of the Dutch book?

Miss Widdecombe: I am not sure whether we have heard the genuine voice of the Labour party; I suspect that Labour Front Benchers would probably say not. I shall refer to beer later on, but shall not comment on those other matters.

During a debate in June 1998, after the violence in the world cup, the Home Secretary said:

Last Monday, I spoke to Mr. Chevènement to apologise on behalf of the British Government and people for the events in Marseilles. We are committed to doing whatever we can to ensure that such disgraceful scenes are not repeated in future soccer tournaments.—[*Official Report*, 22 June 1998; Vol. 314, c. 720.]

Yesterday, the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister spoke of their deep apologies to the people of Belgium, and promised action to reinforce our determination to stamp out hooliganism overseas. Those words were worryingly familiar.

Two years separated those statements and those events. During that time, nothing has been done to effect the Home Secretary's promises. Yesterday, in his statement to the House, the Home Secretary showed the muddle that he had got into. It is not surprising that he is in a muddle. He cannot even agree with his junior Minister on the best policy.

Yesterday, the Home Secretary told the House—this may interest the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn)—that he hoped that the Belgian authorities

will follow the lead of the Dutch authorities. Alcohol was not banned in the Netherlands, but regulations were laid down requiring the sale only of very low-strength alcohol. That seems to have worked satisfactorily.—[*Official Report*, 19 June 2000; Vol. 352, c. 43.]

Will the Home Secretary clarify the Government's policy? Last month, Lord Bassam, who is responsible for the matter, called for a complete ban on the sale of alcohol in Euro 2000 host cities. He said that he did not want beer-fuelled fighting on the streets. Is Government policy in favour of a complete ban, or is it that alcohol should not be banned? The policy is unclear.

What has been happening the past two years is even less clear. There is an enormous difference between the Government's rhetoric and their actions. In view of specific statements by the Home Secretary in the past few days, it is worth putting on record the course that the debate has taken in the past two years.

First, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler). He had the foresight to raise the matter of sanctions against unconvicted football hooligans as long ago as June 1998. He tabled amendments to the Crime and Disorder Bill more than two years ago. Those amendments would have allowed the courts to place restrictions on anyone who

acted in such a way as to give reasonable cause to believe that an order . . . is necessary to prevent him from disturbing good order at any designated football match outside the United Kingdom or during the period before or after any designated football match outside the United Kingdom . . .

I must give the Home Secretary some credit because he was not wholly unreceptive. He said that my right hon. Friend's proposal for a football behaviour order was an important idea and that the Government would sit down and work on it. He has certainly been sitting down ever since.

In a subsequent letter to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield, the Home Secretary said:

I feel that this proposal is very important.

[Miss Widdecombe]

Last night, the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), told "Channel 4 News" that there was "a very strong case" for the proposal. However, it seems that the case has not been strong enough until now, and the proposal was not sufficiently important for the Home Secretary to include it in any of the 10 Home Office Bills this Session.

Following the efforts of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield, Conservative Members did not give up. The proposal was again made by my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns), to whom I also pay tribute for his work, during Second Reading of the Football (Offences and Disorder) Bill. In a letter to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield, the Home Secretary said:

a number of Members taking part expressed their concern

during the debate. Subsequently, the Home Secretary, his Ministers and his spin doctors have tried to perpetuate the unsustainable contention that it was exclusively Opposition Back Benchers who expressed that anxiety. The right hon. Gentleman has claimed that this "important provision" was

dropped because the bill was disrupted by a minority of Conservative backbenchers.

In a letter to me, the Home Secretary condemned what he had the audacity to call "Conservative wrecking tactics". He should tell his spin doctors not to claim what the record so easily disproves—or, as the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) said yesterday with admirable straightforwardness, he should not "rewrite history". However, the right hon. Gentleman did not instruct his spin doctors that way. Instead, he grasped hold of that ludicrous spin like a drowning man clutching at straws—*[Interruption.]* No pun intended.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): I thank the right hon. Lady for giving way. Was it not totally wrong, on a issue such as this, to state on Second Reading that there would be a major amendment to a private Member's Bill? On an issue of such importance and on which there was a consensus across the House, would not Government legislation have been more appropriate, to ensure that it would gain Royal Assent and become law?

Miss Widdecombe: The hon. Gentleman is right and speaks a good deal of sense. He will see that that matches what we expected to happen. For although it may be true that some of my right hon. and hon. Friends raised concerns, so also did several Labour Members, including the hon. Gentleman. The Home Secretary and his spin doctors have never even hinted at that, yet the hon. Members who expressed concern included the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Mr. Pendry), who warned that the orders could be made to apply to what he described as "innocent" fans, and the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley), who said:

I would be extremely concerned if . . . we went further down the road of giving greater powers to the police in cases where convictions have not been confirmed. . . . We should allow nothing . . . to compromise our commitment to civil liberty.

The hon. Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards) urged consideration of what he described as "the human rights implications" and warned of the creation of "a serious precedent", and the hon. Member for Burnley said that the course of action proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford was "dangerous", and added:

I have always been quite strong on civil liberty and human rights issues.—[*Official Report*, 16 April 1999; Vol. 329, c. 491-99.]

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. I endorse everything that she has said but, bearing in mind that the debate results from what has happened in Euro 2000, does she accept that to those of us who have studied all the press coverage, it appears that a number of people who have been deported back to the United Kingdom and who seem to have been involved in loutish and unacceptable behaviour were drawn into it quite innocently?

Miss Widdecombe: I shall come to that point later in my speech.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): If the right hon. Lady is coming to that, perhaps she will spend a little time this afternoon considering why we have hooligans. Many people outside believe that the problem exists because of a collapse of values in the 1980s, which occurred during the period of Thatcherism—a collapse in education, a collapse in law and order, and a collapse in every value in society. That is what the public are saying. I know that the right hon. Lady is well aware of these matters. Why does she not speak about them?

Miss Widdecombe: If I were to have an argument with the hon. Gentleman about the origin of the collapse of values, I would point to the 1970s and 1960s as the period when that occurred. The hon. Gentleman's comment is a distraction from the debate. We are raising the problems that the Home Secretary has not addressed, for which he has faced international condemnation. Whether the right hon. Gentleman likes it or not, the fact that the Government have not addressed the problems will be rehearsed time and again on the Floor of the House this afternoon, and he will have to sit and listen.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): The right hon. Lady is discussing what the Government have and have not done. Does she support a policy whereby one restricts the liberty of people who have not been convicted in the courts? If so, what limit is there to the proposition that people will have their rights taken away before they have been found guilty?

Miss Widdecombe: It is my position that, subject to certain safeguards, it is desirable that we take a very serious look at doing just that.

I should have liked the Home Secretary to have fulfilled the promise that he and his Ministers made on several occasions: they said that this was an important issue to which they would return in Government time. They did not—

Mr. Phil Woolas (Oldham, East and Saddleworth): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: No, I wish to make progress. No one can deny that I have already given way extensively. I shall give way no more until I have finished this particular passage.

Mr. Hughes: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: No. Given that I have just refused to give way to the hon. Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth (Mr. Woolas), I must refuse to give way to the hon. Gentleman as well, because I am egalitarian in my refusals.

Perhaps the Home Secretary, his Ministers and his spin doctors will end this campaign of completely unsustainable statements, which have been twisting the reality of what happened in the House some 14 months ago. In Committee, the issue was discussed at great length, although no amendments were tabled on the subject. My hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) made crystal clear the Opposition's support for what we believed was the Government's plan to introduce a measure in Government time, after the Minister for Sport, told us:

The power to make banning orders in respect of people without conviction is necessary . . . the Government will want to return to the matter . . . We need to find a way of dealing with these people.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): Where is the Minister?

Miss Widdecombe: The more important question is, where on earth is this measure?

The Minister for Sport continued:

We accept that the issue is complex and that the Bill—

that is, the private Member's Bill tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford—

is not the right place to deal with it . . . we may be able to deal with this issue later in a Government Bill.

Still, the Government had the opportunity to include the powers in the Bill.

However, the amendment to the Bill that dealt with this subject was not a Government amendment, as the Home Secretary's spin doctors have claimed. It was tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean)—one of those whom the Home Secretary has accused of attempting to wreck the Bill. My right hon. Friend gave the Home Secretary a warning, which he would have done well to heed. He said:

With the Euro 2000 championships coming up, it is important that we do not have gaps in legislation.

That was as long ago as May 1999.

Mr. Woolas *rose—*

Miss Widdecombe: If the hon. Gentleman will contain himself, I have almost finished this part of my speech; I shall then give way to him.

In Committee, the hon. Member for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe) warned that he was

slightly worried that we will lose the legislation in the long term.

He was right. He went on to say:

I hope that the Minister's assurance is correct . . . People will question our judgment if incidents in the coming months or years show that we have let the loophole remain.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee D*, 5 May 1999; c. 5-7.]

The Government have given commitments on this issue which they have utterly failed to fulfil. On that basis alone, the Home Secretary's judgment must be called into question.

Mr. Woolas: I thank the right hon. Lady for giving way. Does she stand by the comments made by the Conservative party spokesperson and reported in *The Times* of 30 May of this year? He or she—some mysterious spin doctor—said:

Only once these measures are being fully used can we start to assess whether there is need for further legislation.

The Conservative party spokesperson at the time accepted the Government's position. Is not the right hon. Lady trying to rewrite history?

Miss Widdecombe: Had those measures been in place, we would now be in a position to assess them. However, the measures are not in place, so we cannot assess them.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): As we are exchanging newspaper banter across the Floor of the House, may I ask whether my right hon. Friend agrees with the comments of Charlie Whelan, the former new Labour spokesman? He said in *The Observer* that Jack Straw had

passed the buck to the Belgians,

that he had

a lot to answer for,

and that the Belgians were "rightly furious".

Miss Widdecombe: I think that, for once, Mr. Whelan has hit the nail on the head.

Let me return to the Home Secretary's statement. He could not have been more explicit about the need to plug the loopholes that have been left as a result of his own inaction. He claimed yesterday that the majority of those who had so far been deported were not known hooligans, and that only 15 were. Setting aside the observation that that is still 15 too many, let me add that reports today indicate that as many as half those who were deported had criminal convictions. How many of those who were known hooligans travelled to Belgium and the Netherlands, contributed to the trouble and were not detected by the police in those countries?

Tonight the BBC will screen a "Panorama" programme which purports to give answers on that front. The BBC states today that it has

for the past eight days been covertly filming known football hooligans who have evaded checks and controls to get into Belgium and Holland.

Yesterday, the Home Secretary told the House:

We are pretty certain that, in all but 15 cases, our work has been effective in ensuring that those people did not travel abroad.

He made the ludicrous statement that his actions had

worked almost completely to prevent those people from travelling abroad.—[*Official Report*, 19 June 2000; Vol. 352, c. 40-44.]

Today, however, the BBC reports that the head of the British police hooligan spotting team has said that

the majority of people that UK authorities hoped would be denied entry to the host countries are now in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Analysis of that kind does not square with what the Home Secretary told the House yesterday. Who is giving us the facts, the right hon. Gentleman or the head of his anti-hooligan team?

The Home Secretary has claimed that he is leading a new crackdown on hooligans, with tough new powers to ban hooligans for life from English football matches. Why, the House might ask, was the crackdown not initiated before the Euro 2000 tournament?

[Miss Widdecombe]

Is the Home Secretary aware that the chief executive of UEFA responded to his statement yesterday by saying that he did not believe that the Government could not have done more to stop hooligans from making it to Euro 2000, and that if new measures were being announced, they could have been taken previously?

If the new powers are so necessary, why were they not introduced by the Home Secretary earlier? He knew about Euro 2000: my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border had warned him about it as much as a year ago. If new legislation is now needed so urgently, why did the Home Secretary even last month reject the calls for emergency legislation on the issue from the FA and others? Why has the Minister with responsibility for the issue, Lord Bassam, said this to the BBC? He said:

> We will need to revisit the range of powers we have. We need to learn the lessons from all these events.

Will the Home Secretary tell the House what progress Lord Bassam has made since taking up his post in regard to the commitment from the Minister for Sport to introduce new Government legislation? The answer is presumably none.

Why were the lessons not learned from Marseilles in 1998? Why did the Home Secretary allow the law enforcement agencies to go into the Euro 2000 tournament with what he and his Ministers now admit were inadequate powers to combat hooliganism? The answer is that the right hon. Gentleman has got himself into the most terrible fix—but the House does not have to take my word for it. It should take the word of the German Interior Minister, who said that he was "concerned" at the lack of legislation from the Government. It should take the word of the president of the German Football Federation, who is also chairman of the Euro 2000 committee, who said:

> It is not the best idea by your country to do nothing. We have confiscated passports to try and avoid trouble.

The chief executive of UEFA has said:

> It is regrettable that the Government in the United Kingdom has not introduced legislation which would make it possible to stop registered hooligans from travelling.

The mayor of Brussels commented:

> There was an agreement between the British Government and our Ministry of the Interior to stop as many people as possible who might commit offences. It has not been implemented. I do not understand why they were allowed to come here. Too many dangerous hooligans have reached the Continent.

The UEFA executive committee said in a statement on Sunday:

> The actions over the last 48 hours have left a scar on the tournament and left us wondering why more was not done to prevent them from travelling . . . Other governments have shown that it can be done and we call on the UK government to take the necessary steps as a matter of urgency.

Mr. Tony Banks (West Ham): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: I shall finish this section first.

Mr. Joe Ashton (Bassetlaw): I suppose that it is all the fault of the Government.

Miss Widdecombe: Quite right.

Let us take the word of the chairman of the National Federation of Football Supporters Clubs, Mr. Ian Todd, who has said:

> The government is struggling to recover from a situation they made for themselves when they chickened out of introducing that legislation,

or even—dare I say it—the word of a man who knows both the worlds of politics and football, and who has already been quoted in the debate by my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant):

> Straw passed the buck to the Belgians and they are rightly furious. If the Government had done more, then we wouldn't be in the position we are today.

The Home Secretary has no one but himself to blame for that catalogue of condemnation. He cannot blame the Opposition—indeed, he should be congratulating my right hon. and hon. Friends on ensuring that the House had the issue of known but unconvicted hooligans brought to its attention.

The Home Secretary has had more than a year to introduce the legislation that he is now spinning as a massive crackdown on hooliganism, but it comes far too late. In the Government's response to the consultation on football-related legislation, published on 31 March last year, it was stated:

> On recommendation 24—providing a power for the court to issue restriction orders on known hooligans without conviction—the Government sees merit in the proposal but requires further consideration on ECHR implications before taking the matter forward.

yet in a letter to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield, dated 29 April, the Home Secretary said:

> I have given careful consideration to whether the issue of domestic and international bans without conviction would in principle be compatible with our obligations under ECHR and the EU Treaty. I have concluded that they would.

The only identified obstacle to the Government bringing forward the proposals was overcome, by his own admission, more than a year ago. However, the matter has not been taken forward as the Government said that it would be.

Only yesterday, in his statement, did the Home Secretary finally undertake to move forward on the issue—and even then he was equivocal. He had the opportunity to legislate in 1998. He had the opportunity to legislate in 1999; that was when we brought forward those proposals. He could have introduced his own Bill in the current Session. We would have supported him. Even now, I repeat my offer of yesterday: if he wishes to table amendments to the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill in another place, the Opposition will support him.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): Is my right hon. Friend aware that, during the passage of my Bill, I worked closely with the Home Office? I can confirm that legal advice was taken on the compatibility with the European convention on human rights and it was found that neither of the aims of the Bill would be incompatible. Although I took the decision not to proceed with the legislation on unconvicted hooligans, the Government desperately wanted that legislation and saw my Bill as the first legislative vehicle to do it. When they accepted that I was not going to press that, it was my firm understanding from discussions with Ministers that they would do it as soon as parliamentary time was available to them.

Miss Widdecombe: That is my understanding from the information that my hon. Friend and others have given

me. All I can say is that, if that was the understanding, it has not been honoured, but no doubt we will hear more about that from the Home Secretary.

Will the Home Secretary now, finally, institute measures to restrict known but unconvicted hooligans from travelling to matches to cause trouble—measures for which the Opposition have been calling for more than two years? Will he at least acknowledge that that would have the merit of convincing UEFA and the international community that we are as serious about dealing with our hooligans as other countries are about dealing with theirs, and that it would at least provide us with a defence to the threat that we now face of being expelled from the tournament if there is any more trouble?

I am sorry that Labour Members consider that funny. I do not think that our team, after the way in which they played, consider it funny. I do not think that the numerous fans who went there simply to enjoy a game of football consider it funny. I do not think that law-abiding mortals who were caught up in all that trouble consider it funny. I do not think that other Governments consider it funny. Let us place it on the record, however, that Labour Back Benchers on the Government's second Bench think that it is hilariously funny.

Will the Home Secretary now consider extending restrictions on attending international matches to those hooligans who are subject only to domestic banning orders? Will he also take a long, hard look at the sanctions that the United Kingdom can impose on hooligans and at whether they are adequate?

We should be looking, in the long-term, to the 2002 world cup qualifying campaign, in which there will be further England-Germany matches. In September 2001, England will travel to Germany to play in what may well be a crucial qualifier. We can only hope that whoever is Home Secretary at that time—I do not believe that it will be the right hon. Gentleman or any of his colleagues—will not have to make further statements to the House about hooligan violence that could and should have been averted.

Two years ago, and one year ago, we were warning about Euro 2000. Today, I warn the Home Secretary about the 2002 world cup, and I hope that he will take that rather more seriously than he took previous warnings. Meanwhile, the Opposition will give the Government our full support in planning and legislating to close the loopholes for that campaign. However, on the evidence of Euro 2000, the Government's track record is worryingly patchy.

The Government's record of inaction has been roundly and rightly criticised across the board. Yesterday, the Home Secretary all but admitted that his policy had failed and that he would have to close the stable door after the horse had well and truly gone. However, he cannot say that he was not warned.

The Home Secretary must take responsibility. He must take responsibility if we should, heaven forbid, be expelled from the tournament. He must take responsibility for doing nothing. He must take responsibility for the way in which our name has become mud because of the way that the matter has been handled. He is a Home Secretary who should now come to the Dispatch Box to apologise, and he should do so without any reservation.

4.13 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"wholly deplores the violence in Belgium during the Euro 2000 competition perpetrated by United Kingdom citizens, and condemns the irresponsibility and criminality of those involved; welcomes the good co-operation between the British police and National Criminal Intelligence Service with the law enforcement agencies in Belgium, the Netherlands and France by which a large number of individuals with banning orders from football-related convictions against them have been prevented from travelling to Belgium and the Netherlands; strongly supports the many measures already taken by Her Majesty's Government, the police and other agencies; and endorses the further measures announced by the Secretary of State for the Home Department yesterday."

As I made clear yesterday in my statement to the House, we condemn unreservedly the outrageous behaviour over the past weekend, in Brussels and Charleroi, of the so-called English football fans who brought such shame to our country and to our national game. The nation's sense of outrage at the disgraceful behaviour of a boorish minority of our fellow countrymen has not diminished in the past 24 hours; nor has our apprehension that their misdeeds could still ruin the pleasure which many of us anticipate from further English success in Euro 2000.

I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) for the tribute that she paid to our police forces and police officers who are working in Europe and to our football authorities.

I believe that all true football fans can only be horrified that, once again, events off the field have so overshadowed the performance of the English football team on it. The Government understand and share the anger and frustration of the football authorities in Europe.

The action that UEFA has now taken in response to the violence in Brussels and Charleroi is, I believe, unprecedented. England is, effectively, on a yellow card. Some may feel that UEFA's action is too harsh, seeking to penalise a nation for the misdemeanours of a small minority. I do not share that view. UEFA itself has a responsibility to its host country. The people of Belgium and the Netherlands were entitled to expect a festival of football. When instead the inhabitants of two Belgian cities were subjected to drunken chanting, frequent outbursts of racism, intimidatory behaviour, and then violence, UEFA felt that it had a responsibility to act.

There are those who say that English supporters are not the only ones who have misbehaved, or who claim that they were provoked. Of course, it is true that international hooliganism is not an exclusively English phenomenon. Other football supporters misbehave, but none have disgraced themselves with the monotonous regularity of so-called England followers. I remind the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald that football hooliganism did not start in 1997, but has been a serious problem that has concerned successive Governments over at least three decades.

As I also said in my statement yesterday, the first major disturbances involving England supporters took place in Brussels last Friday, 16 June, and the next day further disturbances occurred in Charleroi as well as in Brussels.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): While I do not disagree with the Home Secretary's sentiments about

[Miss Anne McIntosh]

UEFA's action, can he assist the House in understanding why UEFA refused to act after the death of two Leeds United fans in Turkey following a match there?

Mr. Straw: I take the hon. Lady's point, but I cannot assist the House because I do not have access to the internal considerations of UEFA. If she wishes me to do so, I shall take the matter up with UEFA via our football authorities.

Mr. Banks: Of course no one blames UEFA for its rightful anger—we all feel it. However, it is extraordinary that, before the press conference, the chairman and the chief executive of the Football Association were not given an opportunity to discuss the matter. There comes a point when one feels that an element of politics has entered the situation, and that would be disastrous for the English game—and for world football.

Mr. Straw: I understand my hon. Friend's concerns, and he has much greater knowledge than I do of the internal workings of international and European football associations. However, the House will agree that it is unruly so-called English supporters who have provided the occasion for the decisions that UEFA has made so far and of which it has warned us.

The latest figures that we have are that 916 British citizens have been arrested in the course of the tournament, many in disturbances in Brussels and Charleroi last Friday, Saturday and Sunday. The majority of those arrests were what the Belgians call "administrative arrests", with a great many people being picked up for failure to carry a passport or other identification. In such cases, no charges have followed, but many—although by no means all—of the individuals concerned have been subject to deportation. Some 464 of them have so far been returned to the United Kingdom, being flown back either to Manchester or Stansted airports. Some of the remainder are likely to be deported direct to the UK, but many have been released without any further charge in Belgium, and that includes a majority of those arrested in Charleroi. The British consul in Brussels knows so far of six—of the more than 900 arrested—who are subject to criminal proceedings in Belgium, although that figure may rise.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): Is it true that a substantial number of the more than 400 people who have been deported have criminal convictions?

Mr. Straw: The information I was given this morning showed that 16 of those 464 were on the list of 1,000 provided by the National Criminal Intelligence Service of known football hooligans or those with football-related convictions. An analysis is being made, and I shall provide it to the House when it is available, but it is true that a substantial proportion of the total number arrested had criminal convictions against them that were not related to football. In order to put that into perspective, however, I should also like to explain—I shall provide more details in a moment—that a third of all young men have a criminal conviction of one kind or another by the age of 30. That is a dreadful commentary on our society, but it happens to be the case. A quarter of a group born in 1968 who were subject to analysis had convictions by the age of 24.

Sir Norman Fowler: Does the Home Secretary feel that it would have been franker and better had he made that clear in his statement yesterday? As it is in the press this morning, I assume that it was in the knowledge of the Home Office when he made the statement.

Mr. Straw: Had I had the information, I would have made it available. I have never sought not to make available information of that kind. The fact that it is publicly known that a third of all people have convictions by the age of 30 would have led people to say that, of any random sample of 1,000 men picked up anywhere in the country, at least a third were likely to have had criminal convictions.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Of the 97 Britons so far subject to international banning orders, how many are known to have breached those orders? Can the right hon. Gentleman tell the House what assessment he has made of the criteria for, and of the resources allocated to, surveillance operations on suspected football hooligans?

Mr. Straw: I think the total, which I was given this morning, of those subject to international banning orders is 99. We have checked, and the latest information is that 94 of them have fully complied with their reporting conditions. The police are making inquiries about the whereabouts of the other five. They have committed an arrestable offence of failure to report, and the police will be following that up.

I cannot give the hon. Gentleman an exact answer with regard to surveillance resources. I shall be happy to write to him or see whether my hon. Friend the Minister of State can provide the information when he winds up. We have sought to ensure that the police have adequate surveillance methods and equipment, and also, of course, that they have adequate powers.

Mr. Burns: In the light of the right hon. Gentleman's answer about the criminal records of a number of people in Europe at present, will he reconsider the answer he gave me yesterday? Does not this new fact of which the Home Secretary is aware make the case that if we had had banning orders for unconvicted football hooligans before Euro 2000, we could have stopped most of them leaving this country for the tournament?

Mr. Straw: With great respect to the hon. Gentleman, I shall come on to who said what to whom during the proceedings on his Bill if he wishes. But the central truth, which means that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald was almost entirely off the point in her speech, is that the police have a list of 500 or so against whom there are banning orders of one kind or another. They include the international banning orders that the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) mentioned, of which there are 99. The other 400 are made up of other kinds of banning orders; the hon. Gentleman will know that there are three kinds.

Those names have been provided to the Belgian and Dutch authorities. In addition, the names of 500 other hooligans known to have football-related convictions

against them have also been provided to the Belgians and the Dutch. Where there has been an attempt by individuals on either list to travel to Belgium or the Netherlands, we have, thanks to a very effective spotting system, provided that information to the Belgian and Dutch authorities, and those people have been turned round at the port of entry.

Of course I accept that we would have preferred to have on the statute book the full range of orders available through the vehicle of the Bill promoted by the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns). We have never pretended otherwise. However, the work that has been done means that we have achieved by other methods the ends sought—by the hon. Gentleman and by the Government—in that Bill, and that the people involved have been dealt with effectively. As I shall explain, the problem is that the football-related violence that has happened in Belgium is caused by people who are not on those lists.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: My right hon. Friend referred to the central point in this matter. Millions of people believe that that central point is the appalling statistic that my right hon. Friend produced—that one third of all young men under 30 in the United Kingdom have been the subject of a criminal charge. That shows what the values of the 1980s and 1990s did to a generation of young people. They are the children of Thatcher, and we are paying the price for the damage done in those years.

Mr. Straw: If I may, I shall give my hon. Friend and the House the precise information on that matter. For a cohort of men born in 1968, 26 per cent. had convictions by the age of 24, and 10 per cent. had convictions for violence against the person, sexual offences or robbery. In comparison, among men born in 1953, 34 per cent. had some convictions by the age of 40, and 10.5 per cent. had convictions for violence, sexual offences or robbery.

In the interests of complete accuracy, I must tell the House that a note just passed to me states that the total number of people subject to international football banning orders is 101, not 99.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) raised the underlying issue, but I wish to return to a matter of fact. Given the fear of violence in Belgium or Holland, will the Home Secretary say whether the Home Office considered intervening to prevent people with previous convictions for violence—in the past seven years, for example—from travelling on the basis that there was reasonable cause to believe that an offence might be committed? Would it not have been possible under our existing law for our police to stop such people leaving the country, or for the Belgian or Dutch police to stop them entering their countries? That approach would cover a range of people who may turn out to have been involved in the violence and to have been sent back from those countries, but who have never had football-related offences recorded against them.

Mr. Straw: A good deal of attention has been given to that matter, and to the provision of intelligence about people who were identified, through being questioned at ports, as having previous convictions that were not football-related. That information has been provided to the Belgian and Dutch authorities. In the main, those authorities have decided that their laws mean that it is not possible for them routinely to turn those people back.

I of course considered carefully whether powers existed in the United Kingdom that would have allowed people seeking to leave the country to be peremptorily turned back on the basis that it appeared that they might cause trouble abroad. However, the House knows that powers to restrain United Kingdom citizens from leaving the UK are not available to any Secretary of State. Whether such powers should exist is a very large question, as they would give individual police officers huge discretion.

A point that I have raised repeatedly in discussions with my Belgian and Dutch counterparts is that, in Europe and around the world, it is always easier peremptorily to refuse entry of a non-national to a country than it is to prevent the exit of a national from that country. It is routine, on my direct signature or by delegated authority, for all sorts of people to be refused entry to the United Kingdom because their presence is not regarded as conducive to the public good or because they fall foul of other criteria. We hope very much that the Belgian and Dutch authorities will follow suit.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, and hope that I can be helpful to him. I remember from my dim and distant days as a law student, and perhaps the right hon. Gentleman does as well, that under the civil jurisdiction, judges of the High Court can in civil cases issue orders called ne exeat regno, which prevent people without criminal convictions but who have something to do with a civil case from leaving the kingdom. Will the right hon. Gentleman make inquiries of the Law Officers to see whether that power is available to be used in the circumstances that we are discussing, and whether it is available to be used either civilly or in the criminal jurisdiction in the circumstances that he and the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) have just been discussing? It may be worth looking into.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to the hon. and learned Gentleman for his recollection of his law lectures. I am afraid that I do not recall that particular aspect and, as I have been asked to offer apologies, I will offer an apology about that. However, I will certainly take up the hon. and learned Gentleman's point.

Given that passports are issued under the royal prerogative, two years ago we looked carefully at the possibility of withdrawing the facility of a passport by the royal prerogative as well—in other words, by Executive fiat. However, as the hon. and learned Gentleman will be aware, the strong advice that we received, with which it was impossible to disagree—apart from the fact that there were major issues of principle—was that as Parliament had already intervened to modify the exercise of that royal prerogative by, for example, other statutory measures to restrict the exit of people from this country, the use of the prerogative for such purposes was not possible; there was also a query as to whether it was desirable.

In the 1970s and 1980s, this country suffered terribly from criminality and hooliganism in football grounds and away from those grounds but in the United Kingdom. Over time, a combination of increasingly effective police action, better design and security in the grounds and a greater acceptance of responsibility by the clubs has led to a great diminution in trouble here at home.

[Mr. Straw]

It has also meant that our police service has built up unrivalled expertise in dealing with the hooligan problem in this country. That expertise, relying on the traditional British policing virtues of careful targeting and careful planning, has many times shown its value in the course of joint operations such as the one put in place in this country for the Euro 96 tournament.

Last November, I established a co-ordinating group to make preparations for Euro 2000. That group brought together officials from Government, with representatives of the football authorities, the police service and NCIS. It also co-ordinated the efforts being made with the Belgian and Dutch authorities to ensure effective co-operation in the run-up to, and during, the tournament.

I have had many meetings with my Belgian and Dutch counterparts over the past few months. I signed a memorandum of understanding with the Belgian and Dutch Ministers in February, and I have in recent days had regular contact, in person and on the telephone, with Klaus de Vries, the Dutch Minister of the Interior, and Antoine Duquesne, the Belgian Minister of the Interior.

The measures in place are the most extensive ever made prior to any similar major sporting tournament abroad. Central to this strategy has been effective police co-operation between ourselves and the police in Belgium and Holland. As a result, the Belgian and Dutch police sought and received from our police service the most detailed and extensive operational advice about arrangements that they were putting in place for Euro 2000.

As well as providing operational advice, British police officers have been deployed in Belgium and Holland, and on Eurostar, to act as spotters to help police operations here and abroad. NCIS has collated details of individuals convicted of football-related offences in the past—and those whom it has suspected of causing trouble. The list of names, as I told the House, was passed to its counterparts in France, as well as those in Holland and Belgium, well before the tournament began.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I am grateful to the Home Secretary, because he has been very generous in giving way. Most of the 460-odd people whom he described as having been administratively deported will presumably not have been charged with any offence, and will therefore have no record in the future. Will the Home Secretary say whether the Belgian authorities, in conjunction with the co-operation that he has described, are continuing their inquiries against any of those 460-odd people, and whether any further charges are likely to arise?

Mr. Straw: I understand that no charges have been laid at any stage against any of those 464, which is why they were subject to administrative deportation. We have only the barest details—if this needs to be added to, I shall ensure that my hon. Friend the Minister of State does so when he replies—of the site at which they were subject to arrest. We have no further details. There is no evidence of any kind that could be used in any court at all—

Mr. Fabricant *rose—*

Mr. Straw: If the hon. Gentleman will wait for a moment, I shall answer the question asked by the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown).

The hon. Member for Cotswold may have heard this morning, as I did, the police chief from Belgium. I am trying to turn up the transcript. He may have heard Colonel Blickie answering a question from Mr. Edward Stourton on "Today". Mr. Stourton asked:

> Do you accept that some of those who were arrested were innocent?

Colonel Blickie replied:

> Yes of course, yes of course.

Mr. Stourton asked:

> Do you regret that?

The colonel replied:

> Of fact, a fact you regret it that's the problem. When we are doing our operations in the street, it's rather difficult to make the difference between those who committed some crimes in the street and those who were together with them and did nothing.

He added that people should have kept away from potential trouble.

Mr. Fabricant: On that point, and further to it, will the Home Secretary be making representations to the Belgian police, to request copies of video tapes that they will have taken, to add to the files of NCIS? Were members of the British police or their agents in Belgium at that time making their own video tapes? If such video tapes will be made available, will the right hon. Gentleman eventually introduce Government legislation so that we can impose banning orders on those individuals or withdraw their passports—powers for which we have been asking?

Mr. Straw: I understand that NCIS will be seeking whatever evidence it can secure from the Belgian authorities. British police officers have certainly been acting as spotters in Belgium as well as in the Netherlands, and have been present in the bi-national police control operation.

As I have already said, the majority of those arrested in Charleroi were not deported. They were released without any further action or charge being taken. We must accept that—as I shall be making clear later—different police services operate in a different way.

I was explaining about the lists with which we were provided by NCIS. They included individuals subject to international banning orders, those subject to domestic banning orders and—to deal directly with the point relating to the civil order which we had hoped to see provided for in the Bill introduced last year by the hon. Member for West Chelmsford—the 500 people who have been convicted of football-related offences in the past but who are not subject to banning orders of any sort.

We asked the authorities overseas to refuse entry to Belgium and Holland to all those on the lists during the duration of the tournament, and that operation has largely been effective. Of the 464 individuals so far deported, having been arrested in Charleroi and Brussels last weekend, the latest information of which I am aware is that only 16 were suspected football hooligans and one was subject to a domestic banning order.

We can debate what happened to the Bill of the hon. Member for West Chelmsford until the cows come home. The reality is that the same effect as the effect of including provisions for such civil orders in that Bill, which we wanted and which many Opposition Members—although not all—wanted has been achieved by another route.

A larger question is what to do with those who have not been the subject of football-related convictions but who have other convictions of violence. That is a new issue with which we must deal.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: I should like to make some progress. I shall then give way to the hon. Gentleman, who speaks from the Opposition Front Bench.

Much has been made of the efforts of the German authorities and police to prevent known hooligans from travelling to Belgium and or the Netherlands. I applaud the commitment of my counterpart in Germany—Interior Minister Otto Schilly—and his colleagues in the action that they have taken. There are, however, two points of difference for the House to note. First, each police service in the European Union operates in a wholly different judicial framework and has a different framework for the accountability of the police. The police in one jurisdiction may long have had powers of arrest and detention that may appear peremptory and unacceptable in other jurisdictions. Secondly, we are not the only nation to suffer football hooliganism, but our hooliganism is different both in its scale and in its provenance.

In an interesting report on Radio 4's "Today" programme this morning, German hooliganism was described as "highly organised". Part of our hooliganism is also highly organised and premeditated. Where that is the case, our police have been able to take effective action to prevent those involved from travelling. More than 200 people arrested in Charleroi were UK citizens, but I remind the House that 130 German citizens were arrested too. The efforts of the German police have not stopped the travel from Germany of those who have subsequently got into trouble.

The difference with our country is this: the evidence suggests that a significant part of English hooliganism abroad is much more difficult to detect and prevent in advance because it is not organised, and nor is much of it specifically premeditated. That does not excuse hooliganism one bit, but it does pose much greater difficulties in dealing with it. The dismal truth is that the vast majority of those arrested during last weekend's outrageous events did not have previous convictions for football-related offences, and nor were they suspected of having been so involved. That is perhaps the most depressing aspect of what happened in Belgium. The problems were not created by a tiny minority of well-organised, hard-core thugs.

Mr. Heald: Does the Home Secretary intend to introduce legislation to enable international banning orders to be made if there is evidence that someone who has not necessarily been convicted is a risk? The Home Secretary said that he would have liked such provision introduced in the Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns), so when will he do it himself?

Mr. Straw: If the hon. Gentleman will wait, I shall make my view clear during my speech.

Mr. Banks: I by no means seek to excuse unacceptable and inexcusable behaviour, but I can back up my right hon. Friend's point. Is he aware that judges in Argentina recently closed down the football season twice because of deaths by shooting inside and outside football grounds? That sort of thing happens, tragically, around the world, but we tend not to read about it quite so much in our newspapers.

Mr. Straw: Of course a great many countries have serious hooliganism at home. On the whole, thanks to the very good efforts of our police forces and greatly improved acceptance of responsibility among the clubs, that is generally a thing of the past here.

Mr. Burns: Will the Home Secretary clear up one point beyond doubt? How many of the British subjects arrested in Belgium and Holland rather than turned around at the port of entry have convictions not for football-related offences, but for other matters?

Mr. Straw: I cannot give the House the precise figure, but it is a significant minority—somewhere between 30 and 40 per cent., I understand. I have already made that point about three times, but if the hon. Gentleman wants to make a further point about it I shall be happy to give way.

Mr. Burns: I am grateful. The point that I am trying to make is that, as about 35 per cent. of those people had criminal records—albeit not football-related—we could, if we had had the power to withdraw passports from hooligans unconvicted of football-related offences, probably have removed their passports because the courts might have been satisfied that they might offend abroad.

Mr. Straw: That proposition needs thought, for it goes way beyond anything advanced in any part of the House during the passage of the hon. Gentleman's Bill—which was about taking powers in respect of individuals convicted of football-related offences.

We have to be careful about proportionality. Removing a person's passport in any circumstances is a significant sanction. The fact that a substantial minority of those arrested in Charleroi have criminal convictions should come as no surprise, because it simply reflects the proportion of men aged 30 in the population as a whole who have convictions—although I accept some may be serious. My central point is that a majority of those arrested had no convictions. Those persons arrested in Belgium did not, overwhelmingly, have football-related convictions. Nor were they subject to banning orders. No legislation predicated on stopping or preventing convicted and suspected football hooligans would have made much difference to the number who travelled abroad. That is a fundamental shortcoming of the argument advanced by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald.

As I made clear yesterday, the Government are committed to examining the powers and arrangements for dealing with football hooliganism in the light of events. The Football (Offences and Disorder) Act 1999, implemented last September, followed widespread consultation about the adequacy of football-related legislation—which had grown up piecemeal over the previous decade. None the less, that statute has limitations. When we have a serious debate, we can go into who said what to whom at the time. The fact is that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst

[Mr. Straw]

(Mr. Forth) accepts that he said things in opposition to the propositions of the hon. Member for West Chelmsford—as did other hon. Members. The right hon. Lady said that opposition did not come "exclusively" from Conservative Members. I noted with care her use of that adverb—but significant opposition came from Conservative Members and was the reason for the legislation's limitations.

Although there are 101 recipients of international football banning orders, there are 400 domestic banning orders in force. The public may see no reason for allowing a person on whom a court has seen fit to impose a domestic ban to attend football matches abroad. I share that view. Almost certainly the right way to proceed is to merge international and domestic banning orders—but I will consider representations from right hon. and hon. Members and the police before reaching a final view.

Mr. Pike: In addition to the two categories my right hon. Friend specified, would it not be a good idea to ask all the premier division and Nationwide clubs? Almost every club has a list of undesirable people whom they do not want at their grounds—not all of whom have been in court.

Mr. Straw: I cannot speak for Burnley but a large amount of information—[*Interruption.*] I am told that the Prime Minister's press secretary speaks for Burnley.

As to spinning, I may tell the right hon. Lady that I am the most unspun Minister I know. The only spinning in which I am ever involved is at 8 o'clock on Monday mornings, in the gym—when I have a spinning lesson that goes on for three quarters of an hour.

Mr. Bercow: Where?

Mr. Straw: On the spinning bikes.

Mr. Bercow: In which gym?

Mr. Straw: In the House of Commons gym. If anybody wishes to be visually offended at that time of the morning, they are welcome to join me.

Mr. Ashton: I am a former director of a premier league club, so may I point out to my right hon. Friend that the Data Protection Acts inhibit the exchange of information tremendously? As my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) said, every club has about 50 or 60 names and addresses of the people who have been arrested, evicted or convicted. The clubs are forbidden from trading such information because of the Data Protection Acts, and the police are forbidden from letting them have such information. If my right hon. Friend could slightly amend the Data Protection Acts to allow for the trading of that information so as to prevent crimes or hooliganism, that would be very helpful.

Mr. Straw: I am glad that my hon. Friend has raised this issue. There are many myths about the Data Protection Acts and we are seeking to deal with them. We sought to deal with them by an amendment to the law in section 115 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to ensure that there can be proper data sharing not only by law-enforcement agencies, but by others involved in the prevention and detection of crime. I have talked directly to Elizabeth France, the Data Protection Commissioner, about the issue and she has made the point that the data protection legislation is there not to prevent the transmission of data, but to regulate the circumstances in which it takes place.

I am happy to take the matter up with my hon. Friend's club and with the football league and the premier league. As I understand it, there is no reason at all why such information should not be made available to the police. There is a different issue about whether the police can make information available in return, but the purpose will be served if information is made available to the police.

As I have told the House, only a handful of the 464 people who have so far been deported from Belgium were known to the National Criminal Intelligence Service as confirmed or suspected hooligans. That again raises the point about the limitations of such orders. Even in those cases, it cannot be assumed—not least given what Colonel Blickie of the Belgian police said this morning—that the evidence against them would have been sufficient to satisfy a court that a banning order ought to be issued to the civil standard of proof.

As I have also told the House, NCIS is carefully analysing the lists of those deported to check on previous convictions and on occupations better to profile the kind of individual who gets involved in hooliganism.

Miss McIntosh: Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: No, I have given way to the hon. Lady once and other Members wish to speak.

With the benefit of experience, we shall sit down with the police, NCIS and others to see what further legislative and other changes may be needed in the future. As I made clear yesterday, the disgraceful scenes that we have seen over the past few days require a more immediate response. That is why I announced yesterday further measures to put pressure on would-be hooligans.

First, we have taken steps to ensure as far as possible that none of the several hundred people who have been deported from Belgium in recent days may slip back into that country or the Netherlands without the knowledge of the authorities. We have intensified the scrutiny of passengers leaving ports and airports en route for France as well as for Belgium over the critical period before tonight's match at Charleroi.

Mr. Heald: The Home Secretary will recall that my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) made the point that Eddie Curtis, who is the head of the anti-hooligan spotting team, has said that most of the undesirables that they do not want in Belgium and Holland are actually there already. Is that right?

Mr. Straw: I have not seen that remark from Mr. Curtis. However, I repeat that my information, which has been provided by NCIS this morning, is that, of the 464 who were deported—by definition, much more information is known about them than about those who may happen to be in Charleroi—only a handful were known to NCIS as confirmed or suspected hooligans.

Secondly, I have asked that contact be made by our police with all those deported over the past few days to warn them not to try to return to Belgium or the Netherlands and to ensure that they understand the likely serious consequences of their returning. Thirdly, building on the significant British presence already in Belgium, we have asked whether there is any way in which the operational value of the British police's contribution to the Belgian operation can further be enhanced.

Fourthly, we have suggested that the Belgian and Dutch authorities mark the passports of the people whom they deport.

Fifthly, we have asked the Belgian authorities to take action to restrict the consumption of alcohol which, in the end, is a matter for the municipal authorities. However, I understand that the mayor of Charleroi has decided in response to the hooliganism to prohibit drinking in cafés in the main square. I am glad that he has done that and am grateful to him.

Finally, more can be done to deter football violence overseas by bringing it home to people that the consequence could well be expulsion for life from the ground of the team that they support. I was glad to report yesterday that the Football Association and premier league clubs have decided that any supporter convicted of hooliganism, or against whom there is good evidence of hooliganism, should be banned for life from attending football matches in England.

The events of last weekend serve as a shocking reminder of the potential for serious disorder from young men who have attached themselves as supporters of the England team. We must take action to deal with that and are doing so. Only when the nation can feel as proud of all our fellow England supporters as we did of our team on Saturday can we be confident that we have defeated the dreadful criminal scourge of English hooliganism.

4.56 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): It is obviously good to have the opportunity afforded by this timely debate. I join colleagues from the other parties in congratulating the England team on their success last Saturday, wishing them well in their match this evening and thanking them for the manifestly good way in which the team and the management have behaved and dealt with the press. Indeed, they have represented England as well as anyone could have wished and have done us proud.

We clearly share in the embarrassment, agree with the condemnation and share the regret that, by and large, it is English supporters and British citizens in Belgium and Holland who have brought discredit to those who follow the game. It is a tragedy that what should be a festival of football and one of the great pleasures of the sporting season has been tarnished again and that England has to take collective responsibility for that.

The central question has already been referred to, and involves men almost exclusively, predominantly English men. Why do so many young English men display unacceptably loutish and intolerant behaviour, not just in connection with football games, but regularly in so many places? Why do we often see drunken and arrogant behaviour, which is frequently racist, xenophobic and intolerant on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights in towns and cities throughout the country? Why do so many people make a pastime of going away regularly for loutish weekends on the British coast and behave as if continuing a stag night? Why do we often export such behaviour to Mediterranean and other resorts, where being loutish, boorish, crude, offensive and vulgar is regarded as an acceptable part of holiday culture? People behave like that regardless of the effect on their hosts and other visitors. That behaviour is no different in connection with football than it is in Malaga, Ibiza, Ayia Napa and other coastal resorts of the Mediterranean or, to be honest, Blackpool, Bournemouth and other coastal resorts in this country.

We are focusing on a particular sporting event but, unless we get to grips with this issue, we are leaping on a passing bandwagon and ignoring our wider responsibility.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): The hon. Gentleman spoke about the central question. Surely, that question is why are only three Conservative Members taking part in this Opposition day debate on the important issue of football violence?

Mr. Hughes: Though not central, that is surprising, given that this is one of some 14 days of the year on which Conservative Members choose the subject for debate.

The other paradox is that many of the people who get caught up in this hooliganism live a Jekyll and Hyde existence, and to be fair, the Home Secretary suggested that too, in his speech. From Monday to Friday, they do a decent job, work hard and behave as respectable members of society, and from knocking-off time on Friday, they adopt another life style. They are hooligans not all week, but on weekends and on holiday, where some of their family, colleagues and friends cannot see them.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Does he agree that the apologists for such behaviour do nobody any favours by suggesting that it is the fault of the police in the country concerned for being over-enthusiastic or under-enthusiastic in policing events, or—this point ties in with what my hon. Friend is saying—that boys will be boys and that alcohol-fuelled loutishness is acceptable under any circumstances?

Mr. Hughes: I agree, and I shall return to that point in a moment.

I declare my interest as someone who, like the Home Secretary, goes to football matches regularly. I go to my local club, Millwall, which has also had problems. It has worked extremely hard and successfully and has almost entirely solved those problems, which is to its credit because the club's tradition was not one to be proud of. Like many colleagues, I have seen and heard bad behaviour in football grounds. We need to be clear that such behaviour is often accompanied by the language of racism, homophobia and sexism.

Those antagonistic, aggressive attitudes are often a short step from physical violence. The people who will use such language are often those who, let us be blunt, are violent at home, to their partners and children, and elsewhere. I hope that we will return soon to that wider agenda because we must take care to focus on dealing with those endemic fundamental problems, which the

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Government, to their credit, are seeking to tackle. I am not especially critical of the Government on this issue, but we have not rooted out such behaviour, and we will not root it out by having this debate or by introducing legislation that focuses only on people who go to football matches or on football supporters abroad.

I return to the point made by my hon. Friend. Parliament spends a great deal of time discussing drugs and drug-related crime, of which there is a huge amount. I have always argued that the fewer drugs—whether NHS-supplied, legal or illegal—there are in society, the better. The fewer people addicted to substances that vary their natural behaviour, the better. We have often concentrated on a range of drugs, particularly illegal drugs, but not on alcohol. It is important for us to realise that, whereas roughly two thirds of property-related crime is linked to illegal drugs, many offences against the person are alcohol related. They occur in the street, after closing time, and at home. We need to put higher up the British political agenda the issue of how we are to deal with alcohol-related crime. I am not being critical of the Government for not recognising that issue, but I want there to be parity between the responses to alcohol-linked crime and crime that is linked to other drugs, because alcohol is a drug as well.

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that we have held two significant seminars on alcohol and crime, which were chaired by myself and involved all the relevant organisations, and we are now developing detailed action plans to deal with precisely those issues? The hon. Gentleman's remarks are absolutely right, and the matter is a priority for the Government.

Mr. Hughes: To be honest, I was not aware that there had been two seminars. I do not think that I was invited; if I had been, I might have come. I am happy to discuss the issues with the Minister, in a seminar or elsewhere. I hope that I was not unfair to the Government. I said that they recognised the issue, and we need collectively to highlight it because so many crimes are alcohol related.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Obviously, the consistent theme is the role of alcohol. Is it worth us saying to all the authorities that it may be good to maximise television and other revenues, but they ought to consider changing the time of matches because the ability to drink all day and all night is always the cause of all the aggravation?

Mr. Hughes: That is a good point, and my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) has just told me that derby games are often arranged to accommodate that. Again, I declare an interest: I was brought up the son of a brewer and my grandad was a brewer. I am not against alcohol. Indeed, my mother's pension would not be paid if it were not for the profits of the Whitbread brewery company.

The problem is that we in this country often do not manage to combine the responsible use of alcohol with normal civilised behaviour. A couple of weeks ago, I spent two days in France. I was in Avignon on a Saturday night and there was no loutish behaviour. People were enjoying their evening out; they were having meals and drinking sensibly. There is a cultural problem in this country that allows the normal use of alcohol to spin over into completely irresponsible activity.

On the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), I do not criticise the Dutch and Belgians for responding significantly differently, but I take the point made by the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn); there is a quiet moral story in that access to low alcohol beer and less dangerous drugs was perhaps a far more helpful combination at Eindhoven in Holland than access to the stronger beer on which the Belgians pride themselves and no drugs in Charleroi. It is good that the mayor of Charleroi has said that he will restrict the sale of alcohol. As the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) says, we must always ensure that people are not encouraged to drink more than they would otherwise or to spend the time waiting for kick-off drinking.

Another important question, which has not been mentioned, is that of liberty but, in this context, it is not entirely straightforward. I will defend—perhaps not quite to the death, although I hope that I would—people's right to walk the streets freely if they have no conviction preventing them from travelling. Indeed, there is a duty in the European Union to allow people to travel freely. We are, however, permitted to curb access to private venues. Football clubs are private venues, and international football matches are also private in that sense. Therefore, it is entirely possible, if it is thought appropriate, to curb liberties involving fee-paying activities—whether going to bars to drink or going to football matches to watch football.

We must be careful always to distinguish between restricting the liberties of people to walk the streets, travel freely and live their lives, and particular activities such as going to a football match, which is not a right and can be subject to conditions, just as driving is not a right and can be subject to conditions. What action should be taken? I presume that that is the question that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) wanted to put on the agenda.

As the Prime Minister said yesterday or the day before, the first responsibility is that of the individual. We can legislate day in and day out but, until individuals realise that they must take responsibility for their actions, we have not got the message across. In addition, it is the responsibility of the family, the friend, the colleague or whoever to say, "That is not acceptable." It is their responsibility to restrain the friend who might get out of hand, or to say, "I am not going with you if you do that." It is their responsibility to say, "I think you have had enough to drink." Those in any group have a responsibility to manage one another, but I am afraid that, increasingly, we have a society in which far too many people walk away from that responsibility. It is sometimes difficult, painful and dangerous, but we must stand up for people's right to walk the streets in safety—a phrase that the Prime Minister has also used. That means that people may have to intervene to stop someone else behaving badly.

What should Parliament do? This morning, *The Independent* published a useful table in which the relevant laws of the 16 countries participating in Euro 2000 were summarised. It made it clear that, apart from Germany, we already have the toughest legislation. Therefore, the suggestion that we have no decent

legislation is based on a false premise. We have much legislation and we have done a lot. We should remember that recent Governments of both parties have made progress. My colleagues and I support the idea that we should move as quickly as possible to ensure that all such bans apply domestically and internationally; there is no logic in simply saying that people cannot go to a match at home. We support the Home Secretary in wanting to go down that road.

It is also clear to us that there are some things that we should not do. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, who looks after sport for our party, my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), who did this job before me, and I have all made it clear, in letters to the Home Secretary and in other ways, that we do not believe that it is either consistent with the British tradition or appropriate or proportional in the circumstances to legislate to take from people without convictions the right to travel. In passing, let me say that I am sure that the House feels great solidarity with my right hon. Friend after the tragic loss of his son last week. He would otherwise probably have been with us today. We would oppose legislation that would take away that right. There is no consensus for it, it would be wrong to assume that Parliament would willingly go down that road and there would be opposition from those on the Tory and Labour Benches and on our Benches. I am not sure that such a Bill would get through the other place, even if it got through this place.

We must be clear that there is legislation that we could enact and legislation that we should not enact, but, as the Home Secretary said yesterday—I take his side rather than that of his Conservative shadow—even if we had pursued the proposals that have been made over the past two years, they would not have dealt with the majority of the people who caused trouble in recent days. It is no good pretending that the proposals would have been a solution, as many of those involved either had no convictions or had no relevant convictions. That is why I asked the Home Secretary whether we should also consider those with convictions for violence, not just those with football-related convictions.

What action should others take? We made the point yesterday that the Belgian and the Dutch authorities could take certain additional action. In addition to limiting the availability of alcohol, the Home Secretary may have pursued the suggestion of cordoning off various areas, not only around a football stadium, but, if necessary, around the squares in Brussels or elsewhere. All that we can do is make suggestions, as the Dutch and Belgian Governments are sovereign, but such action could be carried out perfectly legally. The police in this country regularly cordon off areas and allow through only those with a right to go through, such as people who live and work in those areas, people with tickets for the match, the teams and their supporters.

I must refer to our police. I understand that it is easier to stop people coming into this country than to stop people leaving, but it seems entirely consistent with the law for our police or police in other countries to be entitled to apprehend a person whom they have reasonable cause to believe might commit an offence and, in this example, to prevent that person from travelling. On that basis, I assume that the Dutch and the Belgians can stop specific people from coming into their countries. *[Interruption.]* I should be grateful if the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke)—if I might have his attention for a second—would confirm that our authorities are empowered under the present law to stop people leaving if there is reasonable cause to believe that they might commit offences and cause trouble. We could question someone with a conviction for a violent offence committed during the past seven years—not a spent conviction—and ask for guarantees. We could also even say, "Sorry, we are not allowing you to go any further."

Yesterday, in summary, I raised the point about spotters with the Home Secretary, simply on the basis of information from people who were in Belgium last weekend. I am told by somebody who works in this place—a perfectly responsible adult who went to the game—that many people on the train from Charleroi to Brussels invited others, by telephone and in conversation, to join them later at a venue in Brussels for a ruck and to cause trouble in the town after the match. We must make sure that we have enough of our police listening, watching and acting with the other intelligence services to enable all such information to be fed to the Belgian and Dutch authorities. I have travelled on those trains often, as I lived in Belgium for a while. The more that we can police the main train routes in Holland and Belgium, the more likely that we are to pick up on action co-ordinated by the mobile phone, which is increasingly used in crime, not just in relation to football.

What action should UEFA take? My colleagues and I have a clear view: it would be wrong for UEFA to eliminate the English team. The hon. Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks) made the linked point exactly. UEFA was wrong to have had a three-hour meeting in the past two days without having the FA present. That is completely unacceptable. The FA should have been present, not only at the end of the meeting to allow it to put its case, but throughout. It would be absolutely unacceptable for UEFA to take the decision to disqualify without laying down clear criteria and ensuring that they apply to every country. Also, the same penalty should apply to each country. UEFA should also ensure that there is every chance for a case to be put, heard and argued.

More than that, it would be justifiable for UEFA to eliminate England—if the team qualifies tonight for the quarter finals—only on grounds of crowd safety or that of the team or its supporters. Otherwise, as the England manager clearly said, disqualification would not only be disproportionate, but could produce a reaction, and perhaps greater antagonism. I therefore hope that UEFA will not go down that road. I am sure that there is some internal politics, but even if there were not, the Football Association has done everything that it was asked to do. I have not read a single report of a ticket holder behaving badly. If the team, the management and the supporters have behaved respectably, it would be inappropriate for our team to pay the price for the recent events.

What else should others do? The *Sunday People*, reporting Saturday's match, carried the headline "Hun Nil". That is unhelpful. An opinion piece in *The Mirror* referred to the so-called good old days when

> They used to bite yer legs, have beards and moustaches, wear Cossack after-shave and live on steak and chips with lager.

It clearly had nationalistic overtones. As my noble Friend Lord McNally said in another place yesterday, the tabloids and, sometimes politicians, are responsible for hyping

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xenophobia and thus aggression. In that context, some of the language, particularly of Conservative Members in recent months, on immigrants, foreigners and asylum seekers has fuelled those who are tempted to be xenophobic or racist.

I am as patriotic about England's success as anybody else. That does not mean that I do not respect the Germans' or the Turks' right to be patriotic, or even that of difficult countries such as Yugoslavia. They have as much right as us to be patriotic and we have a duty to respect that right. I am reminded by your presence in the Chair, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the home internationals give us plenty of chances to learn that we can be patriotic while respecting the fact that we have four countries in one kingdom. Some of us have learned that, and enjoyed the ups and the downs of it for many years.

If we pander to prejudice and raise the anti-foreigner game, we will pay the price. When such behaviour becomes frequent, it produces reactionary results in politicians. It leads them increasingly to call for liberties to be taken away and to support increasing numbers of bans on people who have no convictions. It leads to a new consensus, which is not liberal or progressive, but reactionary, restrictive and inhibiting. We would be taking away the liberties of the many because of the actions of the few, to use the Government's phrase in a different context. Some may rejoice in that. Fascists like the idea of continually curbing people's liberties. They like aggressive societies that curb liberties and kick people's heads in. I believed that we had got rid of such societies in Europe; we fought world wars to prevent them.

We must provide the other alternative and respond responsibly. We do not want a society in which we say, "I'm sorry, but we can't do anything about this." The Government are trying to respond to difficult issues; but we all have responsibilities as well. It is not somebody else's problem; it is the responsibility of every single one of us. From now on, whenever we witness the sort of behaviour that we are discussing, in our families, friends, peer group, neighbours and constituents, we must say that it is unacceptable. We can thus begin to change the cultural attitude of the past decades. It can be done, and we must lead. In the meantime, it would be wrong for the English team to pay the price for a problem that goes back far longer than this tournament, these matches or the events of the past few days.

5.19 pm

Mr. Tony Banks (West Ham): I begin by saying to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) that the House needs contributions such as his. The points that he made, some of which I shall echo, are precisely the points that the House and the country need to address. The subject is not one to be treated lightly. It should not be treated as a political football, so to speak.

I have a great deal of time for the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), but I must say to her—although I can say it only in her absence, as she is no longer in her place—that I expected something better from her in her speech. I do not say that in a carping way; I genuinely admire the right hon. Lady, particularly for her stand on other issues that are close to my heart, such as animal welfare.

This is a time when we need to present a united House—a united front—to the problems facing us. This is the first time that I have spoken in the House as a Back Bencher since the general election. I was looking forward to making a speech, although perhaps the House did not share my anticipated enjoyment. I would have preferred to choose almost any other subject for my contribution, but obviously I want to comment on the impact of recent events on our 2006 world cup campaign.

The crisis faced by English football is the greatest in its long, proud history. We gave the game of football to the world. That is one of the things that we have been saying in our 2006 campaign—we gave the game of football to the world, and we want to welcome the world to the home of football—yet here we are, on the threshold of becoming pariahs in the world of football. As I said, at such a time, football and the country need the parties in the House to present a united front. Playing politics with the subject, by either side, is dangerous and plays into the hands of those who wish us ill.

I understand UEFA's anger. After all, trouble breaks out only when the English fans turn up. It does not happen with the Scottish fans, or those from other countries. There are some difficulties with Turkish fans at present, but if we look back over recent years, it has tended to be the English fans who turn up and spoil the party. We can well imagine UEFA's anger, but I repeat what I said in an intervention—that it was extraordinary that Lennart Johansson, the president of UEFA, and Gerhard Aigner, the general secretary, did not see fit to call in Geoff Thompson, the chairman of the Football Association, and Adam Crozier, the chief executive, who were in Charleroi. I have just come back from Belgium. We had a meeting there last night, and I came straight back. I did not know that there was to be a debate, but I came back because there are other matters to be dealt with to keep the 2006 campaign on the road.

I find it extraordinary that the chairman and chief executive of the FA were not called in. UEFA officials talk about the family of football: I have heard them say time and again, "We are the family of football." When problems arise, they should call in the family to discuss them. There may have been a similar outcome, but at least the FA would have been party to it and would have been consulted in reaching it. I find UEFA's behaviour extraordinary. I trust that it is due to nothing more than clumsiness and political naiveté, rather than anything more sinister.

UEFA has no right, any more than anyone in the House, to play political football with such a serious issue as that now facing English football. I say to the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), that I find it extraordinary and unacceptable for an international football federation to attack the policies of a sovereign Government. It is not for UEFA to do that. It is entitled to its opinions, but the way that that was done is unacceptable. I use that word yet again. It is a matter for the affiliate associations—in this case, the English Football Association—to maintain contact with the national Government. It is not a matter for an international body. UEFA is not the United Nations. Although I understand the anger that it felt, which we all share in the House and which all sensible people share, UEFA must be careful not to exceed its brief.

I hope that the telephone call which I know that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made to Lennart Johansson, and the call which I think was made by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to Gerhard Aigner, will restore decent relations between the British Government and UEFA. I repeat that, on this occasion, UEFA exceeded its brief in some measure.

As always, I listened carefully to the speech of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald. She seemed to attach little blame—perhaps I missed it—to the drunken yobs who disgraced football and the nation at Charleroi. In the end, that is what it is all about. The blame cannot be passed on to the Government or the football authorities; in the final analysis, we are all responsible for our own conduct. It is no good those people saying, "Well, I didn't realise that the Government had not passed strong enough legislation. Had they done so, perhaps I wouldn't have acted as I did."

Whenever I listen to the "Today" programme, everything always seems to be the Government's fault. Perhaps it is because I am now on the Government rather than the Opposition Benches—who knows?—or perhaps I am now listening properly. I begin to wonder whether, if those who blame the Government turned up late for work, they would tell the boss, "Unfortunately, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment did not give me my wake-up call and I blame the Government for making me late for work." That is a caricature, but, increasingly in this country, when a problem arises we pass the blame on to the Government and ask what they are going to do about it.

The Government can and must take action. Perhaps they should have done more, but, ultimately, responsibility for the scenes that we saw was entirely that of the yobs who created the mayhem and havoc. We must ensure that, whatever points we make in this House, we never lose sight of that fact.

The right hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes)—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hon. Member."] Perhaps one day he will be a right hon. Gentleman, but it will be for long service on the Opposition Benches.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Like you.

Mr. Banks: Yes, like me. It is surprising how fast time goes when one is enjoying oneself.

The hon. Gentleman touched on a crucial point: there is a yob culture in this country, and it goes beyond football. It dispirits me to say that. We saw who those people were and we have, more or less, a picture of them—they are overwhelmingly young, white, male, drunk, xenophobic and racist. Short of locking up everyone in the country who fits that description—unfortunately, they might be a minority, but they are a substantial minority—we cannot deal with the problem in terms of football or any other part of our society, sporting or otherwise.

The hon. Gentleman was also correct to say that we see the same sort of people in town and city centres around the country every Saturday night. Our town centres are being turned into no-go areas for respectable citizens. As the hon. Gentleman said, we also see them in Spanish and Greek resorts. How often have we felt ashamed to be English when we have been there ourselves and seen the loutish behaviour of those street trash? That is exactly what they are.

We must do more than simply get angry about the problem. We must try to analyse how it happens, rather than simply throw blame backwards and forwards. We must try to find a sophisticated way of dealing with it because, ultimately, these people are a problem for us all.

There is no easy legislative way to deal with these people. No one could describe me as a governmental brown noser, but I accept what the Secretary of State has said. I believe that we could have done more. In the end, however, one has to hope that people will behave better—that they will behave like responsible human beings. I get angry when people say that they behave like animals. Animals never behave in that way, so let us not use that description again.

We must now consider what further measures we can take. However, the House and the country must accept that, every time we take more measures, we scoop up people who are innocent. Further measures will also make injustice apparent to the innocent people who are caught up and will take more civil liberties away from us. We are English and proud to be English, but, frankly, those yobs who call themselves English have no right to use such a description of themselves. We must deal with them in the strictest and strongest way possible, while never losing sight of the fact that a much deeper-seated problem in our society encourages those people and fosters their behaviour patterns.

As I have said, we all have responsibility—the Government, football and, obviously, the House. But who are these people? They did not just appear. There are times when we feel that they are aliens, and that we do not want to share the planet with them, let alone a football ground, a continental street or a continental beach. Nevertheless, they have mothers, fathers, sisters and girl friends. It is about time that the families of these people started to put some pressure on them as well.

As I would never have behaved in such a way, I suppose that what I am going to say is a bit of a nonsense; but I can imagine what my father's reaction would have been if the front page of a newspaper had shown a picture of me coming back, having been kicked out of Belgium, Ireland, France—which hosted the World cup in 1998—or any other place in the world where we have caused mayhem in recent years. No one can exonerate himself, and the families of those yobs and thugs have a responsibility to deal with them. No one can walk away and say that it is someone else's fault—that the Government, or football, should do something about it.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey also made a good point about the language used by the tabloids. They, too, are responsible. Let me make it clear that I do not blame them, but it is a fact that language such as "Hun Nil!"—which was the headline on the front page of the *Sunday People* after the result—is racist and offensive. It encourages contempt for foreigners.

That is where all this problem stems from. As kids at school, we were brought up with the idea of the British empire—the empire on which the sun never set. There was a subtext: the English—I say "the English" because of the way in which we responded to the Scottish, the Irish and the Welsh—were the master race, created in

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God's image, and God had made a big mistake when he created foreigners. As mature individuals, we can deal with that; it need not infect us. I am afraid, however, that some of those semi-educated mindless yobs do not see it that way.

No doubt whoever wrote that headline thinks that it was just a bit of fun, but unfortunately it is necessary to be reasonably intelligent to appreciate humour. In fact, I do not find the headline particularly funny—I find it offensive—but to the weak, febrile individuals of whom we are talking, it constitutes almost a justification for the things that they do. "We beat the Hun": how offensive that is to Germans, both those in Germany and those who live and work in this country.

The Sun used a similar headline: "Heroes 1, Jankers 0". No other newspapers in the world describe football results in that way. Indeed, the language of most countries does not include insults to foreigners, and certainly does not include the range and complexity of insults that ours does. We cannot even engage in a debate about the European Union without using tabloid language and talking about Frogs and Krauts. As I say, I do not blame the tabloids, but tabloid journalists cannot write racist rubbish of that sort and then write editorials or features condemning the behaviour of the very people whose attitudes they have, in my view, fostered and, in certain cases, encouraged. No doubt I shall be ripped to pieces by some of the tabloid editors tomorrow. It will not be the first time, and I am sure that I can live with it. We know that what I have said is true, and it is about time that tabloid editors and journalists realised that they cannot whip up such behaviour and subsequently condemn it. They must realise that they are part of the problem.

Even if we are booted out of Euro 2000, that will not solve the problem of the yob culture described by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey and me. We, as a country and as a Parliament, must come together to seek ways of dealing with what I consider to be a cancer in our society. Toughening up legislation is one way, but securing changes in attitudes and putting peer pressure on these people is another matter.

We have dealt with the problem on our domestic football scene. That is the irony: all this only happens when people go abroad. The manifestations are here, but they are controlled in a far more organised way. When these people go abroad, all the restrictions are off, and they revert to the crude and nasty type that we recognise. We tackled racism inside our grounds through campaigns but, in the end, the thing that stops people is peer pressure. People used regularly to jump up and start to make strange monkey noises at a black player on the pitch, even at the club that I have supported for 50 years, Chelsea. "We are the only white club in London", used to be the song. British National party and National Front literature was openly sold on the terraces. We have dealt with that through peer pressure. In the end, that is what will deal with the yob culture in this country.

I want to say a few words about my work, as all Members know—well, I hope that they know, because if they do not I do not know what I have been doing for the past 12 months—as the Prime Minister's special envoy. I have felt many times that I have become that legendary Member for 30,000 ft. I have been working with others on England's campaign to ensure that England hosts the world cup in 2006. I stood down as Sports Minister precisely to represent the Government on that campaign; I felt that it needed my full-time attention.

My heart sank when FIFA, the world governing body, changed the decision date for 2006 from March to July. Immediately, I thought, "Oh no. My God. Euro 2000." I knew that there would be problems, not least in England qualifying. We managed to scrape through, but I thought, "We will have real difficulties now." It is a tragedy because—I do not say it in any jingoistic way; all the FIFA members have acknowledged it—we have the best bid. England has the best bid in terms of our facilities, the atmosphere in our grounds, our stadiums and the excitement and passion of our football. It is such a tragedy that that might all be wasted if England is thrown out of Euro 2000.

As I have said, if that happens it will be difficult to see a way forward. If the decision had been taken, as it was originally meant to be taken, in March by FIFA, frankly, we would have won. We could still win, just, but it now depends on what happens not on the pitch, but on the streets of Charleroi tonight and, if we get through against Romania, when we play Italy in the quarter final.

It is a tragedy. It is not special pleading for myself—I have a job and I will just carry on doing other things. But a sizeable chunk of my life and the lives of a whole group of people, young men and women, have been spent working on the campaign for four years. Those people include Sir Bobby Charlton, Sir Geoff Hurst, Alec McGiven, the campaign director, and all the people at the Football Association. They have made a great effort. We should be proud of what they have all done. I do not want that effort to be absolutely wasted by what has been done to our reputation in Charleroi and elsewhere.

It still is a wonderfully well-organised, effective and professional campaign. Incidentally, we spent no more money on our campaign—none of it is Government money—than the South Africans and Germans have spent on theirs. I hope that they are not enjoying our predicament, but how much more optimistic they must now feel about their chances than they did only a couple of weeks ago. If anything goes badly, we will be in real trouble.

Mr. Heald: Does the hon. Gentleman think that all this is very sad for the children of this country who love soccer and go out and play in divisions, championships and tournaments? One of the great memories of my childhood was England winning the world cup at home. Our children will be deprived of that because of a bunch of real oafs and yobs.

Mr. Banks: The hon. Gentleman makes that point and gives his age away because some of the newer Members probably were not even born when England last won the World cup. I hope that I do not go to my grave before we win it again. I might add that trying to host the world cup in 2006 was not some foolproof way of ensuring that we won it again. We can still win it, but we will probably have to do so somewhere else. The hon. Gentleman was right in those comments.

Part of the campaign for 2006 is "England's Welcome to the World", which involves inviting 12 young people under the age of 15 from every one of the 203 countries that are affiliated to FIFA—which has more affiliated

countries [illegible] the United Nations does—to come to England for [illegible] weeks, with up to four adults and carers, to stay in [illegible] homes and to share the experience of the 2006 World cup in England. It is an imaginative scheme, and it has received great acclaim around the world. The world cup is about our children and about passing on the legacy. We are still talking about the 1966 world cup, which many people still consider to be the greatest sporting event that this country has ever enjoyed. Some people, however, would say that it goes even further than that.

As I said, this is a very sad day for English football. I am hoping that, if things go well today and on Saturday—if we beat Romania—we shall be able to get things back on to an even keel, proceed with our game—with our clubs in European competitions and our national team in international competitions—and keep our world cup 2006 bid on the road. However, if that does not happen, I know who I will blame—that street trash and dog dirt who disgrace not only the name of English football, but this country itself. They will never, ever, be forgiven.

5.41 pm

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks) on his return to making Back-Bench speeches—his have always been extremely good and entertaining. He is, obviously, going to continue in that tradition. I also pay tribute to him for the work that he has done for football. I agree very much with his comment on yob culture—which I shall return to later in my speech.

There seem to be essentially three questions in this debate. The first is whether the Government should have introduced legislation to widen police powers particularly to prevent suspected football hooligans from travelling abroad. In my view, the Government should have done that. They seem to support the principle of doing so, or at least that is my understanding of their rather convoluted letters and statements.

As everyone, I think, must recognise and know, only the Government could—or, arguably, should—introduce that type of legislation. We all recognise that such legislation would be controversial. Liberty still condemns even the prospect of such legislation. It is absurd, however, to think that one can leave such legislation to a private Member, even one who is as skilled as my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns). It was also incredibly weak for the Government, with their overwhelming majority, not to pass such legislation.

I have no doubt whatsoever that such legislation is a Government responsibility. I do not think that either the Home Secretary or Lord Bassam—who, extraordinarily, is the Minister in charge of football safety—has done himself any great credit with the argument that such legislation was defeated by Conservative Members. Yesterday, the Home Secretary was at least cautious on that bogus argument. Nevertheless, I listened yesterday as Lord Bassam repeated the argument on radio.

It is tempting to write off Lord Bassam as a one-man argument for reform of the House of Lords, but the issue goes rather wider than that. I find it difficult to take seriously the Government's intent on football safety as long as he is left in charge of it. Frankly, I think that the hon. Member for West Ham would do a much better job of it than Lord Bassam could.

About two years ago, the Government were warned about the prospect of what has now happened. When I moved new clause 10 to the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, I said:

> Last week, the vast majority of this country felt shame at the behaviour in Marseilles of so-called English supporters—who comprised only a small number of the English people in Marseilles, and in no way represented genuine English football supporters, any more than they represented the people of this country itself.
>
> Nevertheless, we saw for ourselves the damage that was done and the violence that was committed.—[*Official Report*, 22 June 1998; Vol. 314, c. 710.]

Two years later, all those words could have been used about the events in Belgium. The Government have had two years to act, but they have failed to do so. Regardless of whether it would have had an impact on recent events, the Government should have introduced legislation—that is their responsibility.

The second question is whether such powers would have had any significant effect on the events at the weekend. I was not happy with what the Home Secretary said, because he seemed to choose his words carefully on that subject. He said:

> Of the nearly 400 now being deported, just 15 have been identified as previously known hooligans and of those, one has had a domestic exclusion order against him.—[*Official Report*, 19 June 2000; Vol. 352, c. 37.]

That led the Home Secretary to the conclusion that legislative changes, of the kind that the House has had before it recently, are not necessary. However, had the House known then what the *Daily Mail* reported today—that 80 of the first 200 deported had criminal convictions—that would have changed the flavour of our reaction to that statement.

There is a great difference between being told that only 15 of those deported from Brussels were previously known hooligans and learning that some 80—if not more—convicted criminals were among them. That was revealed not by the Home Office, but by a national newspaper. We should have known that yesterday and it is not necessary or justifiable to point to the criminal conviction rate on average among young people generally. The Home Secretary went on to conclude that legislation was not required and would have had no impact in any case.

Mr. Ivor Caplin (Hove) *rose—*

Sir Norman Fowler: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, but I hope that he has been present for the debate.

Mr. Caplin: I have been here for some of the debate. I wanted the right hon. Gentleman to clarify his point about criminal convictions, and whether they were football related, because that is an important aspect of the legislation promoted by the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns).

Sir Norman Fowler: With respect, that is why I made the point about the hon. Gentleman not being here for the relevant part of the debate, because I was talking about convictions that are not related to football. We have been exploring in the debate to what extent the commission of an offence not related to football can have an impact on an exclusion order to prevent a person from going

[Sir Norman Fowler]

overseas. That is what my new clause was about two years ago and it is the issue that the Home Office has been considering for the past two years.

I am unconvinced by the case made by the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary that some of the people involved were undetectable first offenders. That is not a sustainable point. The Home Secretary made the same point, somewhat disingenuously, when he said that barristers and engineers were among those who were arrested. Doubtless they were, but they were not typical.

The Home Secretary said yesterday that it is not because of a lack of resources that hooligans are not detected but, if a power had existed, the police might have investigated more thoroughly. My conclusion is that such a power could and would have prevented some of the hooligans from travelling to Europe.

My third question is whether all our aims in this area can be achieved exclusively through new legislation. My answer is the same as that given by the hon. Member for West Ham and the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). They cannot be achieved simply by legislation, and that should be recognised.

We should also recognise that there is no single remedy. We need a series of measures if we are to tackle this problem, because it is fanciful to believe that those who riot overseas lead a blameless life in this country, and that the only time that they ever commit any offences at a football match is when they go overseas. I do not believe that.

I strongly agree with an article, not in one of the Conservative supporting newspapers, but in today's *Daily Mirror*, by Paul Routledge, who wrote that what happens in our British towns and cities, with

> Young English males . . . gripped by an urge to get drunk and violent

is then exported over the channel.

> It is fashionable to be a lout. And to be a lout abroad is very heaven.

That is the kind of issue that we now have to tackle.

There is an additional factor. Not only are those concerned, as the hon. Member for West Ham put it so well, yobs and louts, but they believe that they can get away with it. That is the missing part of what the hon. Gentleman said. They feel that their actions will have no consequences in terms of the law.

Here I do not make a party point. Over the 30 years that I have been in this House, under different Governments, various parts of the law of this country have fallen into disuse—not minor parts, but major parts. For example, traffic laws are now substantially unenforced. Everyone knows that that is the case. It is to the benefit of the aggressive and to the disbenefit of the young and the vulnerable, who are injured and killed as a result.

Crimes such as burglary receive little police attention, and crimes such as breaking into vehicles receive next to no police attention. I shall give just two small examples. On Sunday, I returned to my car and found that the car parked behind mine had the door ominously wide open. I rang the police to report a break-in. I got an operator, but was initially told, "I'm sorry, sir. The line is engaged. Do you wish to hold?" as if it were like reporting to Direct Line Insurance. There was no interest, although ultimately, when I got through, there was some. When I had my own car broken into in my constituency, there was no interest whatsoever in that deeply boring crime, apart from my being given a report number for my insurance.

I use those examples to make the point. This has happened over a period of years—from the second world war onwards. It has happened at no particular time, but over years, and I am in no way trying to make a party point about it.

Mr. Charles Clarke: Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that over recent years, right up to the present, in the west midlands as elsewhere, the number of burglaries and the number of vehicle crimes has continued to go down?

Sir Norman Fowler: I am delighted to hear that that is so. I can only report what happened. If the Minister is trying to make a party point, he will concede that the investigation of burglary and of car crimes is very cursory. There is no conceivable question about that. I am not blaming the police. They clearly have a list of priorities and have to go for the first priority. In my own street, there has been a murder and that has been investigated with tremendous use of resources by the police. I am not trying to make any party points.

Mr. Ivan Henderson (Harwich): The right hon. Gentleman mentioned that he had been in Parliament for over 30 years. I previously worked for a shipping company, and I saw some of the damage and disastrous vandalism caused by football fans who travelled on ships over those years. I wonder why the right hon. Gentleman and his party did not leave it to companies then to select whom they took on their ships. Why did they not introduce legislation to prevent those people from travelling abroad on those ships when they were in charge?

Sir Norman Fowler: It is always dangerous to make a party point, because then one is countered with another straightforward party point. If the hon. Gentleman wants to go down that course, I would reply that I have strong memories of the 1980s, when we sought to introduce various restrictions to try to deal with football hooliganism and were strongly opposed.

I am not trying to ascribe blame to one party or another, least of all to the police, but if people think that they can break the law without consequence, some will do so; if people with good jobs—barristers and engineers—feel that they can get drunk and riot, some will do so. It is a simple consequence of the fact that they are not prevented by detection.

In both cases, part of the solution is to raise the prospect of detection and conviction. That could have most effect on the kind of people that the Home Secretary has been talking about—the people with good jobs who we assume do not want to lose them. If greater detection is part of the solution, the House had better face the prospect that there is no alternative to having more police. We are under-policed, and our cities and towns are now paying the price. Many would argue that the country areas are also paying the price.

The Home Secretary used to talk about zero tolerance. He went to New York to look at the situation there, and I followed in his footsteps. I spent a few days with the

New York police looking at zero tolerance. There is no question but that the policy of zero tolerance—it is not a particularly good description—had a dramatic effect in New York. New York is infinitely better than it was five or 10 years ago, when it was a drug-ridden and crime-ridden city. What the police have been able to do has been built on the fact that an extra 7,000 police were put into place before the policy was introduced. That is why it was successful; that is why they were able to have an impact; that is why they were able to bring crime down. It has been the success of the New York police, but a success based upon more police.

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have debated police numbers in the House to a great extent. Is the right hon. Gentleman arguing that the football hooliganism that we are debating today is a direct result of the reduction in police numbers in the years 1992 to 1997, when he was a member of the Government?

Sir Norman Fowler: That is one of the silliest arguments that the Government have put forward. Why does the Minister choose the years 1992 to 1997? Why do Ministers use the argument about 1992 to 1997? Do they not normally use the argument about 18 years of Tory Government? Do they not normally go back to 1979? The hon. Gentleman knows extremely well why he does not go back to 1979. It is because, if he takes the years 1979 to 1997, the period of the last Conservative Government, he finds that it ended with over 15,000 extra police. The Minister should not make these cheap party political points. That is a silly point, one that the Home Secretary makes, and nothing makes me angrier or more irritated, because it is completely spurious and foolish.

Mr. Clarke: I had no intention of raising the subject in this debate at all, but the right hon. Gentleman put on the agenda the question of police numbers in relation to soccer hooliganism. I am responding to his point.

Sir Norman Fowler: If the Minister is not going to talk about police numbers, crime prevention or the relationship between what hooligans do overseas and in this country, he should get another job, as he is not making the right connections. He asked about the period 1992 to 1997—five years of the 18 years of Conservative Government.

Mr. Clarke: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Norman Fowler: No, as I am sure that the Minister will wind up the debate and avoid mentioning this subject. When the Conservative Government left office, there were 15,000 more police officers than when we came to power. When I was in government, there was no question about the priority given in the 1980s to recruiting more police and adding to police strength.

Mr. Heald: Does my right hon. Friend agree with the recent Audit Commission report, which criticised the Government for reversing the trend evident throughout the Conservative years, including the period 1992 to 1997, when the numbers of police constables and front-line police officers rose? The report found that, under this Government, the number of officers had fallen.

Sir Norman Fowler: That is right: police numbers have fallen, not risen. However it is defined, the problem must be resolved, but my argument goes beyond police numbers. If we want to prevent people from going abroad and causing problems, we must do something at home. As the hon. Member for West Ham said, we must ensure that peer pressure is exerted on those responsible, but we must also increase detection rates. That would have a preventive effect on crime in general, and especially on the type of crime that is the subject of the debate.

If I needed any confirmation of my determination to vote for the Opposition motion, the Minister has provided it. To cope with the problem that we face, we must give the police more powers. The responsibility for doing that lies with the Government and Home Office Ministers. At the same time, we need to have more police officers.

The Government have failed to introduce the necessary legislation, and to recruit and retain police officers. Above all, they have shown themselves to be deeply complacent, and that is why I and my colleagues will vote for the motion this evening.

6.3 pm

Mr. Derek Twigg (Halton): It goes without saying that I condemn the shameful violence at the weekend, for which there can be no excuse. It is a pity and a disgrace that it should have overshadowed the victory over Germany for which we have waited so long.

The debate is not about political point-scoring, but I want to consider what the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) said, and to look back at the record of the Conservative party on this matter. The previous Conservative Government introduced four Bills relating to football violence and disorder—the Public Order Act 1986, the Football Spectators Act 1989, the Football (Offences) Act 1991 and the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. It took them seven years to get their first Bill on to the statute book, yet they have the cheek to tell us that we have not done enough to solve the problem of football violence. They had four attempts and still failed to achieve anything. It is a disgrace that Conservative Members should have the cheek to accuse the Government of not doing enough.

I should add that, even after the 1994 Act was passed, we saw the disgraceful scenes in Dublin in 1995. What did the Conservative legislation achieve to stop that sort of violence? We will take no lessons from the Opposition, given the disgraceful way in which they dealt with the problem.

How many times have hon. Members and Ministers debated and condemned violence by English football fans abroad? It is a terrible and continuing problem that has no easy solution. We must work out how to reduce and control the problem, and how to deal with the perpetrators. The newspapers print many intellectual, soul-searching articles asking whether the problem is an English phenomenon or whether it has to do with the loss of empire or with the fact that we won two world wars. I do not know the real reasons behind the problem: all I know is that the violence is wrong.

There is no getting away from the English mentality which says that we are superior to other nationalities. According to that way of thinking, it is all right to go abroad, abuse the people there and subject them to violence. That violence is directed not only at males but at women and children as well.

[Mr. Derek Twigg]

As has been noted, the people involved come from a drunken yob culture that is not acceptable. A sizeable minority of people believe that it is all right to go abroad and behave in that way. That is a disgrace.

There are many positive things to be said about our country, and some negatives. The same is true of all countries, and I do not understand the English conviction that we are superior. English people should be able to behave properly in other countries, and the violence that takes place is a disgrace.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will correct me if I am mistaken, but I understand that the Belgian authorities assured my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary that they would deal severely with people who were violent or disorderly. The measures used against them were to include prosecuting them, bringing them to trial and, if necessary, jailing them. Will my hon. Friend confirm that that assurance was given?

One of the biggest problems is that English yobs abroad think that they can get away with crimes of violence and abuse because they know that they will not be sent to jail. Some will not even be formally arrested, and the ones who are sent to jail are released quickly. I accept that people should not behave violently in the first place, but should not strong action be taken by the authorities in the countries concerned?

That strong action has been supported by my hon. Friend the Minister and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and by former Tory Ministers, but it never seems to be taken: people are merely removed from the streets and then sent back home. We can deal with the problem by making sure that people know that they will be arrested for what they do, and that they will be shamed. That would deter many of them from violent behaviour, and I shall be interested in my hon. Friend's response to that proposal.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary mentioned Colonel Blickie, the man in charge of the Belgian operation. He made the worrying admission that many of the people arrested over the weekend had not committed any offence. It is a double tragedy if genuine, peaceful football supporters who have done nothing wrong have been caught up in the problem. I do not blame the Belgian authorities for a problem that is caused by English people, but I hope that everything is being done to deal with the violence.

Many political points have been made in the debate, but certain elements have been missed. For example, an important factor in the violence is that strong beer has been sold all day to fans. Why was that allowed to happen? I am not sure that the weaker beer and other options available in Holland would have prevented trouble if England had played Germany there, but elsewhere strong beer was on sale all day and people were able to get drunk on it.

Moreover, why were large crowds allowed to gather in one place? Containing trouble in one area may be a good tactic, but the question remains an interesting one.

Flashpoint matches take place in the British domestic game, and the game against Germany was considered to be just such a match. In this country, games between Liverpool and Manchester United, Newcastle United and Sunderland or Celtic and Rangers are often played at midday or in the early afternoon. That stops the all-day drinking that causes people to get fuelled up and cause trouble, and it seems to bring about a significant reduction in violence.

I know that there is no excuse for the behaviour that we have seen, and that international matches are often required to fit in with the television schedules, but why has not the same approach been adopted with those games? Again, I hope that my hon. Friend will comment on that.

I was interested to hear the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) talk about people who, although they have not been convicted of football-related offences, may have convictions for other offences. The right hon. Lady said that we need to safeguards but, when challenged, would not say what those safeguards should be. We need to know what those safeguards would be, otherwise the right hon. Lady's remarks are just the usual rhetoric from the Conservatives attacking the Government.

If a yob is shown on video to be throwing a chair or a bottle or punching someone, that seems pretty good evidence to use to prevent more of those people from travelling abroad and stopping more trouble taking place, as many right hon. and hon. Members have suggested in this debate. I think that there are ways of ensuring that there is evidence that can and should be used in the future.

The Home Secretary pointed out that it is easier to stop people at the point of entry than to stop them leaving. That important point should be taken up more strongly with our counterparts in Europe, and I hope that something will be done about it.

It is important to football in general, and to football in this country in particular, that we host the world cup. This is the home of football—we invented the game. We have excellent stadiums and facilities, the support is fanatical and everyone who comes here from abroad comments on the good atmosphere at matches. It would be a travesty if we lost the opportunity to host the world cup because of what has happened recently.

Our police, authorities and organisations seem much better able to control any disorder or trouble. We have a strong record in dealing with trouble efficiently. I am not sure that there would be any trouble—there were some incidents at Euro 96 but, overall, with the Germans in Manchester and the Dutch and French in Liverpool, there was a good atmosphere. People enjoyed themselves, and it was a good occasion. I am quite sure that that could be recreated. I hope that we do not lose our opportunity to hold the world cup here because of the behaviour of these yobs.

This is a very important issue—it causes great national anxiety, and it shames the country. My constituents are absolutely sick and tired of it. There are measures that can be taken, but it ill behoves the Conservative party to suggest that the fault is the Government's. We must all share some of the blame but there is no simple remedy for solving the problem totally. The previous Government had at least four attempts during their time in office—

Mr. Heald: Five.

Mr. Twigg: The hon. Gentleman says that it was five. Even so, they failed, so they should not give us any

lessons. We will do what we can to solve the problem, and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will do all that he can to bring about some change in this area.

6.12 pm

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): We had the Home Secretary's statement yesterday, and we are having this debate on the Floor of the House today, against the backdrop of a minority of thugs and louts going abroad and committing violence and mayhem once again. It is a national humiliation, and it drags the reputation of our national sport into the gutter.

We must look at what more can be done to minimise the disgraceful behaviour that we have had to suffer over the past two weeks or so. As a number of right hon. and hon. Members have said, very little can be done with regard to first-time offenders. There will be terrible problems preventing them from doing anything because, by definition, they are unknown to the authorities. That applies not simply to football-related incidents, but to any walk of life and any crime. However, I believe—a point to which I alluded in earlier interventions on the Home Secretary—that there is one area of the law which should have been tightened up by now and which must be tightened up as soon as possible. I refer to the omission in the Football (Offences and Disorder) Act 1999 concerning the removal of passports for unconvicted football hooligans in certain circumstances.

I never envisaged the state using such a power willy-nilly and irresponsibly. During the proceedings on my private Member's Bill, I understood the Government to agree with me 100 per cent. that there should be a power in law to allow unconvicted individuals to have their passports withdrawn before an international match or championship if an application was made to the courts by the police and it was proven to the court's satisfaction that there were reasonable grounds for believing that if those individuals travelled abroad, they would engage in acts of violence, vandalism or hooliganism.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Burns: I am sorry but I will not, because time is limited.

A number of people have referred to civil liberties. I will give two examples to show that that principle is already engaged in our legal system. Anyone on bail pending a court appearance or a court case—who is, of course, innocent until proved guilty—can be asked to surrender their passport, and must do so. Secondly, in difficult child custody cases, if a court suspects that a child may be taken beyond the jurisdiction of a British court, the passport of the parent can be withdrawn, although no crime has been committed and no crime may be committed. There are examples of taking action prior to an event whose consequences would be difficult to rectify.

I believe that it would have been right to provide the power to withdraw the passport of unconvicted individuals, under certain circumstances and when a court was satisfied. I also believe—even more strongly today than I did when I asked the Home Secretary about it yesterday—that that measure should have been taken in time for Euro 2000. So that there could be no misunderstanding, I specifically asked the right hon. Gentleman in an intervention today whether it was right that about 30 to 35 per cent. of people who have been arrested in Belgium over the past two weeks have criminal convictions—not for football-related offences, but simple criminal convictions. The Home Secretary said yes.

No doubt, when we have the proper information and data in the coming weeks, we will be able to study this in greater detail. However, I suspect that a number of the individuals who were arrested have been convicted of crimes of violence, possibly even hooliganism or other anti-social behaviour. Those would have been valid grounds for a court to withdraw the passport of such individuals so that they could not travel abroad. Even though such convictions were for criminal offences and were not football-related, it shows that such people are minded to commit acts of violence during a football riot in any town or city in Belgium or Holland.

The Government have made a mistake by not using their majority and legislating for those powers, after the Queen's Speech, in time for Euro 2000. That is what I thought was their intention when I discussed the matter with the Home Office during the Committee stage of my Bill. I said that I would not proceed with that proposal because I was fearful, for the reasons that I outlined to the Home Secretary, that it might mean that the whole Bill would be lost last summer, either in this House or, more probably, in another place.

I urge the Government, even at this late stage, not to forgo taking those powers. If I have understood my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) correctly, the Opposition have pledged to assist the Government in allowing those provisions to come into force in time. It is important to have that power for future football matches and, as the hon. Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks) said, we desperately want to host the world cup in 2006. Events of the past two weeks have meant a setback, but we must prove to the world not only that are we determined to do all that we can to minimise and tackle football hooliganism—there is a common will about that on both sides of the House—but that we are backing our words and good intentions with positive acts. That would be a good act, and a signal both to the community outside this place who engage in football hooliganism and to those who will determine the awarding of the 2006 matches that we are determined to do all that we can within the law.

I find encouraging and welcome some of the comments made by the Home Secretary in his statement yesterday about international bans on convicted hooligans under the Football (Offences and Disorder) Act 1999, and the courts then adding the extra penalty of banning those individuals for up to a maximum of 10 years from travelling abroad to football matches.

That legislation was passed last summer, and I suspect that no Member taking part in the debates that preceded its enactment doubted that the courts would ruthlessly use the powers that it provided when football hooligans were convicted. We seem to be finding—it is still early days because the Act has been in force only since September last year—that the courts are reluctant to use the powers. There is anecdotal evidence to that effect. For that reason, I was encouraged by what the Home Secretary said about tightening procedures and encouraging the courts to use the powers that are available to them more extensively.

[Mr. Burns]

I am not a lawyer, but I think that I am right in saying that one of the most effective and immediate ways to try to redress the tardiness of the courts is for the Lord Chancellor immediately to issue guidance to them reminding them of the powers in the Act and telling them that they are expected to use those powers unless there are exceptional circumstances and compelling reasons for them not to impose international bans.

It would be a travesty, and a snub to the House, if the courts were to ignore the intention of Parliament, which is clearly specified in the 1999 Act. We are not talking of a section that is badly drafted and open to doubt. To strengthen the courts' resolve, the Act states that if the courts do not impose a banning order, they must in public state their reasons for not doing so. That part of the Act shows that we expected the courts to use the powers vigorously. I hope that the Lord Chancellor will remind the courts of that.

If the courts do not start doing what Parliament intended, I urge Home Office Ministers to give serious consideration to taking the next step forward and saying, "All right, we have tried. The courts are reluctant to do what Parliament wants, so we shall make it crystal clear to them by introducing a mandatory sentence for anyone who is convicted of a football-related offence. There can be a longer time for those who are convicted and sent to prison, and possibly a shorter time for those who are not imprisoned, to differentiate between the seriousness of crimes and the punishment that ensues." That must be done.

We shall not overcome or minimise the problem solely by means of legislation, although legislation is an important weapon in the armoury. However, something that I was reading today struck me as perhaps worthy of consideration, and that is naming and shaming football hooligans. I cannot claim credit for the suggestion. The practice started in the United States about 15 or 20 years ago, and it related to other crimes. Local newspapers would name and shame individuals who engaged in certain criminal activities or anti-social activities, to bring peer pressure to bear on those involved to improve their behaviour and social attitudes. It may be worth considering that local newspapers should name and shame those individuals who may not have a conviction but who have been arrested or deported from a foreign country, or who have been apprehended in this country, for hooligan or anti-social behaviour.

The Home Secretary has mentioned the extent to which middle-class people, such as lawyers and accountants, are being arrested for football hooliganism in Europe. Most people do not want to be named and shamed. They do not want their anti-social, drunken or violent behaviour drawn to the attention of their neighbours and the members of their local community. If naming and shaming could bring peer pressure to bear on them to take a more responsible attitude, it would be worth a try. That would be in addition to all the other measures that are needed and those that are set out in the legislation.

I hope that tonight, and for the rest of competition, we do not see a repetition of what we have had to put up with for the past two weeks. I am not confident that that will happen, but I hope that it will. Sadly, we are dealing with a minority of morons, who do not have the intelligence to behave rationally: it must be the big stick rather than the carrot if we are to get them back on track and stop the nation being repetitively and constantly shamed.

6.26 pm

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this sadly topical debate on football hooliganism. I am grateful also to the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) for giving me just enough time to make my contribution. However, I caution against the effectiveness of naming and shaming. Some of the so-called fans of whom I am aware who are involved in organised football violence do not consider naming to be shaming. Instead, they consider it to be a badge of honour. That is the awful truth with which we must deal.

I am not an impartial participant in the debate. I speak as a long-term football supporter and as a regular attender of football league matches for more than 30 years. I recently had the honour to be made vice-president of Reading football supporters' club, something of which I am particularly proud, as many people in Reading well know. However, I am ashamed to admit that, over the years, my town has produced some especially violent football hooligans, whose behaviour was highlighted in the recent BBC documentary entitled "MacIntyre Under Cover".

I was in the Chamber yesterday during the exchanges following the statement of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on Euro 2000, and on the disgraceful scenes of violence and mayhem that occurred over the weekend at Charleroi. With a few exceptions, the quality of the contributions did none of those present any favours. For example—I say this in all kindness—what does the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) know about football fans? How many football matches has she attended? Does she seriously think that football violence started when the Government were elected? Does she recollect events at places such as Turin, Heysel, Malmo and Dublin, which occurred when Conservative Governments were in power? It is not a party political matter. It is a damning indictment of the conduct of a significant minority of fans and of a rich seam of thuggery towards, and contempt for, people from other nations.

I say to the Government that it is a bit lame to try to pin the blame for the failure of the Football (Offences and Disorder) Bill promoted by the hon. Member for West Chelmsford on the actions of the lunatic right on the Conservative Benches, when many Labour Members had reservations. The lunatic right, or the extreme right, have a responsibility, but that is not only in this place. Its role is in the public promotion of racism and xenophobia, which is, sadly, a hallmark of certain aspects of English football.

I have spent a good deal of my political life working with anti-racist and anti-fascist groups in fighting organised and violent racism. I pay particular tribute to my colleagues from the *Searchlight* magazine for their invaluable work in exposing the strands of evil that link the extreme right wing in British politics with organised violence, both on and round the football terraces and against black, Jewish and Asian members of our community.

I return to our home-grown thugs from Reading. I am talking about Danny Walford and Andy Frain. We learn much about what motivates these people from the

company that they keep. Frain is a member of Combat 18—the name is derived from Hitler's initials—which provides bodyguards for holocaust apologists and other right-wing, racist speakers. He runs—I am sorry to tell my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks)—with the Chelsea headhunters, and he has been prosecuted for the dissemination of Ku-Klux Klan literature. He dreams, I fear, of establishing a white homeland in Essex. Walford, as the documentary showed, glories in violence. He has no political affinity with any one football club, and he boasts how easy it is to organise rucks and riots on the internet and via mobile phones.

Instead of trying to score political points, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald and some of her colleagues would do well to consider how their own public comments and actions affect the situation. They have helped to fuel the atmosphere of racial intolerance that lies at the heart of the problem.

In case any hon. Member doubts that the major problem underlying football hooliganism relates to the behaviour of English fans abroad rather than at domestic competitions, it is worth quoting House of Commons Library figures for arrests and attendances at football league and premier league matches. There has been a welcome reduction in football-related violence. In 1984–85, there were 7,000 arrests from 17 million attendances. Last year, the arrests fell to more than 3,000 while attendances rose to 24 million.

That is a tribute to the behaviour of the vast majority—the genuine football fans—and the efficiency of the police and clubs in tracking, identifying and banning known troublemakers and those involved with organised football violence. What happened in Charleroi at the weekend had absolutely nothing to do with football, and everything to do with alcohol-fuelled racism and xenophobia. How else can one explain comments made by a spokesman for the National Criminal Intelligence Service, who said on Sunday:

> The bottom line is that there were a lot of young men aged between 18 and 30 who get drunk and like to cause trouble. They talk about provocation but to these people someone speaking German is considered provocation.

That is a damning indictment.

Practical measures could be taken to isolate the thugs. I shall not use up time by listing them, but they offer only part of the answer. We must address the whole conduct of our politics. I want to associate myself with the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham, who condemned the street trash who have done so much to blight our national game and our reputation as a footballing nation.

Mr. Tony Clarke (Northampton, South): I appreciate that we are pressed for time but does my hon. Friend agree that we are hindered in tackling the street thugs and trash by the media's comments about Kraut-bashing and analogies with the second world war? Does not the media's little Englander attitude, which also, sometimes, expresses itself among those on the Conservative Benches, hinder our progress towards being less anti-European and not such little Englanders?

Mr. Salter: I agree. Sections of the tabloid media must bear their share of the responsibility.

We have proved that football hooliganism can be tackled effectively at home. The challenge is to take further practical steps to prevent known hooligans from travelling to games abroad. We must also tackle the racism and xenophobia that spews out filth in the back rooms of certain of our political parties, in the pages of some of our tabloid media and in far too many of the hearts and minds of young English males masquerading as football fans.

6.33 pm

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): We have had an excellent debate on this important subject. The hon. Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks) talked about the yob culture and its effect on the innocent. We must all realise that the hopes of many people, particularly the young, are tied up with the England football team as they face Romania tonight. I recently attended a football tournament for under-13s at which there was remarkable enthusiasm for Euro 2000 and for seeing England and our best players do well. Most of the nation will be glued to television, hoping that England will do well. We hope that our players, who have done rather better than usual so far, will be able to progress.

However, at the same time there is the dread thought for the people of Belgium and Holland that the violence might return. In an article earlier this week, a journalist put the matter rather well, writing:

> The politicians ought to front up in the midst of a riot to see for themselves what it feels like to be intimidated, abused, roughed up, vomited on, stolen from and, in every sense of the word, offended. Then, perhaps, they would not talk quite as much about civil liberties and nets, but instead find the guts to eradicate this plain yobbery.

Both sides of the House have offered strong condemnation of the oafs, yobs and louts who commit these acts and humiliate our country.

As a Conservative, even I feel that having our Prime Minister snubbed by the Belgian Prime Minister when he attempted to hold a meeting in front of the television about football hooligans displays the depths to which our country has sunk. We are being shamed and humiliated. In 1998, at the world cup in France, we saw a glimpse of the same thing. At Marseilles, a dreadful riot involved English fans, but it was not only the English who were to blame. At Lens that year, German fans went on the rampage, beating a gendarme almost to death.

There were, however, different reactions in England and Germany to those shocking events. The German reaction was to take emergency measures to try to stop that happening again. In England, within a week of the incident, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) tabled amendments in Committee on the Crime and Disorder Bill in which he sought to make it possible, in the cases of those known to be likely to cause riots, damage and insulting behaviour, for a court, on the application of the police, to be able to say that, for specified persons and matches, the risk of allowing travel would be too great. There is a civil liberties price to pay, but if refusing someone the ability to go to a football match abroad for three weeks every four years will save England the humiliation that we all feel at the actions of oafs, it is not too high a price.

My right hon. Friend made a suggestion back then with which most commentators agree. The same suggestion has been made on both sides of the House tonight. The Home Secretary said two years ago that he would sit down and work on the idea. I know that he has been busy; many problems have crossed his desk since then, and we have

[Mr. Oliver Heald]

all heard the numerous statements that he has had to make about them. However, he has spent two years sitting down and working on it, and nothing has emerged. That is unacceptable. He had an opportunity in 1998, in 1999 and again this year before the European championships began to pass legislation through the House with the support of the Opposition. He refused to do so.

We need to know whether the Home Secretary supports legislation. If he does, when will he do something about it? He has slurred the Opposition disgracefully by saying that it is all our fault. The fact is that he holds the job of Home Secretary and he is the man who can introduce legislation with unlimited time. He has failed to do so. The outside world—Europe, the football supporters and others—criticises him, and is right to do so. UEFA and the football supporters are entitled to say that the right hon. Gentleman has not done enough because he has not done enough.

It is feeble for the Government to say that they gave 1,000 names to the Dutch and the Belgians and that they sent warning letters to half that number, telling them that it would be rough for them if they went to Holland or Belgium. The German reaction to a similar problem was to turn back 2,500 people. They visited each of them and either marked or took away their passports. The Germans compiled good lists of the likely football hooligans, and set up border controls to ensure that those people did not get through. The result was that only 31 German, but 800 England, supporters were arrested.

The same problem was identified in 1998, but there was a different response. As both countries had that problem in 1998, it would hardly be surprising if people in UEFA wondered what had happened since then. They might compare the proactive approach of the Germans, which resulted in far less criminality by their supporters, with the lackadaisical approach of the Home Secretary, which led to 800 English people being deported from Belgium—the figure is rising all the time.

To say that this national humiliation is the fault, among others, of UEFA—as did the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes)—he criticised alcohol, which is fair enough—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman says that he did not criticise UEFA, but he did. He said that it was quite wrong of the organisation to make that threat, but the fact is that UEFA has had enough. His speech deserves little comment—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) says that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey beat me once, which is true but not relevant to this debate.

Several hon. Members—including the hon. Member for West Ham—pointed out that tabloid language was most unhelpful. We all agree on that. It was said that alcohol is a problem, as, of course, it is. It was said that the yob culture was all wrong and that we must do something about it, but no one knew quite what we could do.

We were left with some clear conclusions from my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield. He said, first, that the Government had not done enough to change the law and that, secondly, a culture had developed in which yobs and oafs could get away with their behaviour. He pointed out that the number of police had been cut dramatically by the Government.

My right hon. Friend said—fairly—that he was not trying to make a party political point on the matter, but I want to do so. The Government have cut police numbers by 2,500; there are 3,500 fewer specials and 90 police stations are closing every year. In such an atmosphere of slack law and order, it is not surprising that people think they can get away with it.

My right hon. Friend said that there should be a policy of zero tolerance towards football violence. During the years of Conservative Government, constant attempts were made, year after year, to meet the problems as they emerged and to clamp down on them—the hon. Member for Halton (Mr. Twigg) criticised that. The reason that the hon. Member for West Ham could say that we had sorted out the problems in the grounds was partly due to the action of the FA—of course—and partly to that of the clubs. However, in large part, it was due to measures passed in 1985 by the Conservative Government to crack down on alcohol abuse in grounds and to the Public Order Act 1986, which created new offences that cut down on the abuses that had been occurring.

The Football Spectators Act 1989 for the first time imposed restrictions to prevent people from going to international matches by compelling them to attend police stations during the match. The Football (Offences) Act 1991 and the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 were passed. As each problem emerged, the Conservatives passed laws to ensure that it was addressed.

No one claims that all the problems can be solved at a stroke. As soon as one is resolved, another emerges. However, we need a rigorous attitude. We need a Government who are prepared to take action when it is needed. Football violence and yobbery is a national curse; it must be dealt with rigorously. It is no good for the Government to say that they will look at the problem and then to fail to do so. It is no good for them to say that they will solve the problem one day and that they have held another seminar—as the Minister almost always does—sweet words, but no action. We need a commitment to legislation now. Will the Minister tell us that he will introduce legislation and, if so, when? We want action and we want it now.

The Home Secretary said that only a small number of those who were deported were known to the authorities as football hooligans. What about the football hooligans we know about? Eddie Curtis, the head of the hooligan spotting team, said that most of the main undesirables—the criminals on the NCIS list—had got into Holland and Belgium. I do not want to read more headlines, because the Government have failed to curtail the liberties of such people for three weeks every four years. Let us have some action—let us solve the problem.

6.46 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): We have debated a serious subject, and I genuinely thank the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) for tabling it. I welcome the debate. We have heard some outstanding speeches, and I hope that no one will be offended if I pay special tribute to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), who made an excellent speech, and to my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks), who made a first-class speech. I shall not follow him in his speculations as to the motives of UEFA

and so on, but I am sure the whole House wishes him well in his efforts with the 2006 world cup. I pay credit to the intelligence with which he so powerfully addresses the issues.

It was a shame that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald and the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) descended to crude party politics.

Mr. Heald: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Clarke: No, I shall not give way—[HON. MEMBERS: "Give way, give way."] When the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) spoke about small numbers, I thought that he might have been referring to the fact that, at times during the debate, only one, two or a maximum of three Opposition Back Benchers were in the Chamber. I wondered whether that reflected a general unhappiness with the stance taken by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald.

As the violence two nights ago demonstrates, the key point is that international football hooliganism is not the exclusive property of English troublemakers. However, the record of English hooligans outstrips that of all their competitors. We have all noted, in various ways, that we are heartily sick of their boorish, offensive, threatening and sometimes violent behaviour.

Several hon. Members rightly asked what individuals could do in such circumstances. To avoid individual responsibility is absolutely wrong. Individuals must take responsibility for their acts; they must behave in a sportsmanlike way; they must focus on good conduct and respect others. That is critically important, as several hon. Members pointed out.

The question being debated today is what the Government can do about those matters. That is a legitimate subject for debate, and I shall respond with three points. First, I shall describe what the Government can and should do operationally. Secondly, I shall set out what can be done legislatively—referring especially to the issues raised in a good speech by the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns), who has a fine record of fighting for such matters. Thirdly, I shall discuss the general social and cultural issues that were raised by several hon. Members.

On operational matters, policing is extremely important. The achievement of effective policing of football in this country and our expertise—manifested during Euro 96 and in our domestic games—are powerful. My hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Mr. Twigg) used those points to make a good argument for holding the 2006 world cup in this country. We want to lend that expertise to other countries. We discussed with Denmark, Holland and Belgium how policing could be strengthened throughout the continent. That is important. I had two meetings with Turkey's Minister of the Interior to discuss those matters in relation to his country's policing issues.

The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow)—who is not in his place—asked about intelligence. The police devote extensive resources to keeping close tabs on the most active football hooligans—often at great risk to the officers involved. The House will understand that I cannot reveal details, but outstanding work is done by spotters and intelligence liaison officers, and the whole House will share in paying tribute to the National Criminal Intelligence Service.

It is worth highlighting the work done in the European Union—by my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State, in Tampere, and the Prime Minister in Feira—to ensure closer liaison between criminal justice systems: not something the previous Government would have done. We are committed to effective joint working, which is critical in this, as in so many other respects. An important element is the international agreements with Holland and Belgium in particular and the operational discussions. Our police have a strong and positive relationship with forces in the rest of the European Union; the UK ports operations, which we continue to intensify, is an example of how joint working operates. I am sure that Opposition Members wish to encourage that work, which is critical to everything that we do and to which we are greatly committed.

We have done a lot, but much more needs to be done at every turn—including the international environment, both judicially and operationally. The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald and the hon. Members for North-East Hertfordshire and for West Chelmsford focused on legislation. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey said that our legislation is already among the toughest in Europe. There is an argument as to whether Germany's laws are tougher in some respects, given that country's different political and judicial traditions, but Britain is at the cutting edge of tough legislation. The Football (Offences and Disorder) Act 1999 built on the work of the previous Government and reflects a consistent tradition across all parties of seeking to strengthen effective legislation against hooliganism.

I acknowledge that more can be done. The passports legislation associated with the hon. Member for West Chelmsford was the subject of a party knockabout in today's debate, but we are looking at doing more in an appropriate way. My right hon. Friend referred to merging domestic and international banning orders. We have made announcements about stopping people from returning to the Low Countries and partnerships with clubs. My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham also made a number of specific proposals for strengthening existing legislation.

I assure the hon. Member for West Chelmsford, who put his points extremely effectively, that we are prepared to legislate—including on naming and shaming. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) made important points in that respect. Key to that is that any legislative change that we might have made would have had little or no impact on events in the Low Countries at this time.

Mr. Heald: Does the Minister accept that it is necessary to have the sort of football behaviour order that my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) proposed two years ago? If so, when will one be introduced? Is it correct—as was said by Eddie Curtis, head of the spotting team—that most of the undesirables are in Holland and Belgium as we speak?

Mr. Clarke: That is not the information we have from NCIS. Mr. Curtis made it clear that he is deeply frustrated with the failure of the courts to use their existing powers to impose banning orders—a point also made by the hon. Member for West Chelmsford. We are considering tightening or extending legislation—including football behaviour orders. There is plenty of scope for partisan knockabout, but any serious review of recent events in the

[Mr. Clarke]

Low Countries and what must be done shows that legislative change of the kind that preoccupies the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire would not have resolved the current situation.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham and the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey made effective points about yob culture. Twenty six per cent. of men born in 1968 had convictions by the age of 24, and nearly 10 per cent. had convictions for violence against the person, sexual offences or robbery—an appalling picture of the society that has developed and that reflects convictions that did not necessarily have anything to do with football violence. We have to turn that around.

The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield mentioned law and order in the community. Other issues that need to be addressed include the way in which young people are brought up, xenophobia in the media, law and order, education and alcohol. One Opposition Member sneered about seminars that bring together people dealing with alcohol-related issues, but over 18 Tory years nothing was done. Alcohol is a big factor in crime. The alcohol industry, retail and licensing trades want to work on that connection—and the White Paper on licensing addresses some of the issues. Alcohol is important is looking for the motive force behind crime—almost as important as drugs, in some respects.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham and others mentioned peer pressure and families. Individualism is to be found in some people but—I am not making a party political point—the phrase, "There is no such thing as society" was extremely damaging. It might be argued that it is okay to say, "There's no such thing as society," but I fundamentally disagree. Government policies on crime reduction partnerships put in place by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, and the initiatives in education—by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment—in health and in other areas are aimed at building communities and getting people to work together in an acknowledgement that society is important.

There are no quick fixes, but we must work in that direction rather than in the opposite direction that we inherited. That will be difficult, but we are introducing a series of measures focused on all the issues that I have mentioned. I urge right hon. and hon. Members to vote against the Opposition motion—which is all about short-term, blame-culture fixes—and to vote for the Government amendment, which identifies the real problems and supports measures to change society in a way that will eliminate football hooliganism in future, which is what we all want.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 132, Noes 363.

Division No. 235] **[6.59 pm**

AYES

Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Baldry, Tony
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maginnis, Ken
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Peter Atkinson.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*

Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Shef'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Opik, Lembit
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*

Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Clelland and
Mr. Clive Betts.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House wholly deplores the violence in Belgium during the Euro 2000 competition perpetrated by United Kingdom citizens, and condemns the irresponsibility and criminality of those involved; welcomes the good co-operation between the British police and National Criminal Intelligence Service with the law enforcement agencies in Belgium, the Netherlands and France by which a large number of individuals with banning orders from football-related convictions against them have been prevented from travelling to Belgium and the Netherlands; strongly supports the many measures already taken by Her Majesty's Government, the police and other agencies; and endorses the further measures announced by the Secretary of State for the Home Department yesterday.

Government Planning Policy

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): I must tell the House that Madam Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.17 pm

Mr. Archie Norman (Tunbridge Wells): I beg to move,

That this House condemns the apparent intention of Ministers to ignore the recent vote by members of SERPLAN to limit the number of new houses built in the South East and to 'punish' members of SERPLAN for taking that decision; calls on Ministers to abandon their attempts to impose overall figures for new housebuilding on regions of the country; deplores the Government's failure even to meet its own targets for new development on brownfield sites; regrets the continuing decline of towns and cities and, on almost the first anniversary of the Rogers Report, the Government's failure to address the vital issues of urban regeneration, or growing internal migration and the drift from towns and cities to the countryside, or homelessness; and calls upon the Government to halt the decline of the cities, bring forward measures to protect greenfield sites and the Green Belt, and take steps to return more power to local communities to decide planning and housebuilding priorities.

First, I am sorry that the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions cannot be with us this evening. I understand that his mother is not well and I am sure that I speak for all hon. Members in saying that we fully understand the reasons for his absence. We wish his mother well and hope that she has a speedy recovery.

Several of my colleagues may believe that the timing of this debate is not ideal but, from the point of view of the residents and councillors in the south-east, it is apposite as the Serplan period of consultation has just concluded. As a result, our debate on an issue that has caused people in the south-east great anxiety and tension will give the Minister for Housing and Planning an opportunity to discard all his speeches in previous Opposition day debates on the matter and put to one side the well-thumbed copies of statements of denial and all the talk of moving away from predict and provide. It will enable him, for the first time, to come clean on how he plans to answer the clear response that the councillors and residents of the south-east have given as part of the Serplan process that he created.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Norman: No, I want to make progress.

The issue is a formative one for people in this country, not just in the countryside or the south-east, but in the inner cities, the north and the south-west. Conservative Members believe that the Government's policy on house building is a national folly. As my distinguished predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) put it, it is like

taking a carpet knife to an old master.—[*Official Report*, 2 November 1999; Vol. 337, c. 103.]

The policy perpetuates the vicious circle of migration from the north, the loss of countryside for ever, congestion on our roads and the decline of our inner cities. Quite simply, it is the wrong houses in the wrong places.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Does my hon. Friend accept that not only is that happening in the

south-east, but people in the west midlands are equally disturbed about the use of the green belt? Does he not think it an outrage that some 5,000 new homes will be built in south Staffordshire, while brownfield sites in the centre of Birmingham, Walsall, Wolverhampton and other towns remain undeveloped?

Mr. Norman: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct and, as ever, is a potent voice for the west midlands.

Against the background of a perpetuating cycle of declining inner cities and the concreting over of the countryside, the Government claim, as the Minister has done in previous debates, that they have decentralised the process; that an extra 200,000 houses can be built in the south-east with no additional use of greenfield sites; that, incredibly, there is no such thing as north-south migration, and that the new housing in the south-east is needed for the sons and daughters of the existing population. Those claims fly in the face of all the facts.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): What would the hon. Gentleman say to people in the Thames valley who are looking forward to the extra 200 police officers that are to be provided and to the Police Federation, which is saying that the price of housing is so high that those police officers will not be able to afford to stay in the Thames valley? Does he accept that his party's policy is a recipe for running down our public services, and that we need to provide affordable housing for key public service workers, such as police officers, firefighters and health workers?

Mr. Norman: I simply say to the hon. Gentleman that it is for his constituents to decide how many houses are built in the area. We have the confidence to allow local people to make such decisions because we know that they will be right. I do not know whether he has the same confidence.

The Government have erected a facade of deception, are juggling the numbers and are responsible for overbearing centralisation. Most bizarre of all is their claim to have decentralised and to have moved away from predict and provide. They claim to have moved to a five-year planning horizon, when the local plan for every council in the south-east is worked out on a 10-year basis and we all know that major infrastructure and development projects need a more distant time horizon.

The real process is one of protracted negotiation, and of the Government predicting more houses and pressurising councils to offer up the maximum, as they pressurised Serplan to do. They issue diktats when local councils do not meet central needs. Nowhere is that better illustrated than in the Minister's petulant response to the Serplan consultation and the absurd claims that he made only last week in environment questions that Conservative Members have made this a party political issue. We all know, as he should, that the councillors and residents of the south-east have made this an issue because they deeply resent his overbearing approach.

Some councils made their position clear long before the Serplan process took place. Jane Pitman of Hertfordshire county council said:

> Anything above what Serplan recommended is unacceptable.

Richard Payne of Bedfordshire county council said:

> In Bedfordshire we have taken heed of Government advice and consulted every district council, parish council and stakeholder with an 80 per cent. response. Almost all of these were totally opposed to the type of increase that the Government is proposing.

Those councillors were speaking for local residents long before the Serplan process took place.

All we are saying is that local residents and councillors of the south-east should be listened to first, and if the Minister is at all sincere about moving away from predict and provide, he will respond by telling us that he will take their views into account.

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Mr. Nick Raynsford): The hon. Gentleman referred to councillors in Bedfordshire who expressed concerns about additional housing requirements some time ago. Can he tell the House whether they objected in 1996, when the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), the then Secretary of State for the Environment, required Bedfordshire county council to provide 2,100 extra dwellings?

Mr. Norman: It has been an astonishing feature of the Minister's response, every time that the House has debated this matter, that he refers to past issues. He is now responsible for planning; he devised the Serplan process, and he, not we, said that the Government had moved away from predict and provide. He has come up with the shallow pretence of decentralisation. I could go on quoting local councils for a long time, if he wishes, but he is answerable, and it is for him to tell us whether he will listen to the views of local people and councils. He will have an opportunity to do so in a moment.

Is not the truth that the process has been a charade, and the idea that we have moved to a five-year process of review and monitor is complete nonsense? Councils now preparing their local plan are working on a 10-year basis. The Minister is interested in consultation only as long as the answer is yes, and he is interested in decentralisation only as long as councillors will do what they are told.

I know that the Minister has said that he was misreported but, for the record, will he clearly retract his comments in *The Sunday Telegraph* and in radio interviews to the effect that Serplan's views would be ignored and that councillors who had objected to his proposals would be punished? Will he apologise to the residents and councillors of the south-east?

Mr. Raynsford: I will not retract those comments because I never made them. I remind the hon. Gentleman that I assured him in the House last week that I was grossly misrepresented in *The Sunday Telegraph*. I have always said that we will listen to the views of Serplan and others, and I am only sorry that he did not, in the normal custom of the House, accept that assurance and that he has carried on peddling this nonsense.

Mr. Norman: Of course we accept what the Minister has to say, although it is not what *The Sunday Telegraph* had to say. That is a matter for the Minister and *The Sunday Telegraph*. However, he has a chance to respond today and to say not only that he was misreported but what he is going to do about this issue. The consultation process is closed. He has a chance to say that

[Mr. Norman]

he will take all views into account and that he will cease his bullying tactics. He can then demonstrate that he is sincere about decentralisation.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Will the hon. Gentleman retract, and apologise for, the grossly insulting comments that he made about my constituents in Toxteth during his visit to Liverpool yesterday? Or was he misquoted?

Mr. Norman: I am delighted that the hon. Lady raises that matter because it gives me the chance to point out, as I will demonstrate later, that building executive homes in the south-east perpetuates the migration from the inner cities in the north. When I was in Toxteth and in Kensington, which is also a deprived area in Liverpool, I said that it is a tragedy that over the past few years the Government have put so much money into building fortress-like houses and buildings in deprived areas, that they cannot now afford to provide adequate community policing. That means that the crime level in Liverpool has risen by 3 per cent. in the past year and that during the three years of this Government, the number of policemen on the beat in the city has declined by 160.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): Does my hon. Friend think that it is perfectly reasonable to doubt the Government's bona fides when they say that they will listen to Serplan's complaints, given that they not only refused to listen to Sussex, but turned their back and told Sussex that it should jolly well have as many houses as they said? Sussex took the Government to court, but they went ahead. Why should we believe that they will change their mind now?

Mr. Norman: My right hon. Friend speaks with great authority on the subject, and the Minister will want to respond directly to the point he makes later. This is not just a matter of decentralisation; even on a central view, the Government's policy is wholly wrong.

As the Minister has said, his own projections show that 70 per cent. of the new household requirement for the next 20 years is for single people. Most of them are elderly people, living alone. A further 10 per cent. approximately is for single parents, who are much in need of affordable housing. They want to continue to live in the towns and cities where they have always lived, yet there is no evidence that the process that has been embarked upon of building 50 per cent. or more of the houses on green fields in the south-east will deliver any such result.

Serplan recommended that 40 per cent. of the new housing should be affordable, but the Minister ignored its recommendation in his guidance. Only two months ago, Shelter stated that it was concerned about the inadequate provision for affordable and social housing in that guidance. Only a week ago, homelessness figures were published showing that priority homeless cases are at the highest level for the past four years. Far from providing homes for the elderly and less-well-off, which is the real challenge and real need, the policy will deliver identikit executive homes—the same type and design in Yorkshire as in Kent, in Suffolk as in Cornwall—and it will leave the elderly, the less able and single people behind in the inner cities.

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin) *rose—*

Hon. Members: Tory gain.

Mr. Bradley: Looking at some Opposition Members, I think that Tory Regaine would be more to the point, especially in the case of the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant). What are the right houses and where are the right places for them? If the hon. Gentleman allows local authorities the discretion to take their decisions without national guidance and they refuse to accommodate those houses, what steps would he take to ensure that housing provision was made for those who need it most?

Mr. Norman: The right houses are those that local people decide on under an obligation to provide for local needs. We believe that many local authorities in areas of economic expansion in the north as well as the south will decide to build more houses because they want to fuel expansion for their local employers. We will trust local people to take the right decisions, properly informed by the resources of central Government.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Norman: I shall not give way because I want to deal with the point made by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman). She made the mistake of referring to migration from the cities of the north and urban renewal. Not only are the wrong type of houses being built, but the process will perpetuate the cycle of urban decline and the loss of green fields. There has been much contention about the facts, and the facts about migration from one region to another are less than clear. The Deputy Prime Minister has stated that he does not believe that migration from the north to the south is an issue. In his statement on the Serplan consultation, he said:

> Let there be no doubt that demand for additional housing in the south-east is not the result of massive north-south migration, but mainly the result of migration within the south-east, particularly from London to surrounding towns and villages—[*Official Report*, 7 March 2000; Vol. 345, c. 864.]

The figures show that the actual pattern is one of migration, as we all know, from the cities to the countryside, from the north and midlands to London and from London to the south. The arithmetic is complicated. *[Interruption.]* Before Labour Members jump in, let me share some basic facts with them. Between 1991 and 1997, net migration from the north was 114,000 people. Net migration to the south-east was 132,000, and net migration from London was 32,000 to the south-east in 1997. There is a clear pattern, which we all recognise because we see it on the ground, and those hon. Members who have constituencies in the north will recognise it, too. People are moving out of the cities into the countryside, from the midlands to London and from London to the south-east. It is simply nonsense to say that migration from our cities is not a major problem—it is.

Two thirds of the new houses to be built in the south-east under the Government's policy will be occupied not by single people but by families; not by

people who live in the south-east, but by people leaving London. That gives the lie to the Minister's claim that the proposals are about accommodating local people. In *The Independent* of 13 June, he said:

> it is about housing for the sons and daughters of existing residents, and people who are essential to the local economy.

What complete nonsense. His own projections state that the requirement is not for those sons and daughters; 70 per cent. of it is for single people, most of whom are elderly. We know the track record—executive homes are being built, more than 60 per cent. of which have three bedrooms or more. Sons or daughters indeed.

Does the Minister think that all the new houses in the two new towns in world-class countryside in Devon, in Cambridge and in Ashford, which will treble in size, will be occupied by sons and daughters of the people of Ashford, Cambridge, Plymouth or Exeter? That suggestion is simply ludicrous and untenable. We know that it is not true, and he knows that it is not true. If he thinks that, he must explain how Ashford can treble its population without importing people from London and the north. We all know that it is complete nonsense.

The problem exists not only in the south, but in the cities of the north. I could take hon. Members to areas in the centre of Leeds that are 3 miles from a thriving commercial centre—the boom town of the north—where there are housing estates with empty homes, with 50 per cent. of people unemployed and with little local investment. I could take them to places 10 miles out of Leeds, such as Thorp Arch or Boston Spa, and show them executive homes being built on green fields so that income-generating families can move out of the centre and travel back in their cars to work. Is that sustainable? What has that to do with the Government's transport strategy or inner city regeneration?

We have to accept that, if executive homes are built in the countryside, there will be a declining school roll in the city, or an empty house left behind in the most deprived urban areas. Shops will be boarded up in deprived areas, as I saw in Toxteth only yesterday. Crime rates will rise in the inner city, as I saw in Liverpool only yesterday, and another commuter will have to travel back in from the green fields, adding to congestion.

The defining characteristic of the great cities of Europe—Paris, Düsseldorf, Munich, Amsterdam, Madrid or Barcelona—is that they are residential cities in which families want to live and work. The consequence of Government policy is that it will perpetuate the trend of people migrating from the cities. The hard fact is that until we get entrepreneurs and developers to apply their ingenuity to redeveloping brownfield land first and greenfield land only last, we will never create the accommodation that income-earning people need to stay in this country's great cities.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, especially as he mentioned my constituency. Does he accept that, if new homes are not built in Cambridge, many of the sons and daughters of local residents will not be able to afford houses there? Is he aware of the work of Professor Christine Whitehead, who has said that Cambridge will be unable to sustain its labour force after the middle of the decade or provide affordable houses for its workers? That has been backed up by staff from Addenbrooke's hospital, who are concerned about the difficulty of recruiting workers into the health service in my region.

Mr. Norman: As the hon. Lady knows, the point about Cambridge, which the Minister will accept, is that the extra houses built there will not only be for sons and daughters of local people, but for people migrating out of Leicester, Birmingham and other parts of the country, and they will leave behind a declining population. She might like to tell us whether she is in favour of redefining the green belt and building on the green belt around Cambridge. Is the Minister in favour of that, too? Is not the truth behind the Government's determination to build so many houses on green fields that the green belt is no longer sacrosanct? Is that not exactly why the Minister now says that the green belt is no longer safe under Labour and needs continual revision and redefining?

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman has made another completely false allegation. I have never said that the green belt is not safe under Labour. Will he withdraw that completely unfounded allegation?

Mr. Norman: The Minister says that he has not said that the green belt is not safe under Labour; during his speech, he will have plenty of chances to explain what he meant when he said that the green belt has to be constantly redefined and revised. In Cambridge, in Newcastle and in the south-west we see that the green belt is no longer safe under this Government.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Is my hon. Friend aware that the Labour leader of North Hertfordshire district council, Councillor David Kearns, recently attacked the Government? He said:

> We feel very let down. The Government claims to be committed to . . . the environment and regenerating urban areas . . . now we have them supporting plans to rape 2,000 acres of Green Belt around Stevenage.

Mr. Norman: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. The rape of Stevenage and the removal of the green belt around it—one of the Deputy Prime Minister's first acts on coming to power—signalled his intentions for the future very clearly.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): Before my hon. Friend moves on from the green belt and Labour's record on the Cambridge green belt, is he aware that the Labour city council, supported by the hon. Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell), was the authority that pushed for a review of the green belt to free up sites inside the Cambridge green belt for large-scale additional development?

Mr. Norman: My hon. Friend is correct.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes) *rose—*

Mr. Norman: I want to make progress.

Mr. Steen: Before my hon. Friend moves on, will he give way on that point?

Mr. Norman: Yes.

Mr. Steen: My hon. Friend has mentioned brownfield sites. Is he aware that the Government's plans for

[Mr. Steen]

new-build houses depend entirely on building 60 per cent. of new housing on brownfield sites and that not only are the local authorities unhappy about those plans, but that the European Union has ruled that the Government cannot build on brownfield sites if that entails giving a grant to the owners of the land because that would be an unfair subsidy? Is he aware of that problem and do the Government realise that their entire housing policy will be destroyed if that EU ruling is upheld?

Mr. Norman: My hon. Friend is something of an expert on these subjects and I know that he wants to speak later. As ever, he has made an original and different contribution.

The price of building in the south-east will be borne not only by the inner-city areas of the north, but by the taxpayer. The south-east is one of the most congested parts of the country and the infrastructure is simply not available to accommodate the 900,000 new houses that the Minister wants to have built there. Building 900,000 new houses implies not only new housing, but new roads, street lighting, hospitals and schools. We estimate that such a number of new houses also implies 2,000 km of new road at minimum, as they would have to be connected to other areas, as well as 3,250 hospital beds, 300,000 school places and a total price tag of £7.7 billion.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Norman: No, I want to make progress.

However, there is no provision for that investment and no plan to provide for it. The roads are more congested and the railways more crowded than ever. Investment in roads is declining. In the south-west, there are other problems—my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) will want to mention those to do with sewerage—and concerns over water resources. The Government have made no provision for the flood plains of Kent and none for renewable energy. That is not environmental sustainability, but environmental vandalism.

Incredibly, the Deputy Prime Minister claims that 200,000 extra houses can be built in the south-east with no extra use of green fields. However, the Government give the impression of simply playing with numbers and ratios. As he said in the Frost interview on Sunday:

"People think, 'Isn't this about spinning and spinning is about misleading people'".

That is exactly the situation. The Government have claimed that those dwellings can be accommodated through terraced housing and greater density of building. They pray in aid Poundbury, but the hard arithmetic shows that to get an extra 200,000 houses in the south-east the density will have to be 50 houses a hectare greater than that achieved in London itself.

Mr. Raynsford: No.

Mr. Norman: Yes, that means the loss of green spaces in the towns and villages. Yes, it means the return of 1960s and 1970s high-rise.

Mr. Raynsford: Wrong again.

Mr. Norman: The Minister knows that the targets cannot be delivered in the south-east. He knows that the weight of housebuilding is overwhelming. *[Interruption.]* Instead of shaking his head, when he makes his speech why does not he list the counties and county councils in the south-east that believe that they can achieve 60 per cent. of new building on brownfield sites at that rate of construction over 20 years? Why does not he tell us exactly how that will be achieved and describe the implications of the 60 per cent. figure? What densities will be required to achieve it? Why does not he come clean?

Fiona Mactaggart *rose—*

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Norman: No, I am about to conclude.

The challenge for Britain today is to convert existing accommodation for single and elderly people, to rebuild our inner cities, to restore the ownership of neighbourhoods by local people—*[Interruption.]*—to revitalise local government—*[Interruption.]* Does the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) wish to make a point?

The challenge today is to revitalise local government and to protect our countryside, yet instead we have the most centralised policy ever, a determination to ignore local views and steamroller local councils—a policy that will perpetuate the decline of the cities and do nothing to address the needs of the elderly and the less well off. The countryside will be concreted over with identikit executive homes. Quite simply, we will get the wrong houses in the wrong places.

7.47 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I beg to move, to leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"welcomes the Government's move away from the previous 'predict and provide' approach to housing provision and the introduction of a 'plan, monitor and manage' policy under the new regional planning policy arrangements, including a target for building 60 per cent. of all new housing on previously developed land and the tightening of planning controls on out of town shopping and ending the profligate use of land; supports the Government's policies on protecting the Green Belt and improving the use of all land and preventing piecemeal greenfield development; believes the Government's planning, housing, transport, countryside protection, welfare and economic policies will achieve more sustainable and equitable patterns of both urban and rural development; welcomes the Government's continued commitment to sustainable growth, safeguarding the countryside and promoting an urban renaissance; supports the targeting of regeneration initiatives in areas of greatest need and the Government's inter-linked policies for revitalising towns and cities and protecting the countryside; and applauds the Government's aim of giving everyone the opportunity of a decent home and recognises that the doubling of housing investment and other social housing reforms introduced by this Government are creating stronger, safer and more sustainable communities."

First let me express my appreciation for the thoughtful and kind words of the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) about the Deputy Prime Minister's mother. The whole House will join us both in wishing her a speedy and full recovery.

The choice of this evening's debate—our sixth on the subject in the past three years—is telling. To focus attention on planning and housing when England's football team kick off in a crucial European championship

match implies either extraordinary stupidity or great political acumen. Could it be that the masterminds of Tory central office were unaware of the Euro 2000 timetable when they sought the debate? That is possible, but even I cannot believe they are so crassly incompetent as not to have realised that tonight the nation would be glued to the television screen—not, I hasten to add, to watch the parliamentary channel.

If we give those masterminds the benefit of the doubt and assume that they knew about the England-Romania match, what is the object of the exercise? I suspect that two thoughts were uppermost in their minds. The first was to provide a perfect cover for another lacklustre performance by the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells, whose legendary ability to empty the House will be excused on grounds of football mania. Secondly, having convincingly lost the past five debates on the subject, the Opposition clearly relish the chance to initiate a debate when no one will take a blind bit of notice of what they say. That way, they can masquerade as a concerned Opposition without having once again to witness their hopelessly inadequate case falling apart in the full glare of publicity.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Raynsford: I give way to the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman).

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that there are twice as many Conservative as Labour Members present? We regard this subject as significant, whereas we can assume that the vast majority of Labour Members have nothing better to do than gawp at the television.

Mr. Raynsford: The speech of the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells explains the empty seats only too clearly. Hon. Members were driven away by tedium.

Mr. Fabricant: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the Government Whip to go around imploring Labour Members to stay in the Chamber?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order for the Chair. We are considering a serious subject. I suggest that we deal with it seriously. I call Mr. Raynsford.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) *rose—*

Mr. Raynsford: It is difficult to comply with your request, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if I am interrupted the moment I rise to my feet. However, I shall give way.

Mr. Robathan: First, will the Minister confirm that Government Whips determine the days on which specific business will be considered, and that they allocated today for Opposition business? Secondly, will he confirm that, apart from a few louts and perhaps Labour Members, most people in this country believe that the subject that we are considering is much more important than whether the English football team beat Romania tonight?

Mr. Raynsford: We are holding an Opposition day debate. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman does not realise that the Opposition choose the timing of such debates. His remarks were offensive. I hope that, on reflection, he will realise that it is inappropriate to attempt to compare hon. Members with the louts who have besmirched this country's reputation in Brussels.

In contrast to the Opposition, we relish the opportunity for a thorough and full debate on the subject, and I hope that, by the end of this evening's debate, the England team will have scored as many goals as us.

Any serious analysis of the issue must start with the recognition that we face some tough and serious challenges that require thoughtful and mature political responses. We live on a small island; we are already one of the most densely populated areas in Europe, and we have a clear responsibility to protect our countryside and our environment.

We have an equally clear responsibility to meet the housing needs of our country. They include the needs of the sons and daughters of existing residents who want to continue to live in areas where they were born and grew up, and those of key workers, such as nurses, teachers and police officers, who are essential to vital public services. We must also meet the needs of those who are fundamental to economic success, so that businesses are not prevented from expansion and development by lack of housing for their work force. To pretend that there is an easy way of reconciling the potentially conflicting pressures is facile. So too is the assumption—much promoted by the Opposition since they became an Opposition but different from the line that they took when they were in government—that the problem can be resolved by allowing local councils to put up the shutters and say, "No more housing in our area."

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): Will the Minister consider visiting my constituency? He could then visit residents in Pagham, and hear about their fight to stop a development of 700 houses off Hook lane, or residents in Felpham, who face the prospect of 700 houses in their village, or residents in Littlehampton, who face the building of 1,000 houses in Toddington. If he met those people, he would understand the genuine anxiety caused to people in west Sussex by the amount of building that will happen as a result of the Government's policies.

Mr. Raynsford: Most housing that is being built is on sites for which the previous Government granted permission. I was trying to make it clear that those who are worried about the countryside and those who are anxious about the housing needs that I outlined are equally concerned. The issue requires balance and thoughtful and careful policies, not facile, knee-jerk reactions.

Let me quote the words of the last Conservative Secretary of State for the Environment, the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), in a chapter he contributed to a volume entitled "Town and Country", which was published in 1998. He began by making a robust defence of his estimate of the demand for 4.4 million homes up to 2016. Though what I assume is a typing error in the book alarmingly suggests that he thought that 4.4 million homes would be required by 2006, I cannot believe that that is the case. He goes on:

> If we accept that there is a demand for 4.4 million or more new units we could of course simply refuse to allow the demand to be met. The trouble with that answer is that the people who would be

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hit are those least able to cope with the result, and often the most deserving of a new home. It will not be the richer and more competent members of society, since they can afford to pay the high prices which such a shortage would inevitably produce. It is also quite clear that no government would see this solution as remotely politically possible . . .

How prescient of the right hon. Gentleman to recognise that his party has no prospect of returning to government.

Mr. Gummer: If the Minister had continued with the chapter, he might have noticed that I suggested that the real problem was the location of the houses. Before we build the houses, we say that everybody will live where they want to live. We then build the houses in a specific place. When people move into those houses, we say, "We were right to build them there because that's where they have moved." The Minister should be prepared to ensure that the new homes that are needed are the sort of homes that one-person households want, and that they are not built on greenfield sites, but in our cities and places other than the south-east.

Mr. Raynsford: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that it is important to ensure that houses are built to meet need. In the chapter that I cited, he rightly highlighted the growth of single-person households. He also said that we should try to build the houses on brownfield sites. That is the Government's policy. His chapter, which was mostly admirable, is far from the policy that Conservative Front-Bench Members espouse. He might reflect on the extent to which the Conservative party in opposition has departed from the right hon. Gentleman's position when in government.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): The Minister claimed that the bulk of demand, which he aims to meet, will come from single-person households. Why have the Government agreed to the rape of the green belt in Hitchin to build 10,000 houses if the bulk of the need is for single-person households? Why are the majority of the houses that are being built for families? That is the question that my constituents ask most frequently.

Mr. Raynsford: As the right hon. Gentleman knows from our many exchanges about the issue, Hertfordshire county council took the view that it was better to concentrate the development that was inevitable in Hertfordshire in one area rather than spread it throughout the county. That was the basis for the decision. Although the right hon. Gentleman did not agree with it, it was a local decision.

Mr. Lilley *rose—*

Mr. Raynsford: If the right hon. Gentleman will bear with me, I am trying to answer his first question. If he waits to see the pattern of development, he will hopefully see the benefits of the policies that we are introducing to ensure mixed developments through a proper mix of housing types and sizes, and affordable and market housing. That is preferable to the proliferation of executive boxes that characterised the planning policies of the Government of whom he was a member.

Mr. Lilley: I shall clarify the position. The decision to which the Minister refers was not a democratic local decision. It was taken by the ruling group of Liberal Democrats and Labour members, with a majority of one. They refused to let the full council consider it; only 14 of the 70-odd councillors in Hertfordshire voted in favour of the measure to which the Government subsequently agreed. Will the Minister now answer the question: why are the houses not for single people—who, according to the Minister, represent the bulk of demand—but for families?

Mr. Raynsford: It is always interesting to hear people justify their departure from democratic decisions with which they do not agree. It is always possible to find ways of disapproving of the majority view. That is not sensible; it is right to accept that the decision was democratic, whether the right hon. Gentleman likes it or not. There are democratic decisions that I do not necessarily like; that is life. We should not try to repudiate decisions that we do not like on the tenuous basis that the right hon. Gentleman outlines.

I was speaking about the article by the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal. It continued:

People who see house prices rocket, and who find that they cannot afford the home which they once expected to buy, will take their political revenge.

Quite so. That is why, when the right hon. Gentleman was Secretary of State, he was not prepared to stand aside while local authorities sought to make provision for housing needs that he thought was inadequate. Accordingly, he required Kent county council to increase its provision for housing by 2,900 dwellings in December 1996; he required Berkshire county council to increase its provision for housing by 3,000 dwellings in June 1995; and he required Bedfordshire to increase its provision for housing by 2,100 dwellings in October 1996.

That is what the Conservatives did when they were in government just four or five years ago, and to pretend now that we can do the exact opposite without adverse consequences is facile and utterly unconvincing. Indeed, to pretend that local councils can put up the shutters on new housebuilding without the unhappy results so cogently spelled out by the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal in his book flies dangerously close to hypocrisy.

However, we should not simply stand aside while housebuilders gobble up acre after acre of greenfield land, as they were allowed to do in the 1980s and early 1990s, when the Conservative party was in power.

Mr. Steen: As I understand it, we are trying to get as many houses as possible built on brownfield sites. I entirely support that. The 17 June edition of *Local Government First*, which is my regular reading matter, states that the Government's brownfield plans will be hit by a European Union ruling. The article continues:

The European Commission has thrown Government efforts to encourage development of former industrial "brownfield" sites into disarray.

The suggestion is that if the brownfield land is owned by a company, European money will constitute a subsidy, which will distort the market, and therefore should not be allowed. Will the Government's policy on brownfield sites be thrown into disarray?

Mr. Raynsford: No, our policy will not be thrown into disarray, because we are determined to proceed with it.

The hon. Gentleman will understand that we are in negotiation and discussion about the implications of that European decision, which I will not say we welcomed—obviously not—but we are trying to work constructively, to ensure that our policy objectives can be taken forward.

I spoke about our commitment to ensuring that we had the policies in place to counter the threat of further insensitive, inappropriate and unnecessary greenfield development. That is why we set out a new agenda in planning policy guidance note 3 to ensure that new housing provision is concentrated wherever possible on brownfield sites; it is why we set a 60 per cent. brownfield target; and it is why we introduced a sequential approach—brownfield first, greenfield last.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. He has been extremely generous. What does he say to the people of Shropshire, where only 40 per cent. of potential sites, including in Telford and The Wrekin, are brownfield? How on earth will the target of 60 per cent. be met?

Mr. Raynsford: Let me say two things to the hon. Gentleman. First, the legacy that we inherited from the previous Government was that no one knew how much brownfield land there was. The purpose of putting in place our national land use database is to identify more of the sites that are potentially available and of which people were not aware. As that exercise continues, I think the hon. Gentleman will be surprised. Anyone can walk around many of our cities and see the numbers of brownfield sites that are not being properly used. Our policy is to identify them.

Secondly, we accept that 60 per cent. cannot be achieved in every part of the country. In some parts we can do better; in others, we cannot. In London, about 84 per cent. of development is on brownfield sites, but across the country as a whole we are committed to a 60 per cent. target, and we will work for that.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): I am grateful to the Minister. I have attended several of the debates on this topic, as he knows, and I keep hearing reassuring noises to the effect that a brave new policy is being applied. Does he accept, however, that after three years that has made no practical difference whatever to the problems on the ground in Rushcliffe in southern Nottinghamshire? The hon. Gentleman will not reopen a structure plan that allocates the bulk of new housing in the county to Rushcliffe, which is almost entirely rural and suburban and has hardly any brownfield sites, and he has disregarded the applications of the city of Nottingham, which wants to develop more of the centre of Nottingham, and of councils such as Ashfield and Mansfield, which would accept more housing. After three years, the practical effect of the reassuring noises is nil. In such circumstances, consultation on our local plan simply consists of arguments about which green fields must be covered by housing.

Mr. Raynsford: The right hon. and learned Gentleman knows from his experience of government that policies take a certain amount of time to have effect. The right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal changed the policy on out-of-town shopping. The change, which was welcome and which we supported, was introduced in the early 1990s, but it was not truly effective until the late 1990s, because of extant planning permissions. That applies equally to housing.

Total disruption would result from stopping every application and starting again from scratch, which the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) will recognise is not a practical way forward. We are trying to give local authorities new, tougher guidance in PPG3, under which they are expected to review procedures and to apply the sequential approach.

The hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) is nodding. We have discussed the matter at length and he recognises that that is the intention. The policy is having an effect already. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe is wrong to say that it is having no effect, but it will take time to have the full effect that we expect. We are determined to carry the policy forward.

Mr. Hancock: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Can he explain to me and to the rest of the House how he will get his brownfield site policy to work in cities, when many of the cities that he is encouraging to adopt a brownfield site policy have thousands of empty properties going to waste and not being used, many of them standing semi-derelict for several years?

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the problem of empty properties. That is very much part of the brownfield policy. We intend to bring into use wasted sites, land and buildings. We support the Empty Homes Agency and we encourage every local authority to put in place a strategy for bringing empty homes into use. We are exploring a range of options to make that policy more effective.

We know that assets are being wasted which ought to be brought into use, and much more needs to be done in that respect. We have emphasised the importance of urban renaissance and we are putting a strong emphasis on developing areas such as the Thames gateway, where there is huge scope for substantial new development on brownfield sites and in sustainable locations. That is why we have put a new focus on high-quality design to maximise land use. We are looking for mixed developments in which people can live side by side, whether they are buying or renting, with a good element of affordable housing in new developments.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): I thank the Minister for giving way. A central and important issue is to see whether we can provide good-quality housing in greater densities than hitherto. Many of us on both sides of the House who take an interest in these matters were intrigued—there is no other word for it—by the Deputy Prime Minister's speech to the Fabian Society some months ago. In the light of what we have heard about the Government being all talk and no action, should they not by now have introduced more constructive proposals and examples of how their aim can be achieved, for us to judge? If that is a good way ahead, it will go some way towards answering the vexed question of how much greenfield land has to be built on in the next 20 years.

Mr. Raynsford: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, who has a great deal of experience in these matters, that we need to explore practical measures that enable us to implement the brownfield initiative. That is what we are engaged in doing.

[Mr. Raynsford]

We are seeking to set in place new policies, to give local authorities new powers and new information through the national land use database, to identify sites, to bring properties into use, to set up partnerships and arrangements to allow mixed development where that is feasible, and to ensure that there are appropriate powers for land assembly—another important priority of ours—so that we can make a reality of urban regeneration. It is hugely important, and it is part of our priorities.

Mr. Paterson *rose—*

Mr. Raynsford: I shall give way for the last time, as I must make progress.

Mr. Paterson: I am grateful to the Minister. Will he answer a simple question? If only 40 per cent. of the sites available are brownfield, will fewer houses be built, or will the remaining 20 per cent. be build on greenfield sites?

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman obviously has difficulty in understanding the process. If one seeks, as we do, to increase the density of individual development, one can achieve more homes on any given amount of land. That ensures that one makes optimum use of land and stops the wasteful process of the past 20 years or so in which the vast majority of new housing has been built at incredibly low density. More than 50 per cent. of new housing built in this country in the past decade was at a density of less than 20 dwellings per hectare. That involves a profligate use of land, and we need to change that.

Mr. Steen: If the Minister cannot sort out the EU ruling, what will happen? Why does he believe that he can sort it out when subsidies are not allowed under the treaty of Rome? How are we to deal with that?

Mr. Raynsford: I have already answered the hon. Gentleman's question on that. The Government are working to ensure that we have in place appropriate arrangements to enable us to continue with our policy objectives, to which we are committed.

All the initiatives that I have mentioned are being taken forward by the Government to meet our two key objectives, which are to ensure that every member of our society has the prospect of a decent home, and that our countryside is protected from unnecessary and insensitive development.

As I have already said, reconciling those objectives is not easy, but it is essential if we are to meet our economic, social and environmental responsibilities. That is what the Government are determined to do.

The Opposition have made many references to Serplan, and it might therefore be helpful to the House if I spell out the new procedure for establishing regional planning guidance, which the Government have established, and refer to Serplan's role in that process. Let me remind Opposition Members that, when their Government were in power, regional planning guidance was drafted not by the local authorities, not by Serplan, but by the Government. That is what the centralising party did when it was in office. It dictated from the centre, which is what the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells seems so unhappy about. That was his party's record in government, although Conservative Members appear to have developed a strong case of selective amnesia on this point.

We changed the procedure for developing regional planning guidance. We recognised that there was a case for more meaningful participation by local authorities and their associations, such as Serplan, and all the other regional interests.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Raynsford: I have already told the House that I must make progress, and I fear that the hon. Gentleman will take us into rather unproductive textual analyses of European matters. However, I give way to him.

Mr. Cash: On regional planning, there is an interaction between the Minister's Department and the Department of Trade and Industry, particularly with respect to assisted area status. In my constituency, there is the Grindley Lane investment area. The Government office for the west midlands, in partnership with the local authorities, to which the Minister has just referred, agreed that assisted area status should be granted to a range of villages in my constituency. That was a sweetener for the purposes of providing for the Grindley Lane investment area. Can the Minister explain why, when planning permission for that investment area was turned down, the assisted area status remained? There is now a black hole in a greenbelt area, with no justification whatever.

Mr. Raynsford: I say to the hon. Gentleman, who has only just joined the debate, that his question goes very wide of its subject, which is housing provision and the importance of balancing the need for housing with the need to protect the countryside. As the hon. Gentleman said, the DTI has a crucial role in respect of his question. He will be aware that I am a Minister at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Mr. Peter Bradley: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Raynsford: I give way for the last time.

Mr. Bradley: My right hon. Friend talks about the need to protect the countryside, and we all acknowledge that need. Will he take this opportunity, to draw a distinction between the party of government and the party of opposition? The latter has set its face against the development of affordable housing for rural communities—the kind of housing that they need if they are to sustain themselves for the next generation.

Mr. Raynsford: I assure my hon. Friend that I have already drawn a number of distinctions between the party of government and the party of opposition, and between the Opposition's mode when they were in government and their mode now that they are in opposition. I reiterate the fact that we are committed to meeting housing needs and to ensuring that people on modest incomes are not deprived of the prospect of a house by stupid policies that create house price inflation and prevent people on modest incomes from finding housing.

May I return to the subject of Serplan, which I was discussing before I was taken on a detour? We changed the procedure for developing regional planning guidance because we recognised that there was a case for more meaningful participation by Serplan and all the other regional interests. Indeed, unlike the procedure under the previous Government, whereby the Government produced draft planning guidance, Serplan produced a first draft of this guidance. The regional planning body will normally be expected to prepare the draft in consultation with other regional stakeholders, although in this case the timetable meant that Serplan could not involve other stakeholders to the extent that we would have liked.

The procedure also allows full public scrutiny of the draft at an examination in public; again, that is a new procedure to allow for more transparent decision making than applied when the Conservative party was in power. It allows the assumptions behind the draft to be tested and allows other points of view to be expressed.

In the case of the south-east, Serplan prepared the initial draft. It was then subjected to an examination in public chaired by Professor Crow. He then submitted his panel's report to the Government and, as everyone will know, the panel came to very different conclusions from those of Serplan.

Under the new procedures, the Government's role comes into play at this stage. We considered both the original Serplan draft and the panel's report, and we then issued for consultation revised regional planning guidance. Of course, many issues are covered in the process—it is not just about housing. However, as housing has been the main focus of controversy, I shall confine my remarks to this part of the process.

Our conclusion, on looking carefully at all the evidence, was that the panel had overestimated the requirements for new housing at approximately 1.1 million homes over the next 20 years. Equally, however, we were clear that the original Serplan draft had underestimated housing requirements—at around 700,000 homes over the 20-year period.

Therefore, our revised regional planning guidance made two important amendments. The first was to move away from the 20-year projections, which were an integral part of the old predict-and-provide approach that we have abandoned. Instead, we have proposed annual rates of house building, with reviews at least every five years. That allows a far more flexible response to changing demand and needs, in line with our plan, monitor and manage approach.

Our second proposal, on the basis of the evidence that we derived from current trends, from the Serplan draft and from the examination in public, was to suggest an annual build rate of 43,000 homes a year in the south-east, with a review at the end of a five-year period or earlier.

Mr. White: Is my right hon. Friend aware that when Serplan was drawing up its original plan, it had an independent analysis of the data, and that the panel came to a higher figure than Serplan originally put forward? The leader of my council has described the figure that Serplan is now quoting as totally irresponsible.

Mr. Raynsford: As my hon. Friend rightly notes, Serplan reached its figure for reasons best known to itself, and did not necessarily follow all the technical advice and guidance that it received. Clearly, it is important to look at the full range of issues when we make proposals that are crucial to the interests of the region, and we shall do that.

Our proposals, along with all our other suggested revisions to regional planning guidance, were published for consultation on 27 March, with a 12-week consultation period that ended yesterday. I am pleased to say that there has been an exceptionally heavy response to the consultation, with some 700 responses received by yesterday. We shall, of course, consider all the responses before we reach decisions. As is well known, Serplan failed on this occasion to reach a consensus about housing requirements. In the past, Serplan, like other bodies representing a range of different local authorities with differing political control, has sought to reach across the party political divide in the best interests of the region as a whole. Sadly, that did not happen on this occasion. We therefore have differing majority and minority views from Serplan. I accept Serplan's vote and we shall consider fully the proposals that come from the majority. However, we will also consider the views of the other authorities, which would normally have been involved fully in the process and been able to sign up to the conclusions. On this occasion, they have not been able to do that. We shall also consider the views of all the other interested parties, such as the regional development agencies, business and voluntary sector interests, environmental groups and those concerned with the full range of housing provision.

The suggestion put about by the Opposition that we will ignore Serplan—repeated in the wording of their motion—is entirely unfounded, as I made clear in the House last week. I am only sorry that the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells continues to peddle this nonsense, and that he did not have the courtesy to withdraw false and unfounded allegations about my comments.

The hon. Gentleman's allegations are as unfounded as his claim that we intend to cover the countryside in housing. That is pretty rich, coming from a member of a party that was known throughout the 1980s and early 1990s as the greenfield and out-of-town developers' friend. Its record in government was deplorable. Fifty per cent. of all out-of-town development in the post-war period took place in just five years, between 1985 and 1990. The Conservative Government set no recycling target until 1995, and then it was a target of just 50 per cent. Our target is 60 per cent. Thousands of little greenfield boxes are spreading like a rash across the countryside, all at low housing densities and all dependent on the motor car. That was the Conservatives' legacy. We should not forget how much Lady Thatcher hated public transport and wanted to promote the great car economy.

As I have said, the Conservatives have a deplorable record. No one should attach any credibility to their current promises. By contrast, we have clear and credible policies to tackle constructively the real challenges posed by the respective claims of housing and the countryside. I can assure the House that, whatever housing figure we decide is appropriate—we have made no decisions as yet—we will require no more development of new greenfield sites than would have been envisaged under the original Serplan proposal. That is because we have put a clear emphasis on well-designed developments at higher densities, to ensure that we accommodate more people on any given amount of land.

[Mr. Raynsford]

That will not only reduce the profligate waste of greenfield land that is so characteristic of the executive-home developments so beloved by the last Government, but help to ensure the existence of better-designed environments providing for a wide range of needs, for single people as well as families and for those requiring rented accommodation as well as those requiring homes for sale. In that respect as in so many others, we are putting into effect recommendations in Lord Rogers's urban taskforce report. The Opposition may refer parrot-like to the Rogers report, but I suspect that they would not recognise, let alone approve of, any of my noble Friend's policy proposals even if he were to beat them over the head with a copy of his report.

Our approach is intensely practical. It was inspired by the vision of a better future for our cities and our countryside. Ours is an approach that does not neglect the interests of the poor and the disadvantaged. Ours is an approach that will leave Britain with a far better legacy than the one that we inherited from the last Government.

The Opposition's case is threadbare; their record is deplorable; and their motion should be dismissed with the contempt that it deserves.

8.22 pm

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I hope that the Deputy Prime Minister's mother recovers well, and that he and the rest of the family are aiding that recovery as we speak.

I was disappointed that the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) did not allow me to intervene when he suggested that the Government had to tell the people—that the people needed answers to some of his questions. I was going to ask whether he could answer one of my questions, which has baffled the nearly 2 million people who live in Hampshire. They would be interested to know why the county was singled out for special treatment under 17 years of Tory rule. [HON. MEMBERS: "18."] No; the Tories came up with a policy that changed the plan slightly in their last year of government.

The Tories missed the point when it came to Hampshire. There was hardly a planning application refused by the county council or the district councils that the Government did not back on appeal. Tens of thousands of houses are built on greenfield sites; not a single brownfield site was developed with the Government's support during the time when they were in control.

Mr. White: The exception was when the site in question was in Nicholas Ridley's backyard.

Mr. Hancock: Obviously there were exceptions, but they were small exceptions, and there were not many of them. The price that we paid in Hampshire, as a community, was one that many generations will regret in years to come.

If we are honest, we must look back a bit further even than the Conservative misrule of the years between 1979 and 1997. Coming from Portsmouth as I do, I know at first hand why the situation there deteriorated—why the city chose to build outside. It built the largest council estate in Europe outside the city boundaries; but that decision was made in the aftermath of war. Many of our great cities had to go through the same process, because the only option available to them was to build outside.

We built communities containing greenfield gaps. It became convenient for developers to look at those gaps—gaps between the large council estate outside the city, and the city. They felt that filling the gaps was a developer's dream. Successive Governments fell into the trap of allowing that development—that sprawl—to take place.

If we accept that it was inevitable that the inner-city industries would decline—I think that few would deny that—we must also accept that, in the 1960s and 1970s, we should have planned to ensure that the sites were reused. If that had happened, the rape of the green belt that took place during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s could have been stopped.

There are three more good reasons why we are in the mess we are in today. The three issues involved were the direct responsibility of the Conservative Administration who ruled the country in those years. First, there was the right to buy, and the selling of good council houses with no proper replacement policy. It was nonsensical to allow local authorities to dispose of property, believing that the solution would be provided by the powerful Housing Corporation and housing associations when those bodies would manifestly never be able to deliver what was required. They were not capable, financially or practically, of delivering what local authorities have been able to deliver. Opportunities have been lost, and some of the problems that we now face in inner cities result directly from that policy.

Secondly, there was the Conservative Government's failure to continue one of the success stories that they inherited from Labour when they came to power in 1979. The general improvement programme was built around the aim of rejuvenating properties, many nearly 100 years old, which would be guaranteed a 25-year life span. It brought life back to the cities. I remember campaigning in my ward to stop the bulldozers. The campaign was successful: 30 years on, people are still living in those houses and enjoying having a back garden and a front door with neighbours alongside them, in a friendly community. Those benefits have been denied to thousands of others whose houses were cleared under the slum clearance policy.

Sadly—and neglectfully, in my view—the Tory Government dropped that programme. They allowed the process of improvement to be retarded, and presided over the adoption of a negative approach. Only developers with ready cash could obtain grants; young first-time buyers were dissuaded from taking on the challenge of improving older inner-city houses.

The third factor—which caused most of our problems in inner cities such as the one in which I live—was the fact that the Government, for all the right educational reasons, allowed polytechnics and further education colleges to become universities, and allowed them to encourage a massive increase in the number of students without providing the resources that were necessary for students to be housed. Consequently, there was another bonanza for landlords in inner-city areas. They could now consider a flat-fronted, three-bedroomed terrace property in the centre of Portsmouth. Following the relaxation of the rule that no more than three unrelated adults should

live in one property—"three" became "six"—in cities throughout the country, six students per house are paying £50 a week for a room. The owner of the property would be buying a five-bedroomed house on a greenfield site, while still making a handsome £1,200 a month and being able to pay two mortgages.

In different ways, the Tories encouraged the development of those three problems, and the Government failed to recognise the enormous damage that they were doing. Between 1979 and 1997, local authorities sold nearly 2 million properties. In how many cases were the properties needed to meet the needs of local communities in inner cities, built by those capable of building them?

Local authorities were the one agency that was denied the opportunity. They were not allowed even to repair their housing stock properly. The country now faces nearly £17 billion-worth of repairs just to bring up to standard housing that is still owned by local authorities, while billions of capital receipts were left in the bank and we were not able to use them.

What did Serplan try to do? The Minister slightly hedged his bets when he suggested that the Government had looked at the figures carefully. I think that most people would say that they looked at the original figures, looked at the Crow report and split the difference. Within a very few points, the figure is the mean difference between the two figures. It is not wrong for people to look rather cynically at that issue.

Mr. Steen: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I hesitate to raise a point of order, but I have just been in the Lobby and the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) has been using a mobile phone there. I wonder whether there is a view on whether mobile phones should be used in our Lobby.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I think that a ruling has been given on that recently. It is certainly nothing to do with the occupant of the Chair in the course of a debate. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to take the matter further, I suggest that he does so in a letter to the Speaker, but I think that there has been a recent relaxation of the rules.

Mr. Hancock: Serplan was bitter in a way because it felt that its view, the local view, had not been taken seriously. The only action that it could take to resist what was going on was to express a view that the figures were flawed and that it would come up with a figure that justifiably could be satisfied within the communities that it represented.

I am a former member of Serplan. I know from long back that its chairmanship and membership have always been taken seriously. Serplan has always performed credibly, no matter who was running it. It was looked at as one of the prime movers in getting planning right, but Serplan can succeed only if the Government listen to it with an open mind and give it the opportunity to put its message across in such a way that it can be respected, with its view talked through purposefully. Sadly, that dimension is gone. It needs to be rebuilt.

Serplan is about local accountability. It is about local people getting elected and representing local views. Is the Minister serious in what he is presenting to the House in the Green Paper? The Government themselves talk about the need to ensure that local people make those decisions. There can be few bigger decisions that local communities make than the number of people they want to live around them. We must look at whether the figures stack up.

As I said in my intervention on the Minister, when he was courteous enough to allow me in, it is no good arguing a good case for the use of brownfield sites in inner-city areas if, at the same time, the nation as a whole has nearly 750,000 empty houses. Sadly, I did not read much in the Green Paper to lead me with a lot of enthusiasm to believe that that situation was going to be easily accommodated. It is not.

The figures do not apply to just one place. There are nearly as many empty houses in the south-east as there are in the west midlands or in the north-west. There are even more of them in London. One wonders why house prices are so high in areas with so many empty houses, yet it appears that house prices continue to escalate.

In the south-east alone, there are 94,000 empty properties. That in itself is a national disgrace. We should not allow a single greenfield site to be developed until a proper battle plan is drawn up that addresses that issue. It cannot be right. Most reasonable people whom we represent, of whatever persuasion, cannot be convinced that there is a way forward when we fail to address that issue.

Mr. Kerry Pollard (St. Albans): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that many of those houses are empty because they are in transit between either being sold or bought, or because they are being re-let?

Mr. Hancock: I do not accept that because I know that the figures stay remarkably static; the figures for property that has been empty for more than six months or for more than a year remain remarkably static. Local authorities have thousands of empty properties. The national figure for local authority houses is enormous—82,000 in total.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, in the south-east of England and in many other parts of the country, a substantial problem relates to the speed at which houses physically can be passed on when being sold in the private sector? That to some extent relates to the transactions on house sale and purchase, but it also relates to the rate at which probate goes through. Does he accept that that should be looked into?

Mr. Hancock: Of course, that is a sensible suggestion. I agree entirely that there are problems associated with the way in which property is passed on, but, when we analyse that, we find that it affects a small percentage. The percentage of properties empty for more than a year far exceeds that. I do not believe that legal procedures are holding up all that. When I have examined such matters in my city, that has not been borne out.

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the fact that the ratio of housing in this country to, say, housing in Romania is about 2:1; I understand that that is currently the position.

Mr. Hancock: I do not think that that will help the debate too much, but it is probably an interesting

[Mr. Hancock]

conversation piece that the hon. Gentleman uses from time to time. However, I do not believe that it will develop his argument much here, or support the Minister's.

Mr. Peter Bradley: The hon. Gentleman makes some serious points about vacant accommodation, but is he suggesting that it is his party's policy that houses in private ownership should be subject to compulsory purchase order powers to introduce them into the housing market? That is the implication of what he is saying.

Mr. Hancock: I think that there are lots of ways in which we can help the situation. There is a problem. I listened with great interest the previous time that we debated the matter, just before the Green Paper was published. The Minister said with great anticipation that there was something coming. Now that it has arrived, I do not believe that it was worth the wait. A lot still needs to be done. I am sorry if the Minister feels unhappy with that statement, but I was hoping for more positive help to get empty property back into use.

I have just been told that England are now 2-1 up, which is pleasant news. I missed the other point because I thought that it was 1-1.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that I might express the view of the whole House if I say that the hon. Gentleman should pay more attention to the debate that is taking place, in which many other Members wish to participate.

Mr. Hancock: I understand that. I know that feeling of waiting only too well.

The Liberal Democrats have tried to persuade the Government to see the error of their ways. My colleagues tried to persuade the Tories, but could not win that argument during their time in power. Like all Members, we want proper respect for the environment and a balance to be found between urban development and protection of the green belt. That goes without saying.

We believe that we must restrict the sprawl and come up with measures that can address that. Liberal Democrats have said time and again, inside and outside the House, that we want a firming-up of the guidance about cleaning up contaminated land. It cannot go on being said that we can develop brownfield sites in preference to greenfield sites if there is no one around to pick up the tab for cleaning up the sites. Too many inner-city sites are badly contaminated. It can be done only if the Government are prepared to intervene and to help with that process.

We need greenfield taxes on developers' excess profits. Such taxes need to deliver an alternative. We also need to find a proper way in which to get older properties back into use. That can be done simply by levelling off value added tax. In one stroke, we would gain an enormous benefit if we reduced VAT on improvements to around 7 to 8 per cent. That would be reasonable.

Although we could all talk about past experiences, as I said, in the south-east, we have had some pretty bitter ones. The Government's proposals will not solve the problem, and Liberal Democrat Members do not believe that they will even start to meet the real need. If we are to get away from past practice, we shall have to have some radical re-thinking. We need some positive thought about how local authorities can really play a part—not only in the planning process, but, once again, in delivering housing that people want.

If we really do want to use inner-city areas, we shall have to ensure that matching resources are provided to boost education and health provision in them. If we do not do that, the Secretary of State, in exercising his responsibility for planning applications, will have a very difficult job in refusing developers' proposals for greenfield development. Increasing demand will not be restrained if that provision is not made. We need positive thinking, which has been lacking. We also need real leadership.

I hope that some good will come from the Green Paper. I also hope that the Minister is listening very closely not only to hon. Members, but, especially on this issue, to those who have a vested interest in the subject—local authorities and local people.

8.41 pm

Mr. Paul Clark (Gillingham): I am glad to be able to contribute to a debate that is important not only for people in the south-east, but for people across the country. The debate is not only about numbers; it is about people's lives. Despite the claims made by some Opposition Members, the debate is also about our children's future—their ability to live and to work where they wish.

The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) mentioned the need for real leadership. I have no doubt that, if the Government had not shown real leadership and looked to the future, they would have been accused of irresponsibility and of abrogating their responsibility to the House and to the people of the United Kingdom. It is only right that every Government should plan for the future, to determine how people are living their lives, where they want to live and how developments should proceed.

The previous Tory Government attempted such planning when they were in office. I was a local councillor in the then borough of Gillingham at that time, when we had to live with the Tory construction plan. As I do not want to be accused of putting words into anyone's mouth, or of attempting to mislead anyone, I shall quote from that plan, which was adopted in late 1996, early 1997. It stated:

> Current regional guidance . . . sets a regional housing provision—

for the south-east—

> of 57,000 dwellings per annum—

until 2011. It went on to say that Kent's share of that regional housing provision would be 5,800 dwellings per annum.

The plan justified the 57,000 figure for various reasons, such as

> projected future average rates of net migration—

which is population movement into the county of Kent, and

> the changing relationship between population and households.

The plan rightly stated that the average household size in Kent was decreasing from 2.85 in 1971 to a projected 2.26 in 2011. It went on to cite as reasons for declining household size factors such as

> smaller family size, earlier household formation (young people leaving home and forming separate households sooner), increasing longevity and high divorce/separation rates.

If I recall correctly, those were the precise arguments that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister advanced in his statement to the House on 7 March, when he was introducing new planning policy guidance 3. He said:

> I emphasise that 70 per cent. of new households over the next 20 years will be single person households.
>
> Some will be youngsters setting up home. Some will be people living independently of their families. Some will be elderly people living longer . . . Many will need well designed, well located homes for rent or to buy that are affordable and that give them a range of choice and a better quality of life. We must therefore plan for those changes.—[*Official Report*, 7 March 2000; Vol. 345, c. 863.]

Those were the same reasons that were given in 1996. They are the same reasons that we must consider today when considering how to plan for the future of our counties and regions.

When I was a local councillor, I argued against developments in Gillingham's own backyard and in other parts of Kent. I recognise, as I am sure that every other hon. Member does, the feelings of weakness and powerlessness that one feels when confronted with speculative planning applications that are ultimately approved despite the desires and wishes of democratically elected local authorities. I saw plots of land behind housing developments disappear because another 15 homes could be squeezed into them.

I genuinely believe that the new planning guidance has gone a long way in helping to strengthen the position of locally elected councillors who, at the sharp end of the issue, are trying to put into practice the policies necessary to meet the requirements and desires of local communities. The strength of that policy lies in the sequential approach that is at the heart of PPG3—the presumption in favour of using recycled land and buildings before greenfield sites. The sequential approach entails consideration first of urban brownfield sites, then of urban extensions, and then of new settlements in good transport corridors. Additionally, local authorities are now able to review land allocations, to ensure that they measure up to the new PPG3 approach.

The south-east is certainly not uniform, but—from Guildford to Gillingham, and from Sheppey to Southampton—contains blatant differences and variations. According to all the deprivation statistics, north Kent, where my constituency is located, has a number of the top 10 per cent. most deprived wards and a per capita gross domestic product that is 7 per cent. below the Kent average—which itself is lower than the United Kingdom average.

Against that economic background, there is a clear need to meet the requirements of those who are already living in Kent. We must, of course, also promote inward investment, to create more jobs and prosperity for those who are already living in Kent.

The right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), when he was in government, recognised the need to build homes and to create communities, including jobs and social infrastructure. He recognised that the east London corridor, which is now called the Thames gateway, provided a prime example of a place where the type of policies being pursued by the current Government could deliver homes, thereby easing pressure on other areas. Every planning document on Kent—including the Tories' Kent structure plan and all the documents published by the current and the previous Government—has recognised that opportunity. Serplan has long recognised that potential. That sequential approach means that the brownfield sites that are in abundance in the area of the south-east to which I refer can be used to ease pressures elsewhere, while at the same time meeting the Government's guidance of 60 per cent. or more. We can bring in sites that are totally derelict, with a history of industrial use but now of no use to anyone. That can be done through concerted effort.

Local decision making is the key—I am sure that no one would disagree with that—but it has to be done within a strategic framework. Back in 1995–96, the Tory Government imposed an increase of 2,500 in the number of dwellings required by Kent, despite opposition from elected local representatives. The strategic guidelines have to be put into place at a local level, and that is what happening today with the backing of the planning framework that has been introduced.

We are deciding the strategic sites locally. The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) mentioned some of the hurdles to creating those sites. There is further to go to overcome those hurdles, but we are prioritising them locally and planning the resources required. The issue is land for building communities, to provide homes, jobs and the social infrastructure required. Classic examples exist where such work has already happened.

I have already noticed that house prices are increasing in north Kent as the infrastructure is put in place. I have no doubt that, if we continue to provide the jobs and redevelopment required, but without the housing, we will end up short of homes for key workers and others. The policies outlined by the Opposition would be a complete disaster for economic regeneration in north Kent.

8.52 pm

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): Nearly a year ago, I instigated the first debate on the Rogers report, "Towards an Urban Renaissance", and it appears that, whenever I speak, the Minister is wisely in his place to ensure that everything that I say accords with his views. In that debate, I congratulated Lord Rogers and the urban taskforce on their report, not least because it came to many similar conclusions to those that I had reached 17 years earlier in my book, "New Life for Old Cities". However, the Rogers report clearly showed the immense task facing this country. It was committed to reverse urban decline and decay, to make cities vibrant and alive and to attract young people to the inner cities.

During that debate, I made a prediction. I said that the Rogers report is a wish list of things that cannot be achieved without the political will. We will need to find a political will that must go beyond one Minister and one Department, however good their work may be. This country has produced fine reports over the years, but sadly little has changed. I had hoped that the challenging report by Lord Rogers would usher in a new era of urban regeneration, but I feared that it would not. To date,

[Mr. Anthony Steen]

although the Government have an interesting list of initiatives that they have taken—I thank the Minister for replying to my written question on 16 May—that is only a start and there is a long way to go.

When I came seventh in the ballot for private Members' Bills, I concluded that the most useful thing that I could do to accelerate and expedite the recommendations in the Rogers report was to introduce the Urban Regeneration and Countryside Protection Bill, which had simple aims and would have been of benefit to Lord Rogers and his recommendations. Those simple aims were to identify brownfield land, place a statutory duty on Government, local and national, to utilise that land, and to ensure that any housing development did not place an undue strain on existing local infrastructure. The term infrastructure I defined as including health, education and recreational facilities, as well as transport and sewage.

On Second Reading, on 24 March, the Government welcomed my Bill but said that they could not support it for two reasons. They claimed that it was too broad in focus, with aims that were too general, and that many of the clauses had been covered by points in the PPG3 guidance to local authorities. However, that was before the Government came up against something of a brick wall with Serplan. Lord Hanningfield, the chairman of Serplan and the leader of Essex county council, stated that the scale of development proposed by the Deputy Prime Minister would place an intolerable strain on the region's infrastructure. The Government do not appear to have paid much attention to that, but they should reflect on what has been said. If, say, transportation links were to become overloaded in the south-east, what would happen in other areas?

When we talk about planning, we always concentrate on the south-east, but there are other areas. What will happen in the south-west, where 395,000 new homes have to be built by 2011? The south-east, as we all know, has the best transport links in the country. If they will be at breaking point under the strain of the new proposed housing numbers, what will happen in the south-west? It will inevitably face gridlock.

The Government's numbers will be challenged all over the country by regional planning bodies unless they specify how the proposed scale of new development will be sustainable. Serplan's comments reflect a wider problem with the entire planning and urban regeneration process. Everything revolves around numbers. The Conservative Government whom I supported said that 4.4 million new homes were required. This Government have reduced that to 3.8 million. The prevailing view is that it does not matter whether it is 4.4 million or 3.8 million, because the houses will not be built by 2011.

The Government have changed the slogan. "Predict and provide" is now to be considered evil, and the replacement is "plan, monitor and manage". Nobody knows what difference there is between the two. It is just a lovely spin—plan, monitor and manage—a sort of slogan that one whispers to one's planning officer and he says, "Oh, yes, of course that will be all right," whereas the old predict and provide was obviously wrong and flawed. It is just part of the new Labour spin. It is attractive, but we should know what it means, and it means very little.

The entire process still centres around the allocation of numbers, and not the infrastructure provision. That is why my Bill was rather important and still is. The Urban Regeneration and Countryside Protection Bill, which the Government allowed a full day's debate on 24 March and which is still in the list, would ensure, if they adopted it, that infrastructure was the key factor in deciding whether housing allocation could be achieved. It would ensure a bottom-up approach, with local councils deciding not only where the numbers should go, but what the numbers should be, based on the ability of the local infrastructure to sustain development.

Even if the Government had not made the wrong decision in talking my Bill out, they have made another mistake. I have raised it already, and I shall stress it, because it is so crucial. They have run into difficulty with the European Union over urban regeneration. That matter should be addressed in the winding-up speech.

Local Government First, which I dealt with in my intervention, reported that the EU Commission had ordered the Government to stop giving grants to assist companies in clearing up contaminated brownfield land earmarked for redevelopment. The Government failed to mention that when the issue was debated in Westminster Hall on 13 June. Did the Minister make no mention of such a problem because it is new, or was it in existence on 13 June? If it is a problem, and the Government cannot overcome it, their aim of having 60 per cent. brownfield redevelopment by 2008 will be completely in disarray. Contaminated land often lies in the heart of our cities, in the old industrial urban areas, the very areas that need to be revived if we are to witness an urban renaissance.

I am a little puzzled as to why Europe has got into this, because I have the good fortune to be a member of the European Scrutiny Committee. This year alone, we have passed directives allowing the French and German Governments to subsidise their coal and steel industries. I cannot understand how the Commission allows the payment of vast subsidies to those industries in those countries, yet rules that it is illegal for our Government to make a modest contribution to help regenerate rundown, contaminated land. Perhaps the Government could say a little more about what they hope to achieve. It has been somewhat glossed over in this debate, but it is a crucial issue, because it will put a coach and horses through the Government's policy.

At the beginning of my speech, I referred back to my speech of a year ago. Those hon. Members who were present may remember that it was a bit of a tour de force. I stated that the political will for urban regeneration must go beyond one Minister and one Department. The Chancellor has not got the message yet. Perhaps the Minister could say something to him. If he cared for urban regeneration, he would not allow VAT, which he fails to impose on new build, to be added to renovation material used to renew the urban decline of houses, flats and warehouses in the inner city. It cannot make sense to talk about urban regeneration but leave out the sticks and the carrots. At present, the sticks and the carrots are in the wrong place. One gets a stick if one renovates in the inner city; one gets a carrot if one builds on greenfield sites. That cannot be right.

Given the Government's inertia on urban regeneration and other problems, I earnestly suggest that the Minister look at my Bill again. If he did, it might give his entire

programme of urban regeneration a kick start. This country would be far better if my Bill had become an Act of Parliament by the time we rose this summer.

9.3 pm

Ms Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): I do not remember hearing the previous tour de force of the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen). After his contribution this evening, I must say with all due respect that I am extremely grateful that the Government will be concentrating on meeting future housing need through their Bill and not through the hon. Gentleman's proposals.

This has become an extremely interesting debate, now that the baying brigade of the Opposition have left. It should be noted that the issue is of such importance to the Opposition that there are precisely three of their Back-Benchers sitting in the Chamber. The serious contributions to the debate have come from my hon. Friend the Minister, my other hon. Friends who have spoken and the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock).

I represent an inner-London constituency. After I was returned to the House in 1992, I was shocked by an explosion of homelessness in this capital city during the previous Government's maladministration of housing. People in every metropolitan area had nowhere to sleep other than pavements. Thousands of homes were repossessed because of the inequity of the previous Government's economic policies. There was not one iota of commitment to acknowledging that housing is a national resource.

The previous Administration argued for leaving the matter to the vagaries of the market—"You cannot buck the market"—I believe was one of the phrases used. We were in the centre of a great car economy, we were told. When the Labour Government came to office, they were confronted with a shambles. Huge and diverse problems surrounded the maintenance of the housing stock in the south-east and throughout the United Kingdom.

This debate concentrates on the Government's proposals for the south-east. The Green Paper makes a great step forward by acknowledging that housing is a national resource that must be maintained and developed nationally. However, this is a small island, as my hon. Friend the Minister said. We cannot expand our physical borders so we must therefore maintain our green belt. If we are serious about urban regeneration, and I believe that we are, we must ensure that public spaces in cities such as London are maintained.

We must create greater densities, but that will inevitably require infinitely better insulation and sound proofing in the buildings that are put up. There must also be close integration with transport bodies to encourage the sort of social infrastructures that can make cities vibrant, thrilling and exciting places to live.

Our inner cities decayed under the previous Administration. Crime took over deserted city centres, all sense of community disappeared and social structures broke down. I was amazed to hear Conservative Members argue against planning proposals in their constituencies. They must know that permissions for those proposals were granted by the previous Administration. For example, major developments were proposed in my constituency. My local authority, my constituents and I argued against them ferociously, on the ground that they would bring no benefit to communities in the area, but they were rubber stamped by the then Secretary of State for the Environment. They went ahead with no regard for the genuine needs of people living in an inner-London borough.

The present Government have made a major step change in their approach to this country's future housing needs, especially in the south-east. My one criticism of the proposals is that they do not emphasise that single-occupancy dwellings should not be single-bedroom dwellings. We should not consider building any property that does not have two bedrooms at least. Our population is ageing, and we know that most elderly people prefer to live out their lives in their own homes. It is entirely reasonable to suppose that, as people become frail, they may require the attentions of carers or other family members, because they will not want to go into a hospital or nursing home.

We must begin to look at the immediate housing needs in the south-east and throughout the country, but we must also look to the long term, so that we can have a truly flexible housing stock. Houses must be able to meet the needs of individuals and young couples on the one hand, and on the other, the needs of elderly couples or individuals who require care.

I strongly endorse the Government's proposals. For a glowing example of what can be achieved by building on brownfield sites, one need look no further than the Greenwich peninsula. I want not to discuss the millennium dome, but to concentrate on those aspects of development on the peninsula that demonstrate what can be achieved through the Government's approach.

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and allowing me to give another example of the benefits of the Government's approach. A major development in Paddington will involve 1,000 homes and 30,000 jobs. It is an excellent example of inner-city regeneration and has been backed by £13.5 million of Government money under the single regeneration budget. It has also been designated an education action zone. That shows that the Government are able and willing to bring together all the components needed to make inner-city regeneration work. However, it is one of the last brownfield sites available in central London. Conservative Members are saying that they do not care about the housing need in the city that is not met because they are closing all other options.

Ms Jackson: My hon. Friend is entirely right. What has become abundantly clear from the lamentable contributions of Conservative Members is that they have no care for the provision of housing in urban areas and no concern for the provision of housing in rural areas. It is this Government who have increased the green belt in three short years. In the 18 seemingly unending years of the previous Administration, we saw depredation after depredation when it came to the green belt.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Does the hon. Lady accept that there is no point in increasing the total square mileage of green belt for as long as the green belt itself is eroded and moves outwards from the cities? The kind of regeneration in the city centres that the hon. Lady and I would both like to see

[Mr. Graham Brady]

simply will not happen if the Government continue to allow the green belt to be eroded at the fringe where it meets the city boundaries.

Ms Jackson: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, let me say that the Government have no intention of allowing an erosion of the green belt. If he is thinking about what happened under the previous Administration, that happened because they failed significantly to make our cities desirable places in which to live. They did nothing about affordable housing—people fled to rural areas to find somewhere decent to live. It is interesting that the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) seemed to blame people who had been driven out of city centres into rural areas for taking away the opportunity for the sons and daughters of the people already living in rural areas to find affordable properties in which to live. That is an interesting volte face from the party which claims to speak exclusively for rural communities.

As I was saying, the reclamation of the Greenwich peninsula which was, I would argue, one of the most polluted sites in Europe, is proof of what can be achieved. The millennium village is a benchmark of what can be achieved, and what, under this Government, will be achieved. Its properties are being built and will be maintained, using the most environmentally friendly techniques. One would never know, from standing outside a property, whether someone had bought it or rented it. The village contains facilities such as schools and a park; the environment is not only pleasant to live in but will attract people into the area; and thousands of jobs have been created.

It is, surely, a basic human right to have our own space in which to live and a door that can be closed to ensure our privacy and, equally, that we keep outside that part of the world which, at a particular moment, we do not wish to see.

The previous Administration failed lamentably to tackle housing issues. This Government have produced a Green Paper that can lead to the results that people want. It is a scandal and a disgrace that there are still people in this country who have nowhere to live but a pavement or a shop doorway. This Government will bring about the changes that the country needs for the future. The contribution of Conservative Members this evening has been lamentable, matched only by their practices in this area when they were a lamentable Government.

9.13 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): I am grateful to have the opportunity to contribute to the debate and to follow the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson). May I remind her that last Friday, Shelter was talking about an increase of 45 per cent. in the number of registered homeless since the Government came into office?

I would not have sought to contribute to the debate except for the simple fact that when I wanted to bring a deputation of representatives of local authorities in the Cambridge sub-region to see the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes), her response was to decline to receive such a deputation. She said that she considered that to receive such a deputation would not add to our understanding.

That will not be well understood by people who live in the Cambridge sub-region, perhaps not even by the hon. Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell).

The Under-Secretary and other Ministers at the Department need to understand that this would not set a precedent for other areas. Cambridge and the area around it have some special factors that have been expressly dealt with in regional planning guidance. The Minister knows that I have taken an exceptionally close interest in this matter, including attending both of the days during which this was the subject of an examination in public before the panel. He will know also that the response from the Government to the panel's report and the representations from the standing committee of East Anglia local authorities departed substantially from the panel's recommendations in relation to the Cambridge sub-region, and that the recommendations that Ministers have issued by way of draft regional planning guidance impact probably to a much greater extent in determining the shape of the structure plan in Cambridgeshire than would be the case in almost any other county in the south-east regional planning committee's or SCEALA's region.

The housing projections for Cambridgeshire that were published by the Department last year for 2000-21 showed an increase of 33.8 per cent. over the period from 1996 to 2021. That is a higher increase than in any other county. We recognise in the Cambridge sub-region that we are wrestling with virtually unprecedented levels of development pressure, both economic and housing. The two sectors are intimately related. The Minister will know—I would have hoped that his ministerial colleague would have been prepared to discuss matters with local representatives before finalising regional planning guidance—that there are still substantial reservations about the proposals in the draft RPG.

I will put the reservations simply in four terms. First, SCEALA and the local authorities in East Anglia have put forward a set of proposals that the Government have largely accepted in contradiction to Serplan. They have largely accepted SCEALA's forecasts, but not in relation to the Cambridge sub-region. Working exhaustively on the basis of environmental sustainability and capacity, local authorities saw 4,000 homes per year as a maximum figure. The Government, however, are considering 4,000 as a minimum, and in five or 10 years hence it is conceivable that that figure will be substantially exceeded.

Secondly, there are considerable reservations about the balance, even within Cambridgeshire, that the Government are seeking. They are proposing that 70 per cent. of new houses will be within the Cambridge sub-region in due course. At the present level of building, 2,000 homes a year are being constructed in the area. The implication of the Government's proposals are that more than 2,800 homes a year can be built in the sub-region.

There is no question of people in Cambridge or the surrounding districts saying that they are simply full, putting up the shutters and resisting economic development where it is desirable. However, there is a limit. The necessity of striking a balance between the quantum of economic development and environmental sustainability in the Cambridge region demands a different balance from the one towards which the

Government seem to be heading. To increase by 40 per cent. or more the rate of housebuilding in the Cambridge sub-region will be regarded as complete folly. Indeed, it will be regarded as impracticable when we consider the speed at which planning permissions are generated and processed and building is able to take place in the region. Against that background, an increase of 40 per cent. would be almost impossible.

The third serious reservation is that the RPG makes references in explanatory text to the infrastructure consequences of economic and housing development on the proposed scale. However, it does not tie Government policy commitments to the achievement of specific housing target figures. Residents of the Cambridge sub-region will wonder what sort of Government could, in the middle of 1998, take the A14 out of the roads programme—a road that is instrumental in the cluster development between Huntingdon and Cambridge, and all the cluster economic development in high-tech industries that the Government so much wish Cambridge to accommodate. They press upon Cambridge large additions to the housing stock, but at the same time remove from their investment programme the infrastructure development that is essential to achieve such large increases in housing stock.

The fourth serious reservation is that the Government talk about the importance of green field and green belt, and the protection that should be given to the green belt. The Minister said, "Brown field first, green field last." However, when we come to the sequence of the location of housing that the Government set out in the draft RPG, we see in the five-point sequence that No. 2 states that development should be on the periphery of the built-up area of Cambridge, subject to any review of the green belt. In the minds of the former Labour administration of the city council—the Liberal Democrats shared the same view—businesses should be pushed out, large areas of green belt taken over and substantial housing built on it.

Mrs. Anne Campbell: It was not only Labour and the Liberal Democrats that supported a review of the green belt. Cambridge Futures, South-Cambridgeshire Partnership, and almost everyone who has done any serious study of the matter supported it too. Is the hon. Gentleman not being totally irresponsible in imagining that the houses can be built without a review of the green belt in Cambridge?

Mr. Lansley: My point, which I should have thought that the hon. Lady would understand, was not that there should be no review of the green belt. Indeed, a review is integral to any structure plan review and any unitary development plan. That has happened before, and it would have happened again.

My point, and I hope that the hon. Lady may yet agree with it, is that when Ministers lay down the sequence of the location of development in the Cambridge sub-region, they should, if they are to be true to their word—brown field first, green field last—make the green belt the fifth item, not the second, on the list. It may be difficult for Ministers to reconcile that with their wish to put housing on the periphery of built-up areas, but the desire to do so on a large scale in Cambridge must be secondary to protecting the setting of Cambridge, which was the original intention of green belt policy.

I am seriously worried. Ministers seem to be contradicting their own policy of protection for the green belt. They also contradict their policy of seeking to support economic development in the Cambridge sub-region by not committing themselves to the investment in the infrastructure and the support for public services necessary to deliver that development. They also contradict their policy by directing a large proportion of total housing in Cambridgeshire towards the part of the region in which the least amount of brownfield land is available for development.

The confusion surrounding the Government's policy would be somewhat clarified if, when discussing policy for the Cambridge sub-region, they had the simple good grace to meet us to talk about it.

9.22 pm

Mr. Kerry Pollard (St. Albans): I am delighted to speak in the debate. In a previous incarnation, I was a director of a housing association and chairman of the local housing committee. I have a great interest in housing issues.

There has been much mention from Conservative Members about the whole south-east being covered in concrete. I recall a debate a year or so ago on the minimum wage in which they claimed that there would be mass unemployment as a result of it. Mass unemployment did not happen; nor will the concreting of the south-east.

The south-east has an acute shortage of housing, which the Government are sensibly trying to address. It is not an easy problem to solve. Land is in short supply and is expensive. Available land must be used to create the maximum number of high-quality homes. That means higher densities than in previous years, and we must maximise use of brownfield sites. Both those ideas are at the heart of what the Government are trying to do—and achieving.

In my constituency, 1,750 people are on the waiting list—half of them single. We have £10 million in reserve receipts. Last year's capital programme amounted to £3.5 million, and there is a £6 million programme this year. That extra spending, although welcome, does not begin to address the housing shortage. St. Albans has among the highest house prices in the land—a typical two-up, two-down terrace costs £265,000. My daughter and her partner bought a very small flat a few months ago for £115,000. Nobody on the average wage can purchase anything in St. Albans. Professional people—nurses, doctors, police officers—are unable to afford anything. As the Member of Parliament—paid two and a half times the national average—I could not afford a modest three-bedroom semi.

All that demonstrates that my constituency has much greater housing need than almost anywhere else. Not only those on the waiting list, the homeless and single people, but a great swathe of professional people cannot afford to live in St. Albans.

We have a demonstrable housing need, reserve receipts and buoyant council house sales. Together with that, we have two brownfield sites in the city centre that will be the subject of planning applications within the next few months. My ambition for those sites is that we should include a large proportion of social housing and some key worker housing as well as some houses for sale. One site belongs to Railtrack, whose representatives I, and others, have met recently to further that ambition.

[Mr. Kerry Pollard]

We have used up our allocation of grant; those brownfield sites have come along and they will be built on. We have the chance to construct a significant number of social housing units, a modest number of key worker units, but we have only a limited time in which to act.

Those schemes have all the elements that our Government are trying to achieve; they will provide brownfield, city-centre, high-density, high-standard, social housing and key worker housing. The achievement of our ambition for the sites requires funding either by grant or by allowing a receipts holiday on capital receipts. Such sites become available only infrequently. When they do so, the opportunity to build homes that are affordable to rent and to buy must be taken.

We hear little of practical use from the Conservatives about housing our people. Our Government are trying to solve a housing shortage that has been around for years; we are maximising the use of brownfield sites and using higher densities than has been the recent practice while ensuring that top-quality homes are built to house our people.

9.26 pm

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): I am pleased to be able to contribute to the debate; I am grateful to the hon. Member for St. Albans (Mr. Pollard) for making such a brief speech, as that has given me the opportunity to speak.

The Minister's contribution at the beginning of the debate was rather disappointing—mainly because of what he did not say and because of the issues that he did not address. He talked about many aspirations without offering any concrete—if that is not an unfortunate, although unintended pun—examples of how and when they would be achieved.

The Minister referred to a 60 per cent. target for building on brownfield sites and said that it would take time. We hear that statement more and more often from the Government: everything that they need to do will take time. They have had three years, but they have still made no progress. It is somewhat frustrating when they plead for more time on every issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) told us how the Government's policy reinforces and encourages the continuing migration of people from the north to the south. We have heard about the Government's lax approach to the green belt.

I was pleased to see the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson) in the Chamber, not least because I understand that she has just accepted a position in the old Labour administration of the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) at the London mayoralty. She made an interesting, enjoyable and well-presented contribution to the debate, but she did not tackle the real nub of the greenbelt problem. If the green belt is constantly redefined—if its perimeter cannot be relied on—it does not matter how much Governments expand a total area of green belt from time to time; the green belt's effect as a brake on urban sprawl and thus as a spur to development in cities will have been sacrificed. As that is occurring under this Government, it was hardly surprising that the Minister failed to talk about the decline of cities, nor that he did not really address the problems in our urban areas.

Perhaps one reason why the Minister did not deal with the matter is that he is all too aware that the Labour Government are spending less than the previous Conservative Government on regeneration in our cities.

Ms Buck: May I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the housing investment figures for areas such as my constituency? Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster are both inner-city authorities. In Kensington and Chelsea in 1995, the housing investment grant fell by 21 per cent. In 1995-96, it fell by 3 per cent. During the past year, it increased by 35 per cent. In Westminster, it fell by 25 per cent. in 1995, but this year it has increased by 64 per cent.

Mr. Brady: The Labour party is increasingly worried—rightly so—about what it likes to regard as its heartlands, so it should be concerned not about the figures read out by the hon. Lady but about the 20 per cent. cut in the Housing Corporation grant in the north-west, which is causing real pain and concern in areas where Labour is most vulnerable.

My figures on expenditure in rural areas are from a Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions report for the year 2000—which shows that in their first four years, the present Administration will spend £400 million less on urban regeneration than the previous Government in their final four years. The Government have little to say about regeneration in terms of planning policies—having allowed the green belt to be eroded—or expenditure.

I do not pretend that the previous Government had all the answers but the present Administration are falling into precisely the same trap of concentrating on major capital investment projects. The Lowry centre in Salford is a tremendous inner-city development and the Minister for Housing and Planning has the dome in his constituency. He likes to brush over it but he might think some of the developments surrounding the dome will be helpful. Under the previous Government, Salford quays in Manchester was redeveloped and the metrolink was introduced—both fantastic and successful projects.

Key to bringing life to inner cities, however, is not major capital projects. My hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells mentioned the core importance of bringing families back to inner cities. Some parts of our cities have no difficulty attracting young, single households. Manchester city centre's first £1 million apartment was sold recently and there is one on the market now for £2 million. But all too often, young families feel compelled to move out of city centres because they are worried about crime and standards of educational provision.

The Government's response to crime has been to cut the number of police officers across the country. Manchester has 150 fewer police officers than when the Government took office—when in the past year alone, recorded crime in Greater Manchester increased by 10,000 incidents. At a time when crime is rising, police resources are falling—a vicious circle that counteracts positive steps to bring more life to city centres.

I give the Government credit for sensible policies at the margins of educational provision. When we debate the Learning and Skills Bill, we will have the opportunity to consider the proposal for city academies—state-funded, privately owned, partially selective schools that the

Government believe will begin to raise standards. Why will that policy be applied only where a school has failed and closed, when that option should be proactively pursued, to help raise standards in inner cities? Ministers think that 10 per cent. selection in city academies will raise standards but cling to the belief that anything above that figure—certainly 100 per cent. selection in grammar schools—will reduce standards.

There is no coherence to Government policies. As my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) so ably put it, predict and provide has given way to a new slogan but the practice is too similar to before. There is no radical attempt to tackle the real problems and difficulties faced by cities, acknowledge the importance of the green belt or address planning issues that exacerbate a concentration of development in the south instead of areas that need it more. The Government ask for more time but on the basis of their performance to date, there is no reason for allowing them to have it.

9.34 pm

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): I do not have much time, so I shall be brief. However, if this were such an important debate for the Conservative party, why did so few Tory Back Benchers from the south-east speak? In fact, none of them did.

One of the policies put forward by Conservative Members tonight suggests that the concept of developer roulette will continue. It is the system whereby developers put in planning application after planning application after planning application and they need to be successful only once. However, a community must win every time to protect itself. Their policy does nothing to address that. It is a lose-lose situation for communities.

It is interesting to note that all the Tory shires complain loudly, but my hon. Friend the Minister might be interested to know that, behind closed doors, the same Tory shires that shout the loudest are doing secret deals to protect their area from development and to move it into neighbouring areas. That continues the pattern of how several Tory shires have operated for some years.

The way in which the concept of the green belt has been mixed with that of green fields continues the way in which the Tories have tackled the debate over the past two or three years. They have not gone beyond the issue of what is green belt and what is green field. In addition, they never achieved the target that they set in government.

One of the things that worries me about the vote by Serplan is that a deliberate plan for less than one home per household means deliberately planning for homelessness and overcrowding, with all the social consequences that they bring. It means to plan deliberately for a shortage of labour in areas of economic growth and it means a reduction in housing choice. That is the message that has come from the Tories tonight.

I was going to discuss the regional planning guidance and consider what the Tories have done. On every issue—whether it is the sequential approach, the land take or urban capacity—they have not yet gone behind the issue of sloganising. Nothing demonstrated that more than the speech of the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman).

One key point that must be borne in mind is that we must protect the green lungs of cities. We must ensure that there are trees and that playing fields are not lost as a result of the increased use of land on brownfield sites.

Major development in the south-east is possible only in a few areas. Unfortunately, one of them is around the brickfields between Aylesbury and Bedford. I recognise that market forces will put pressure on Milton Keynes to have major development. The Government have taken the right approach in recognising that and in planning for the future. To take the Tory approach is to take the ostrich approach and just to hope that such development will not happen. If we did that, we would face the problems again.

Tonight in Milton Keynes, 800 families are in temporary accommodation, and that does not count the people who cannot get on to the list. Tory policies would do nothing to address the needs of those families.

One way in which the problems can be dealt with is through the role that English Partnerships and other Government agencies can play. They have started well, but there is much more that they can do. The Tories suggest that, because new jobs create pressure for growth, we should take the high unemployment and stagnation route. That is the approach that the Tories took in the early 1980s when we had high unemployment and areas were left to rot. We know the consequences of that.

I conclude with a plea to the Government. The regional planning guidance is a good start for the south-east. It lays the foundations for sustainable development, but I hope that the Government recognise that many more things need to be done. The tough choices that the housing Green Paper highlighted are ones that we need to tackle. Issues such as housing benefit need to be sorted out if we are to get more people out of poverty. The Government must be prepared to intervene more and to set more rules for house building. I welcome what the Government are doing and I hope that they take the tough choices that the housing Green Paper identified.

9.39 pm

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): This has been an interesting debate, but perhaps not as interesting to some hon. Members as the noises off of a particular football match. The last I heard was that it was not going too well from our point of view. The opening speech of the Minister for Housing and Planning was obviously affected by that event; he certainly referred to it. His combination of clumsy abuse and chanting his usual mantras from the terraces, as it were, seemed entirely in keeping with the match that has been going on at the same time as this debate.

As usual, the Minister started off with a bit of clumsy abuse about my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman), before making a complaint about the number of debates that we are having on the subject and quoting in extenso from my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer). The Minister's speeches follow a predictable pattern, and today's was no exception.

The real issue is whether there is any truth at all in the Government's mantra that the old predict and provide policy is gone, only to be replaced by a new policy. I shall return to the Minister's speech, especially his discussion of the Serplan controversy. The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock), who spoke for the Liberal Democrats, gave a rather long history lesson, but he shared our concerns about Serplan. As is usual and traditional for Liberal Democrats, he distributed his abuse equally between the Government and the official Opposition.

[Mr. Nigel Waterson]

The hon. Member for Gillingham (Mr. Clark) spoke about the need for leadership and made a powerful case for changing the planning system. However, like most Labour speakers, he seemed allergic to speaking about anything in this context post-1997. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) brought his usual authority to the subject; spoke movingly about his private Member's Bill; and made an especially important point about the recent EU ruling, which I hope the Under-Secretary will deal with in her winding-up speech.

The hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson) complained about the previous Government. However, as a former Transport Minister, she must surely bear some of the blame for the current state of standstill Britain.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) talked knowledgeably about pressures in his own region and his reservations about the way in which the whole planning process affects his area. He also talked about the lack of joined-up thinking which, on the one hand, encourages cluster developments in and around Cambridge but, on the other, cuts important road links from the roads programme.

The hon. Member for St. Albans (Mr. Pollard) spoke graphically about the pressures on property prices and availability in his own constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) reminded us of the importance of protecting the green belt and pointed out that the present Government are spending less on urban regeneration than the previous Government. He also spoke about the need to encourage families back into the inner cities.

Finally, the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) made unfair criticisms of the Serplan process. I have visited his constituency, with his knowledge, and do not think that he should assume that all his constituents welcome with open arms any new development in his constituency, as he apparently does. There must be a limit, even for Milton Keynes, and some of the hon. Gentleman's constituents have views that are different from his.

Since the election, Ministers, especially the Minister for Housing and Planning, have made a lot of noise about the alleged end of predict and provide. It turns out that that is just meaningless rhetoric. As we have heard, after carefully weighing all the evidence, Serplan came up with a figure. Professor Crow then came up with a much higher figure. Ministers have tried to present themselves as heroes by pulling out of the air a so-called compromise figure which, following further careful consideration, Serplan voted against before confirming its earlier figure. The result, as we have seen, is near hysteria from Ministers.

I do not want to intrude in the running battle between the Minister and some sections of the media. However, on any view, it would be fair to say that the Minister expressed his unhappiness with the result of the Serplan vote only the other day. He told us a great deal about Serplan and how the Government have allegedly improved the procedure for what he called more meaningful participation. However, all the Government have done is split the difference, in effect. There were one or two tell-tale comments in the Minister's speech. For example, I have written down his remark that Serplan came to its decision for reasons best known to it. That suggests that he is preparing the ground for taking not a blind bit of notice of what Serplan thinks.

The Minister talked about Serplan's failure to reach a consensus. Although he will accept the vote, he will also take account of minority views. Perhaps he would prefer to make the vote the best of three. I assume that if the Conservative party had taken a similar attitude the day after the general election, he would have accepted that as well. Even though Serplan represents grass roots feeling and opinion across the region and even though there was a clear vote and a clear majority the other day, the truth is that, despite all the rhetoric, he clearly has no intention of considering himself bound in any way by Serplan's conclusions.

In a recent interview, the Minister said of our policies:

> Ordinary people would be priced out of the market . . .

Well, I have news for him. They are already being priced out of the market thanks to the Government's policies. Whatever happened to joined-up government? We do not hear much about that these days. Has he seen today's *Financial Times* report on Professor Huggins of the centre for advanced studies at Cardiff university, who has made a study of regional policy? For example, he has decided that training and enterprise councils in the north and the midlands "underperform the average". He says that

> neither these nor the new regional development agencies will make much difference.

He also believes:

> A clear pattern is emerging whereby current policy intervention rolled-out from London is undoubtedly having the effect of widening regional disparities.

Is that not the point of what my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells said?

It is a year since the Rogers report was published, yet what progress has been made towards a so-called urban renaissance? On that as on almost every other aspect of the responsibilities of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, Ministers have been rolled over by the Treasury—on urban regeneration, on housing repairs and renovation, on the VAT regime for development and on new infrastructure for those areas where the Government want to impose all the new housing. What are they doing about streamlining the planning system so that it is quicker and cheaper and reflects more closely the views of local people? Conservative Members think that the whole planning system needs a thorough overhaul.

The Minister and Lord Falconer have one thing in common—their fondness for talking about ordinary people. However, we are not talking about Labour Members who are whisked from one luxury residence to another in the back of a chauffeur-driven Jag. We are talking about people who have worked hard all their lives and moved to an area whose natural beauty attracted them, or perhaps about those who were born in such an area and have lived there all their lives. No doubt Ministers would disparagingly refer to their concerns as nimbyism, but I prefer to regard them as positive parochialism. Those people are right to be worried because they know that, often, services in their locality are already stretched to breaking point and not getting better under the

Government. They know that schools, health services and transport infrastructure—let alone natural resources such as water—are under pressure.

Interestingly, when the Deputy Prime Minister was interviewed on "Breakfast with Frost" the other day, he said, "What they want is an intelligent discussion, but take the Tories: they have gone to their Tory friends in Serplan and said, 'Vote against this because we want to make it an election issue.' Well, if they want to say there should be more executive homes at the expense of perhaps decent houses"—*[Interruption.]* Ah, the Minister for Local Government and the Regions has joined us. I recognise the timbre of her voice.

The Deputy Prime Minister concluded, "I am on the side of the many, not the few." The message for most people is, "The many not the few will be coming very soon to a greenfield site near you." I say to the Minister for Housing and Planning that he, the Minister for Local Government and the Regions and the Deputy Prime Minister will not be at the controls when the bulldozers move in to concrete over the countryside, but they may as well be. I promise them that those who have to live with the consequences of the Government's broken promises and their own broken dreams will know whom to blame. They will exact their revenge on Labour Members and Labour councillors who have failed to stand up for their local communities. I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends to support the motion.

9.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): We have discussed important issues tonight. It is a shame that their seriousness has not been matched by Opposition Members' contributions. As we have heard, this is the sixth time that the Opposition have chosen this topic for debate. I do not mind that because it is important. However, the Opposition's response does not get better; they do not improve with practice. As my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) said, they have failed to produce a serious political response.

Opposition Members mistakenly perceive the debate as an opportunity for making cheap political gain. Tonight, as in the past, they have said nothing of substance about the way in which we should tackle some of the most difficult problems for people in our cities, towns and countryside. Some of Conservative Members' language has been contemptible. To speak about the rape of Stevenage and the rape of the green belt not only diminishes what rape means to victims, but is clearly designed to inflame and sensationalise the issue.

Let me take hon. Members back to first principles. Most people would agree with my hon. Friend the Minister's three fundamental propositions: everyone should have the chance of a decent home; our cities and towns should be renewed and revitalised; and our countryside should be protected. However, anyone who gives those propositions any thought can immediately appreciate that marrying those objectives creates dilemmas.

The dilemmas are different in different regions and types of area: urban and rural, inner city and country town. In some instances, the objectives are in conflict. For example, in the south-east, there is enormous pressure to provide more housing for people and to protect the countryside. That dilemma cannot be resolved simply by ignoring one or other of the objectives, as Opposition Members suggest. It cannot be resolved by the Opposition's over-simplified, cynical response. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham (Mr. Clark) said, the problem is not simply one of numbers. To adopt the Opposition's suggestions would cause immense difficulty now and in the future for many ordinary people who would not be able to find housing near their families or near their work. That has implications for the region's economy.

Previous Labour Governments developed the planning system to enable the countryside to be protected and to get away from sprawl. That careful, planned approach should be contrasted with the effects of 18 years of Tory rule in the south-east and in our cities, where communities had no protection from the types of development that were promoted. The market ruled, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson) explained so clearly. Developers were led to believe that whatever they wanted would be granted. Poorly integrated road building and the break-up of public transport encouraged people to commute long distances by car. Out-of-town shopping—the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) knows all about that—was allowed to happen willy-nilly, and undermined existing town centres.

Conservative policies led to neglect of the cities and the drain of people away from inner cities. Opposition Members have clearly forgotten that virtually all the development on greenfield sites that is currently happening in the south-east was written into local plans and granted permission under the previous Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for St. Albans (Mr. Pollard) highlighted the importance of housing density. Renewing our cities, providing homes in areas such as the south-east and protecting our countryside call for greater efficiency in the use of land. Local authorities are beginning to take notice, and developments that are in line with our policy are beginning to be made. Building in the south-east has been at one of the lowest densities in the country: 22 houses per hectare, compared with an English average of 27 houses per hectare. In our cities also, higher-quality design of higher-density mixed housing is the key to improving the quality of urban housing and bringing people back to our city centres.

I take issue with the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells on his continued contention that there is a flight from the north to the south. Opposition Members continue to fuel the fear that the south-east is being flooded with people from the north. That is a myth. It is not true.

The hon. Gentleman placed great credence in *The Sunday Telegraph* when it misquoted my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to know what *The Sunday Telegraph* says about that issue. The same article, referring to new housing in the south-east, states:

> So are all the new closes and cul-de-sacs being filled with migrants from Liverpool, Manchester and Newcastle? Not at all. The majority of new housing estates are being occupied by people who were already living in the region.

The article continues:

> And what is driving the need for new houses is the growth in the number of single households, fuelled by climbing divorce rates and our ageing population.

[Ms Beverley Hughes]

Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will take note of *The Sunday Telegraph*.

Migration is a two-way process. People are moving into and out of the north as well as the south. The limited evidence available suggests that the so-called north-south shift is probably more a matter of low net migration into the northern regions.

Housing density is a key element of our revised PPG3. That is in stark contrast to the contributions of the Opposition. Ours is a consistent package approach involving greater choice for households of different sizes, greater affordability—we did not hear much about that from the Opposition—and mixed developments. It also entails lower land take; less profligate use of land; a sequential approach so that brown fields are developed first and green fields last; delivery of a national 60 per cent. recycling target and higher quality of housing development.

Mr. Lansley: Will the hon. Lady respond to a point that I made in the debate? If she is committed to brown field first and green field last, why in a five-point sequence for the Cambridge sub-region is green belt No. 2?

Ms Hughes: The hon. Gentleman well knows the reason. Much of the capacity in that area is on brownfield sites. That is the reason for the No. 2 priority.

The pressures in the south-east and in our towns and cities have not come about because of this Government. The pressures have accumulated largely because of the disastrous policies of the previous Government, who abandoned our cities, approved a dramatic rise in the number of out-of-town shopping centres, let the housing market do as it pleased and squandered greenfield land.

The Opposition now argue that local authorities should be able to veto all new housing development in their area. If further proof is needed why Tory local authorities in particular should not be the sole arbiters of housing need, it is the behaviour of those authorities with respect to Serplan. They have abdicated responsibility and caved in to the political diktat of the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells.

The difference between the approaches of the Government and the Opposition could not be greater. We recognise that there are real tensions arising from real issues that will affect the social and economic well-being of people throughout the country. The Opposition are not prepared to recognise those tensions and the fact that a balance must be struck. To do otherwise would deny many people the chance of a home in the future, deny essential workers the ability of live near their work, fail to focus housing in towns and cities, add to the problems of traffic congestion and jeopardise local communities. We are determined to meet those challenges head on, and not duck them like the Opposition. Ours is a serious approach, which we will take forward.

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire) *rose in his place and claimed to move*, That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 175, Noes 326.

Division No. 236] **[10 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian

Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Wallace, James
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Peter Atkinson.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd

Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Robert Ainsworth and Mr. David Jamieson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 323, Noes 167.

Division No. 237] **[10.15 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNulty, Tony

MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Jamieson and Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Wallace, James
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve

Whitney, Sir Raymond	Yeo, Tim
Whittingdale, John	Young, Rt Hon Sir George
Willetts, David	
Willis, Phil	**Tellers for the Noes:**
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*	**Mr. Stephen Day and**
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*	**Mr. Peter Atkinson.**

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the Government's move away from the previous 'predict and provide' approach to housing provision and the introduction of a 'plan, monitor and manage' policy under the new regional planning policy arrangements, including a target for building 60 per cent. of all new housing on previously developed land and the tightening of planning controls on out of town shopping and ending the profligate use of land; supports the Government's policies on protecting the Green Belt and improving the use of all land and preventing piecemeal greenfield development; believes the Government's planning, housing, transport, countryside protection, welfare and economic policies will achieve more sustainable and equitable patterns of both urban and rural development; welcomes the Government's continued commitment to sustainable growth, safeguarding the countryside and promoting an urban renaissance; supports the targeting of regeneration initiatives in areas of greatest need and the Government's inter-linked policies for revitalising towns and cities and protecting the countryside; and applauds the Government's aim of giving everyone the opportunity of a decent home and recognises that the doubling of housing investment and other social housing reforms introduced by this Government are creating stronger, safer and more sustainable communities.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, the Census (Amendment) Bill *[Lords]* may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

INDUSTRIAL ORGANISATION AND DEVELOPMENT

That the draft Horticultural Development Council (Amendment) Order 2000, which was laid before this House on 18th May, be approved.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

Question agreed to.

Census (Amendment) Bill *[Lords]*

Order for Second Reading read.

10.27 pm

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The purpose of the Bill is to make a modest change to the Census Act 1920 so that a question on religious affiliation can be included in the next census of population in England and Wales in April 2001. This is necessary because, these days, many more people choose to identify themselves in respect of their religion or their culture, but there are no reliable figures for ethnic sub-groups or for religion. The 2001 census provides a unique opportunity to collect information from groups who increasingly prefer to identify themselves primarily in this way.

If we are to deal with discrimination in the provision of health, housing, schools, welfare and community care services, we require better information. We require better information about baseline figures against which racial disadvantage and social exclusion within particular minority groups can be monitored. This information would be useful in the planning of religious education; it would have relevance in the regeneration of inner cities; and I would expect it to aid the very valuable work of voluntary sector religious groups.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): My hon. Friend says that his Bill would aid planning for the provision of religious education, but since the proposed census question does not have a subset on the Christian religion determining whether one is Protestant or Catholic, how can that assist with the provision of religious education for families who wish their children to be brought up with a Catholic education?

Mr. Sayeed: I suggest that my right hon. Friend read the Lords debate, and particularly the answer given by the Bishop of Lincoln, who answered that question and dealt with it adequately. It would be wrong and unnecessary for me to parrot his words, as I believe that my right hon. Friend has them in front of him.

In their White Paper of last March on the 2001 census, the Government proposed including such a question. A wide range of faith organisations endorsed the proposal and it gained the support of the Inner Cities Religious Council, the Home Secretary's race relations forum and the Commission for Racial Equality. The Bill had a swift and unopposed passage in the other place and, I believe, commands the general support, but not the total support, of both sides of the House.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): My hon. Friend will know that an amendment accepted in the House of Lords means that it is not an offence to withhold the information. I am grateful for that at least, but, if there is no requirement to give the information, does not that mean that the information is not really required?

Mr. Sayeed: That is an interesting thought, but wrong, I think. Most people are prepared to give the information, but, because of the sensitivity of the question, it was

decided that the normal rules and penalties that appertain to filling all census questions should not apply in this particular matter.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): Will my hon. Friend say whether there is any precedent for introducing in primary legislation a duty for which the penalty for non-compliance is subsequently waived?

Mr. Sayeed: I remind my hon. Friend that there has been a requirement for a number of years in Northern Ireland to complete a religious question. A similar non-mandatory duty in Scotland has recently received Royal Assent.

Amendment of the Census Act 1920 is necessary because the schedule to it does not currently provide for particulars on religion to be recorded.

Many of the questions that are traditionally asked in the census are specifically covered in the first five paragraphs of the schedule. Others that may from time to time be required are covered by paragraph 6, which provides for

> any other matters with respect to which it is desirable to obtain statistical information with a view to ascertaining the social or civil condition of the population

However, legal advice over the years has been that religion is not a matter of either social or civil condition. Legislation is required to allow a question on religion to be on the census.

Public tests of census questions have shown that the proposed question on religious affiliation is acceptable. Those who have had to complete the forms have understood the question and the quality of the response is sufficiently high for reliable information to be obtained. The question was satisfactorily included in the census rehearsal in April last year.

The Bill is simple, clear and short. Clause 1 adds religion specifically to those particulars that may be required to be provided in a census.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Does my hon. Friend consider that the Bill complies with article 8 of the European convention on human rights?

Mr. Sayeed: I am advised by those civil servants who have briefed me on the matter that it does.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Civil servants? Then why is it not a Government Bill?

Mr. Sayeed: The Government can answer that question.

Mr. Leigh: Civil servants—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I think that we have probably had enough interventions from a sedentary position. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] Order. I do not want to have to repeat what I have just said.

Mr. Sayeed: I wish to put it on the record that I am most grateful to the Government for providing the time for a private Member's Bill on this matter.

Clause 1(2) removes the liability to the penalty under section 8 of the 1920 Act in respect of anyone who refuses or neglects to state in their census return the particulars with respect to religion. In effect, this makes any such question on religion voluntary. Although the statutory requirement under the 1920 Act to respond to all other census questions remains, the voluntary status of the proposed religious question deliberately reflects the sensitivity that surrounds this specific topic.

The Bill affects only England and Wales. The census is a devolved matter in Scotland where legislation on this question has, I understand, already received Royal Assent. It is also a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, and this amendment to the census would align census legislation in England and Wales with that of Northern Ireland and Scotland.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Has it occurred to my hon. Friend that religious affiliation changes in a way that race or sex do not? Equally, given that religious affiliation is a very personal matter, what guarantee can he give about the accuracy of this information? After all, I might be a member of whatever religion I might fancy, and who could gainsay me? Who could say that I was wrong?

Mr. Sayeed: The census is a snapshot of the time that it is taken. Therefore, if my hon. Friend chooses one religion at that particular time, that is his religion of the moment. It does not mean that in 10 years' time he may not have changed his mind.

Mr. Hogg: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I apologise for interrupting my hon. Friend, but it would be very helpful if you could tell us the Bill's status. I understand that this is a private Member's Bill which is being given Government time. It would be extremely helpful if you could confirm that that is the case. If it is, could you tell the House whether there are any precedents?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is correct—that is precisely the case. There are many precedents for this procedure.

Mr. Sayeed: It is clear that a number of my right hon. and hon. Friends and, no doubt, Labour Members, wish to take part in the debate.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. He referred earlier to the question being the same in Scotland as is proposed in England and Wales, but that is not correct. The question on religion in Scotland will be very differently phrased. How can he justify that?

Mr. Sayeed: I believe that I said that the Bill would be similar—I did not say that the question itself would be the same. As I understand it, the question in Scotland differentiates between different Christian religions.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): On the hon. Gentleman's point in relation to Scotland, can he confirm

[Mr. Simon Thomas]

that the intention in this Bill is that the question in Wales will make direct reference to the Church in Wales, and not the Church of England?

Mr. Sayeed: I can confirm that that is the case. The question will not be phrased "the Church of England".

Mr. Hogg: This is one of the problems of introducing a private Member's Bill. By what authority does my hon. Friend tell us what the question will be in Wales?

Mr. Sayeed: By reading the notes and the information with which I have been provided. I suggest that if my right hon. and learned Friend had consulted the same information, he would have reached that answer without asking me.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way; he has shown generosity and forbearance in the course of his short speech. Does he agree with the verdict of section 8 of the explanatory notes to the Bill that the response to the census will provide useful information about racial disadvantage and social exclusion?

Mr. Sayeed: Yes, I do, and that is why I am happy to support the Bill.

Mr. Maclean: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I apologise for interrupting my hon. Friend as he reaches his peroration, but he is introducing a private Member's Bill and he has been receiving sensible advice from the official Box. Is it in order for the rest of us to consult the official Box so that we may receive advice on the relevant aspects of this highly complicated Bill? The precedent that permits only the Government to seek advice from officials clearly is not operative on this unique occasion.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed) is receiving advice as the Member in charge of the Bill, which places him in a particular position.

Mr. Hogg: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. What would happen if I went to the official Box to ask for advice?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I should strongly discourage the right hon. and learned Gentleman from taking that course of action.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Can you confirm that you are ruling from the Chair that on occasions on which a private Member's Bill receives Government time, the promoter may have access, as of right, to official support that would normally be available only to a member of the Government? That strikes me as a new departure, and, if that is your ruling from the Chair, it seems to me that any future promoter of a private Member's Bill who is privileged enough to have Government time may have access to which other private Members are being simultaneously denied.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am not making any such ruling. Where the hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire takes his advice is a matter for him. Conversations and advice occur in many different ways.

Mr. Hogg: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You have been good enough to say that you would discourage me from seeking advice from the official Box. In view of your later ruling, however, I anticipate that you would not mind if I did so.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I shall repeat what I have already said to the right hon. and learned Gentleman. I think that I made my position quite clear. He ought not to pursue that line, and it would be sensible if we moved on.

Mr. Hogg *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I shall not deal any further with that point of order.

Mr. Sayeed: I had intended to give a speech of only six minutes or so, but time has moved on. Perhaps I have been too generous in giving way. Let me answer a question that I failed fully to answer before the many points of order. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) asked about the question on the Welsh form—

Mr. Hogg *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Sayeed: Someone asked about it. The right hon. or hon. Member in question can read the Bill's explanatory notes, which state:

> In Wales the words "Church in Wales" will be substituted for the words "Church of England" within the Christian category.

That is where my information came from, and that is why I replied in the way that I did.

There are tensions in all multicultural and multi-faith societies. Discrimination fuels those tensions. Knowing the facts allows us better to plan what we do. This modest change to the Census Act 1920 will help us to gather facts and make a fairer society. I commend the Bill to the House.

10.44 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): I do not wish to speak for long, but the Bill is misconstrued, at least in its present form. I start from the premise that this matter should not be the subject of a private Member's Bill that is being given Government time, a process that I very much distrust. I shall be candid in saying that I distrust it because of its likely impact on matters such as fox hunting. All my life, I have defended the right of people to go fox hunting. We have fought the matter many times in private Members' Bills, and the Government, hitherto, have not given time to such a Bill. They promise to do so in future, and the fight will be hard fought. However, I do not want to encourage the practice

of a Government giving Government time to a private Member's Bill. That fact alone would be sufficient to cause me to oppose the measure.

The matter goes further than that. The Bill is intrusive. I am perfectly willing to concede that it is quite difficult to establish a set of disadvantages that flow from the Bill, other than the infringement of the principle. In the other place, Lord Stoddart made the point that the provision of that information could enable discriminatory Governments, at some future time, to pursue discriminatory policies. I accept that the noble Lord was right in principle, but I think that the likelihood is not great.

It is also true that the provision of such information could enable a Government more readily to impose burdensome regulation on industry and other sectors of the economy. That is more likely, and it is an objection. However, the objections are not themselves sufficient, so I return to the principle.

The principle that we should defend is that the Government of the day do not have a right to pry into our private affairs unless there is a compelling argument in favour of doing so. That is the principle that underlies the European convention on human rights, which the Government have incorporated into domestic law. For example, the House will be aware that—I think—article 8 applies to the right of privacy and to respect for private life and family, as I pointed out to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed).

That principle has been incorporated into domestic law. It is at least arguable that the passage of the Bill would infringe that right. However, in any event, we would be prying into other people's private life. We would be asking them to state their religion—although not with great conviction, because, as my hon. Friend pointed out, the Bill includes the provision that it shall not be an offence to refuse to answer the question.

As the question is not asked with much conviction because it is an unenforceable obligation, why in God's name are we asking it? The fact that I cannot identify any really compelling disadvantages—

Mr. Forth: I will.

Mr. Hogg: My right hon. Friend may well do so, but I do not pretend that I can. However, I assert that there is a principle. I fear that, once we agree to giving Governments—by gradual steps—greater power to intrude, the consequence will be greater intrusion. I am against that.

I believe that the Government are rather totalitarian. They are oppressive in character. They ask of the people questions that they should not ask. They pass policies that they should not impose. They want to subject their fellow citizens to restrictions and obligations that should not be imposed. I do not see why I should be party to that tonight, so I very much hope that my hon. Friends and I will stop the Bill in its tracks, either by voting against it or by making plain our displeasure through extensive discussion.

10.49 pm

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): I was disappointed by the speech made by the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg). It will be regarded with tremendous dismay in my constituency. A section of the British citizens of Rotherham believes that it is necessary for society to find out—on a voluntary basis—about the composition of the different religious communities to which its members belong.

It is extraordinary to hear Conservative Members say that a question—to be answered on a wholly voluntary basis—that is proposed for the census should not be tabled. Never since I entered the House have I seen such a blatant, cynical and cold-blooded desire on the part of the Conservative party not to know its own country. It is interested only in ideology, not facts about the society in which we live.

Mr. Forth: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. MacShane: I would rather continue, so that we may move swiftly to the vote. After my speech, there will be no need for more from the Opposition Benches.

Throughout its entire history, the Conservative party has denied the rights of other religions until forced to do so by social revolt—whether it was Catholic emancipation, the right of Jews to sit in the House, or the desire of hon. Members to affirm at the Dispatch Box. At every stage, the Conservative party has been reactionary and ideological, and has shown contempt for other religions.

Mr. Leigh: Will the hon. Gentleman give way now?

Mr. MacShane: I will not.

Mr. Leigh: But I am on the hon. Gentleman's side.

Mr. MacShane: For Conservative Members to say now that British citizens should not be allowed to declare their religion on a voluntary basis is an affront. I give way to the hon. Member for—

Mr. Forth: The Vatican.

Mr. MacShane: That is the voice of the old Tory party, which denied the Catholics of this country a place in this House.

Mr. Leigh: The hon. Member and I share in common a minority religion. In that sense, we approach many issues from the same point of view. Why is it necessary for governmental authorities to know our religion? What purpose would that serve? Have we not moved on from the time when people of our faith were persecuted in this country? We are all the same now—we are all British. That is all that matters. It does not matter whether we are Muslims, Sikhs, Jews, Catholics or Protestants.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Gentleman is beginning to make a speech.

Mr. MacShane: The hon. Gentleman makes the powerful, classic, republican and secularist point that religion has no place in our society. Yet, each day, we start our sitting in this House with prayers. We have a monarch who is head of the Church of England. That is the kind of country in which we live, where religion is important.

[Mr. MacShane]

The last census was so vague in this matter that I do not know the religious composition of my constituency. It would be helpful to have that information because there are huge issues associated with schooling, overseas relationships and even food safety and hygiene that are of genuine importance to Jews, Muslims and Hindus. My constituents would like such a question on the census and I support them. Many Catholics, Protestants and—certainly in Rotherham—Methodists do not think to the contrary. As a representative of my constituents, I ask the House to support the Bill.

10.54 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): The House is right to debate and scrutinise the Bill thoroughly. As the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) said, we ought to be concerned. When I first heard about the Bill, I asked myself: What right have the Government to demand information about our religious beliefs? Why should Governments be interested in people's religious beliefs? I read the debate in the other place and the arguments advanced as to the benefits that the Bill would provide for society. I read about improved information for the planning of health care, education and social care, and that would, no doubt, be an important benefit. I read about the way in which the information would help the regeneration of inner cities, and that is an important benefit. However, the question that we must consider is the cost of setting aside those benefits.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davey: Let me make some progress first.

The benefits of the Bill are important, but the cost is that we are considering introducing a principle that will lead to intrusion into private beliefs. *[Interruption.]* If Labour Members will allow me to make some progress, I shall say why I am pleased that the voluntary amendment was accepted.

I was worried when I read the Bill when it was first published and then had its Second Reading in the House of Lords. There was no amendment to it at that stage for the information to be provided voluntarily. I have received representations from a constituent. Mr. John Harris of 109 Hook rise south, Chessington contacted me. Hon. Members may laugh, but my constituent is a distinguished genealogist who has studied censuses from every decade since the 19th century to pursue his hobby. He has noticed how, from census to census, the state has wanted more and more information and he is concerned that the Bill may require one piece of information too far.

I therefore considered what this private Member's Bill would require. If it were not for the amendment that was tabled in Committee in another place, I would oppose the Bill. However, I believe that that amendment, which would make the provision voluntary, has made the Bill acceptable—but only just. I want to ask the hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed) and the Minister for further assurances. For example, where will it say on the census form that the answer to the question is voluntary? I am sure that the Minister and, possibly the hon. Gentleman, will have received representations from civil servants who have said, "Oh, we cannot put it on the form directly next to the question, because the form would be too cluttered."

Surely, if we are to make sure that the question is seen to be voluntary, it must be evident to all those answering it that they can do so purely on a voluntary basis. Therefore, that information must appear in bold and next to the question.

Mr. Tyrie: I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman has said. However, he is labouring under a misapprehension. Answering the question is not voluntary; it is compulsory.

Mr. MacShane: Look in the Bill.

Mr. Tyrie: I have the Bill in front of me and it is clear that recipients will have to fill in the form. That will be compulsory. The only difference between this and all the other requirements is that no penalty will be imposed if one does not respond to this one. It is compulsory to fill in the questionnaire.

Mr. Davey: The hon. Gentleman is in danger of playing with semantics. Everyone's understanding, including that of the Government and statistics officials, is that it will be a voluntary question. If there is any legal doubt about that, he will have to make his point rather more persuasively than he has just done. My reading of the provision that he drew to my attention is quite the opposite of his.

Mr. Tyrie *rose—*

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) *rose—*

Mr. Davey: I give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath).

Mr. Heath: I agree with the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie). It is not a voluntary question, as has repeatedly been said. The person filling in the census form is required to provide the information. What will be removed is the sanction against the person who fails to fill in that question. That is a significant point.

Mr. Davey: I am afraid that, on this rare occasion, I disagree with my hon. Friend. It is not a compulsory question, because there is no penalty for failing to provide the information. I find it difficult to believe that a question is compulsory if there is no compulsion on the individual.

Mr. Tyrie: That is the crux of the matter and explains why it is an absurd Bill. As I said in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed), it is a unique case. We have never before had primary legislation with another clause attached to it that says that there will be no penalty for disobeying the primary legislation. That is an extraordinary situation. If the provision were genuinely voluntary, why cannot it be made clear on the face of the Bill that it is voluntary?

Mr. Davey: I can only reiterate my argument that the question cannot be compulsory if there is no penalty for not answering it.

I want, as I am sure that the hon. Gentleman does, the Government to give assurances that the census form will clearly state that the question is voluntary. Moreover, I want the Government's assurance that, after the 2001 census, they will review how that voluntary question has worked in practice. I would be worried if the question were to be automatically attached to every future census. The Government must reconsider the matter after the 2001 census.

Like the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham, I am also concerned about whether the Bill is fully compatible with the European convention on human rights. Under the Human Rights Act 1998, the Government are not required to state whether private Members' Bills are compatible, so I hope that the Economic Secretary will, for the record, reassure us that the Bill is compatible.

The benefits for which the Bill's promoters have argued, in this place and in the other place, are real. The information can help us to attack racial disadvantage and discrimination. If we can ensure that the right of the individual to withhold that information from the state is protected, by making the question voluntary, we can have the benefits without the costs to which other hon. Members have referred.

11.2 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): The process in which we are now engaged is irregular, and it gives me grounds for believing that this has almost certainly been a Government Bill right from the start, but in a practice that we have now become used to, it is being smuggled through in the guise of a private Member's Bill.

I am strengthened in that view when I read what the Leader of the House said last Thursday. She admitted that the Bill's position is unusual and said that

> Governments do not usually find time for private Members' Bills.

She went on, with the casual arrogance that we have come to expect from the Government, to say:

> However, the Bill is believed to be uncontroversial.

What right the Leader of the House has to say that such a Bill is uncontroversial is quite beyond me, as she had no means of knowing what were the views of Members of this House. We have become all too used to such attitudes; the Government simply glibly assume that a Bill such as this is uncontroversial.

The Leader of the House went on to claim that the Bill

> went through the House of Lords without any difficulty.

As we have already heard, a significant amendment was made to the Bill in the House of Lords because many of the Members of the other place expressed disquiet about a fundamental aspect of it. For the Leader of the House to claim that the Bill is uncontroversial and went through the other place without any difficulty strikes me as not only extraordinary, but rather typical of the Government's attitude to the legislative process and to this House and the other House.

The Leader of the House also said of the Bill:

> The issue it addresses was raised after the main census legislation had gone through.

How careless—the Government had obviously taken their eye off the ball. She added that

> there was no reason to anticipate that there would be a difficulty in the House of Commons.

I am generally an admirer of the right hon. Lady, but on this occasion her judgment of the House was inexplicably flawed. She should have known that such a Bill would be highly controversial in the House of Commons, as it has turned out to be, and I shall explain why.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Before my right hon. Friend gets into the main part of his argument, he referred to remarks made by the Leader of the House. Despite making those remarks, she said shortly after:

> The matter is one in which there is considerable public interest—[*Official Report*, 15 June 2000; Vol. 351, c. 1106.]

Surely that is the case and surely it is perfectly reasonable to have a full debate on the matter tonight.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend because later I shall expand on the nature of that public interest, which I find sinister. First, during my preliminary remarks I want to refer to the explanatory notes which, apart from the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed), are all the guidance we have. The provenance of those notes might be interesting for the House to consider. Usually, explanatory notes are prepared by the Government to help us to understand a Government Bill, but here we have what look suspiciously like Government explanatory notes, except that they allegedly explain a private Member's Bill.

Perhaps my hon. Friend—were he to seek to catch your eye again, Mr. Deputy Speaker—or even the Minister might tell us exactly what is the relationship between the Bill, the Government and the Bill's promoters in the other place and in this House. Does not it seem odd that a private Member's Bill should be graced by explanatory notes that bear all the imprints of the civil service? However, let us simply take the explanatory notes at face value. Here we must look for the background to the Bill and what it seeks to achieve. Paragraph 3 says:

> Central government, local and health authorities, commercial business and the professions need reliable information on the number and characteristics of people and households if they are to conduct many of their activities effectively.

That perfectly straightforward preamble lays the ground as to why we might want information of the sort that the census would provide. Paragraph 4 says:

> The Government, in particular, needs this kind of information to form policy, to plan services for specific groups of people and to distribute resources effectively to local and health authorities to enable them to direct resources to where they are needed.

In a moment, we shall see that people's religious beliefs will be relevant to the formation of policy, the planning of services for specific groups and the distribution of resources. We are now deep into the real meaning behind the Bill, which appears to be that the Government intend taxpayers' money and Government planning to be directed to religious groups and to people's religious faith.

Mr. Fabricant: Would my right hon. Friend care to speculate on precisely how the Government will allocate resources on health? After all, was it not Shakespeare's character Shylock who said:

> If you prick us, do we not bleed?

[Mr. Fabricant]

Surely people are human beings whether they are Jewish, Hindu, Christian or anything else. In health terms, what, precisely, is the difference?

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend asks a good question. Later, I shall want to consider the interesting matter of how the Government will distribute resources or make policy for people who write "None" when a census form asks their religion, but I am now considering the preliminaries because I want to help the House and myself to understand exactly what the Government think they are about with these measures.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): I am sure that my right hon. Friend is conversant with the Treasury document "The 2001 Census of Population", but the rest of the House may not be. There is a definite difference in emphasis in paragraph 26 on page 8, which says:

> The topics proposed for the Census are those that have been shown to be most needed by central and local government, the health service, academics, businesses and professional organisations.

What interpretation does he put on that?

Mr. Forth: That raises a question similar to that which I am posing about the formation of Government policy. What those different bodies in their different ways would do were they given the information that would flow from those questions is a matter for speculation and one to which we must all turn our minds. However, I am even more worried to read in paragraph 8 of the explanatory notes that answers

> to the question would help provide information which would supplement the output from the ethnic group question by identifying ethnic minority sub-groups, particularly those originating from the Indian sub-continent. In turn, this will provide baseline figures against which the Government can monitor possible racial disadvantage and social exclusion within particular minority groups.

That immediately leads to interesting speculation about the Government's perception—or that of the Bill's promoters—of the necessary connection between ethnicity and religious belief. Such an assumption is not only arrogant but dangerous.

Proposed question 10 on the census form will refer to Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh. Will it be assumed that Buddhists are from one ethnic group? Are not there white Buddhists and white Muslims? Those who devised the question show great arrogance in assuming that ethnicity and religious belief fall neatly into the same category. If they do not believe that, the aim that is set out in paragraph 8 is nonsense.

Mr. Edward Davey: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that there is a separate ethnicity question in the census?

Mr. Forth: That may well be, but unless one can cross-reference ethnicity and religion, the measure is meaningless because paragraph 8 makes an explicit connection between ethnicity and religious belief. I do not believe that policies should be formed or resources distributed on the basis of religious affiliation. I challenge that assumption, and I shall revert to it later.

For the moment, I simply stress that I reject the causal connection that paragraph 8 of the explanatory notes attempts to make. To make a connection between religious faith, based on information that people are prepared to reveal, and Government policy on the distribution of resources is not only dubious practice, but an intrusion into the most private of personal matters: religious faith.

Before we consider that, we must get to the bottom of whether answering the question is voluntary. The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) asked that question, but failed to deal with it satisfactorily. Let us consider the general proposition that the census form makes it clear that it is compulsory to answer all questions. People will approach the census form on that basis, unless it includes a disclaimer such as that which the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton mentioned. His question remains valid and I hope that we shall receive a comprehensive and satisfactory answer from the Minister.

It is not enough to say that proposed new section (1A) states that

> no person shall be liable to a penalty . . . for refusing or neglecting to state any particulars . . .

That simply means that the penalties that apply in relation to the rest of the census form would not apply to the question about religion.

Mr. Hogg: Is my right hon. Friend aware of the provisions of the Census Act 1920 as amended by the Bill? Failure to answer the question would be an offence that was not attended by a penalty.

Mr. Forth: That puts the individual who completes the form in an odd position.

Mr. Sayeed: Perhaps I can clear up the point. The front page of the census form contains a section entitled "Completing your form". I shall read it out for the edification of my right hon. Friend. It states:

> Completion of the Census form is compulsory under the Census Act 1920. If you refuse to complete it, or give false information, you may be liable to a fine. This liability does not apply to Question 10 on religion.

Mr. Forth: That may provide the answer to the question of the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton. It may be helpful; that is for other hon. Members to decide.

If there is no compulsion to answer the question, that will almost certainly undermine the validity of the question and its ability to achieve the stated policy objectives set out in paragraphs 3, 4 and 8 of the explanatory notes. If some people are prepared to answer the question but others are not, because they think it is intrusive and arrogant, which is my view, or because they are embarrassed, or because they are too idle to do so—the reason could be any or all of these—the resulting disproportionality and unrepresentativeness threaten to undermine the purpose of the Bill.

Let us speculate for a moment that people who would generally describe themselves as Christian do not feel obliged, or do not feel it necessary, to divulge the fact that they are Christian to the Government, whereas those who are Muslim are anxious to divulge that fact to the Government because their community leaders have told them, "If we can make sure that as many Muslims as possible answer the question and are therefore recorded in terms of their numbers, we have read in paragraph 8 of

the explanatory notes to the Bill that we will gets lots of resources because there are lots of us." That, presumably, is the aim behind the Bill, and that would be the motivation for particular groups—I pick Muslims more or less at random—to fill out the form.

Do Christians suppose that resources will be allocated to them on the basis of their answers on the census form? That is a question which I hope the Minister will answer. It flows directly from paragraph 8 of the explanatory notes dealing with the formation of policy and the allocation of resources. What assumptions can I make about the allocation of resources to Christians, following the census? I should like to know the answer. Presumably, if we are living in an even-handed, non-discriminatory society, as the Government would like us to think, there can be no distortion of distribution across the groups. If that is the case, I am not sure that I see the point of asking the question.

Matters get worse than that. Although the question proposed seeks to distinguish between Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh, it lumps all the Christians together, for some peculiar reason. Church of England, Catholic, Protestant and all other Christian denominations are all assumed to be the same. Does that apply to Jehovah's Witnesses, for example—I take another example, more or less at random—or to any other sect or denomination that would generally be described as Christian, but may well have very different views, needs, communities or places in society?

Why are the Christians discriminated against by all being lumped together, while we take great care to make sure that Buddhists, Hindus, Jews and Muslims are treated separately? It is all very odd.

Mr. Gray: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who is making a good point. Is it not also peculiar that in the census question, the word "Protestant" is used alongside the term "Church of England"? The Church of England is a Protestant sect, but a great many other Protestant sects are not listed. There is a curious anomaly in the wording of the question, which shows ignorance or lack of care on the part of the Government in wording it.

Mr. Forth: I shall leave those much better versed in matters theological to speculate on what such differences might mean. It is self-evident that there is probably as big a difference between Roman Catholicism and Protestant aspects of the Christian religion as, say, there may be between Buddhism and Hinduism.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): I am concerned at the right hon. Gentleman's ignorance of non-Christian religions. There is no suggestion that, for example, Muslims should be asked whether they are Sunnis or Ahmadiyas. The right hon. Gentleman is speaking about beliefs within a faith system. Christianity is an overall faith system. There is no suggestion that there should be sub-divisions of other faith systems either. The right hon. Gentleman's suggestion that Buddhists, Sikhs and Muslims are part of the same faith system is offensive to many people.

Mr. Forth: I am not sure that that is what I said at all. I said the reverse: that, whereas the question seeks to distinguish between all those faiths, it lumps all the Christian denominations together.

Mr. Swayne: The distinction to which the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) has drawn attention—between Sunni Muslims, Shi'ite Muslims or whatever—is the critical information that is required to deliver the promises to which my right hon. Friend has drawn attention in paragraph 8 of the explanatory notes. It is the information on those minorities within what the hon. Lady quaintly called "faith systems" that determines whether they are disadvantaged.

Mr. Forth: I should have thought that that was almost self-evidently the case, but apparently it is not to the hon. Lady.

I do not accept the objectives in paragraph 8, because I do not believe that possible racial disadvantage and so-called social exclusion within particular minority groups will be dealt with by the answers that may voluntarily be given to the question outlined in paragraph 10. I simply do not accept that paragraph 10 can deliver the objectives of paragraph 8, quite apart from the fact that it is an unnecessary and unwarranted intrusion by the state into some of the most private aspects of people's lives. All of that is entirely unsatisfactory. I still hope that we shall get an answer later from the Minister as to why it is believed that racial disadvantage and social exclusion can somehow be determined by the answer to the question in paragraph 10. I see no necessary or obvious relationship between racial or ethnicity distinctions and those set out in paragraph 10—none, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim or Sikh. I just do not see the connection.

In almost every single respect, this Bill fails all the tests. It fails the test of our historic desire to keep the state and the Government out of people's private, personal and, in particular, religious lives. It fails its own test of the dubious objectives set out in paragraphs 3, 4 and 8 of the explanatory notes. It fails the test because it seeks to make the answering of the questions voluntary instead of compulsory, and therefore almost certainly undermines any purpose that it might have had.

The Bill is unnecessary and intrusive. It has some sinister elements, which I believe we should resist strongly. Unless we hear some persuasive answers to these questions from the Minister at the end of the debate, I hope that the House will not give the Bill a Second Reading.

11.23 pm

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): I simply want to use this opportunity to give some examples of how this kind of information could improve the lives of a substantial number of people in my constituency. I also thought that it might illuminate and teach some hon. Members about why this exercise is worth while.

Let us take, for example, the Muslim faith. For people of that faith, an important and deeply held part of their religion is to bury the dead swiftly. One of the problems faced by Muslims in Slough is that they cannot get deaths registered over the weekend. That causes my constituents deep offence and distress.

The results of a census such as this could inform the planning of registrars of births, marriages and deaths, so that they could ensure that death certificates were issued, deaths were registered and burials could take place at weekends.

Mr. Fabricant: Is the hon. Lady aware that a similar rule exists within the Jewish religion? She will know that

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there have been Jews in the United Kingdom for at least 1,000 years. Does she realise that Jewish burials have taken place despite the fact that this Bill has not been enacted?

Fiona Mactaggart: As the hon. Gentleman will know, Jewish organisations support the Bill, partly because of the problems that members of that faith have experienced in ensuring that burials take place swiftly enough.

Mr. Fabricant: That is absolute rubbish—and I know it. *[Laughter.]*

Mr. Tyrie: The hon. Lady made a serious and important point about the burying of the dead in the Muslim community. There is a practical solution—putting registrars in the hospitals. I have given some thought to the matter; some expense would be involved, but there might also be some saving. Anyway, it is not a laughing matter. What the hon. Lady must explain is why it is essential to organise a census establishing people's religious faith to solve that practical problem.

Fiona Mactaggart: I am afraid that services are currently planned on the basis of what people think others believe, rather than on the basis of what people know about others' beliefs. I think that a census giving real evidence of such knowledge could ensure that services meet the differing needs of people who have different beliefs.

Another factor would affect another group in my constituency, in a slightly different way. I refer to the police training budget. Members of the Sikh religion who observe the five Ks carry knives with them. I have encountered cases in which young police officers, new to Slough, have arrested young men who have been carrying knives as part of their religious belief. That does not happen in the case of more experienced police officers, because they recognise that in the circumstances of the faith the person carrying the weapon is not, in fact, carrying a weapon, but is carrying a religious artefact.

Mr. Hogg: That is a problem of bad training. If the hon. Lady consults the legislation that makes it an offence to carry a sharp-bladed instrument, she will find that there is a specific exemption in respect of those who carry such instruments as part of their faith.

Fiona Mactaggart: The right hon. and learned Gentleman will find that that is not a high priority in police officers' training in his constituency, whereas it must be a high priority in Slough police officers' training. My point is that police training authorities should be able to target their training appropriately, where it is most needed.

We need information that can ensure that services of all kinds are better shaped to meet the needs of the diverse communities that form our whole community. No one is suggesting that particular faiths should receive state subventions. We are trying to ensure that state services developed in a Christian tradition, which match the habits of the Christian faith, begin to match more fairly and accurately the beliefs and habits of other faiths. If we do that, we can ensure that members of minority faiths feel truly a part of our whole community, feel that their faiths and beliefs are respected, and feel that they can truly participate. If we fail to do that, we shall fail to meet their needs.

11.28 pm

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): I think that all censuses constitute an intrusion into our private lives, and that all censuses require considerable justification. A summary of a recent ruling by the European Court of Human Rights agrees. It states:

> The compulsory requirement to provide information to a census (including sex, marital status, place of birth)
> —incidentally, religion is not mentioned—
> was found to be an interference with private and family life.

The summary said that that could be justified in certain circumstances relating to the public good, but the public good must be justified thoroughly and carefully, and I am not sure that it has in the case of adding religion to the census.

I have not yet heard a convincing argument—certainly not from the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart)—for what we shall gain from the addition of religion; nor do I fully understand where the pressure has come from. I have a hint of a suspicion that some religious groups may hope that, for example, they can obtain the resources mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), or can gain access to schools devoted exclusively to their faith, such as Church of England and Roman Catholic schools do now. However, I am only guessing. I still have not heard clearly what the real reason for adding the question is.

Mr. Maclean: Perhaps I can help my hon. Friend. The Muslim Council of Britain strongly supports the question on the ground that there is a social time bomb ticking away unless something is done now for the more equitable allocation of public services and better planning on matters such as community relations, health care, education, employment and housing. It certainly believes that the question will allow the Government to direct money and funding to it.

Mr. Tyrie: My hon. Friend has firmed up my suspicion.

Mr. Gray: My hon. Friend raised the question of whether the census might be used to allocate funds to schools, but surely the only schools that are divided according to religion are Protestant and Roman Catholic schools in England and in Scotland. That is the only question that the census specifically fails to ask. It does not count the number of Roman Catholics compared with the number of Protestants; it counts merely the number of Christians. There is no provision at the moment for schools of other faiths.

Mr. Tyrie: On the face of it, that may also be a good point, but I would need to think a little more carefully before being absolutely sure.

Mr. Sayeed *rose—*

Mr. Swayne *rose—*

Mr. Tyrie: If I may, I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed) in a moment. I should like to give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne).

Mr. Swayne: The objective may be to identify social exclusion so as to be able to target resources better, but I

do not believe that the information that is being asked for will provide the quality of information to be able to deliver that objective. Surely, the most disadvantaged group in the Muslim community is the Bahais. Therefore, one would wish to know where they were located and how many of them there were. The proposal will not deliver that.

Mr. Tyrie: That is a powerful and persuasive point and further points us in the direction of saying that the information will not be valuable.

Mr. Sayeed: I entirely refute the suggestion that the Bill has been promoted on behalf solely of the Muslim community. It is true that the Muslims have supported it, but so have the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Church of England, the Catholic Church, the Hindus and the Sikhs.

Mr. Tyrie: I believe that the Jewish community is divided on the matter. Indeed, I was approached by a member of that community about the Bill, who first alerted me to take an interest in it. It would be wrong to suggest that there is uniform and full support from all sections of those faiths.

Furthermore, if I were a Jew, having seen what has happened in the past century, I would be deeply concerned at the idea that there should be an identification of Jews in that way in a census.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Tyrie: I shall give way in a moment.

In a free society such as we live in at the moment, everyone, including all Jews, can rest assured that they will not find themselves disadvantaged in any way by providing such information, but, historically, some ethnic and religious groups, particularly the Jewish community, have suffered greatly from being so identified. I can well imagine that that served as one of the reasons why many people in the Jewish community are concerned about the matter.

Mr. Hogg: May I raise the following point with my hon. Friend? If indeed the question is designed primarily to channel resources to particular groups, does he understand that many of us who represent the rural areas will suspect that the resources will be channelled to the inner cities and away from the rural areas? That is a matter that concerns all of those who represent the countryside.

Mr. Tyrie: That is another interesting point, which may well be right. Again, I would want to think about it more carefully before being absolutely sure.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Tyrie: I will give way one more time. If the House will forgive me, I give way to the Liberal Democrat spokesman.

Mr. Edward Davey: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, in July 1999, the Board of Deputies of British Jews voted overwhelmingly for the inclusion of the question in the census?

Mr. Tyrie: I was aware of that, but I stand by the points that I made. It is not true that the whole of the Jewish community overwhelmingly supports the proposal. Many in that community do not.

Mr. Ivor Caplin (Hove): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyrie: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I have given way, I think, six or seven times. There are not many things that I want to say. It seems that almost everyone else is getting their speeches into mine. However, I shall do my best to make the few further points that I wanted to make.

I think that many of the points that we have just heard made in interventions have slowly dawned on those who originally supported the Bill. I think that that is why the Bill has been curiously amended to include subsection (2), which suggests that people will not pay a penalty if they do not comply with subsection (1). I can only assume that the change has been made because those who support the Bill have realised that, as I believe, the Bill goes a step too far in demanding in a census information on religious belief.

There has been some discussion—I should like to clarify the point once and for all—about whether this is a compulsory measure. Some hon. Members have said that it is a voluntary measure.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyrie: No. If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I have already given way seven or eight times—[HON. MEMBERS: "To Opposition Members"]—and I had better move on. Initially, only Opposition Members sought to intervene. However, in view of that demand, I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. David Taylor: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for being susceptible to persuasion. As no penalty is associated with the failure or refusal to supply the information specified in the Bill, could the hon. Gentleman give his definition of compulsion? As providing the information would be a voluntary act, to which compulsory element does he so object?

Mr. Tyrie: I wish that the hon. Gentleman had controlled himself for a moment, because I was about to deal with precisely that point. I am holding a copy of the Census Act 1920, which makes it absolutely clear that it is an offence not to fill in the questionnaire in full. The Bill makes it equally clear that religion will be added to the schedule listing the questions that it will be an offence not to answer. However, although not answering the question will be an offence, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) said, there will not be a penalty for not answering it. It will be a unique case in English law.

Mr. David Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyrie: No. I should like to make a little bit progress in my speech.

Mr. David Taylor: On that very point.

Mr. Tyrie: No. I have given way, I think, eight times, and I really should like to make some progress.

Extraordinarily, although it is an offence not to fill in the census, in this specific case, no penalty will be applied to those who fail to provide the information. Earlier, I inquired whether such a bizarre state of affairs existed anywhere else in British primary law. I sought an answer to that question from the Library and from a professor of

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law at London university, but no one could tell me of one example in primary English law in which a legal duty is imposed for the first time on people but the civil penalty for non-compliance is waived. It is very curious state of affairs.

I do not like this Bill, which is unnecessarily intrusive. In principle, I do not like censuses, which I am not sure necessarily gather much information of value, although I acknowledge that some public good can come from them. I have not been convinced by anything that I have heard yet in this debate that anything of benefit would come from adding religion to the 1920 Act.

11.38 pm

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): I hope that, having established the principle of dealing with private Members' Bills in Government time, Ministers will make Government time available for consideration of the Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, which deals with a matter of deep significance for Opposition Members.

I rise with some trepidation to say that Opposition Front Benchers support the Bill. However, I hasten to tell my hon. Friends—at least I hope that they are still my hon. Friends—that they have a free vote in this matter.

Mr. Hogg: We always have a free vote. We are paid for our opinion—nobody else's.

Mr. Ottaway: The reason why my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) has a free vote is so that he may express his opinions, and I shall come to those in a second.

We recognise that certain information is necessary to achieve the objective of good government. For example, we agree with the statements in paragraph 64 of the White Paper that the information could be of help in identifying ethnic minority sub-groups, especially those originating from the Indian sub-continent, a point made by right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). It may be of interest to the House to know that such a question is already included in the census in Northern Ireland, where the information is used to help in the monitoring of equality policies.

I share my hon. Friends' concerns about the dubious benefit that is to be derived from the legislation, but that is not a reason for not trying. If there is some benefit to be derived from the information, it is worth having, and that is why—on balance—we support the Bill. However, I have listened closely to what my hon. Friends have said and, if it is felt appropriate to move amendments to cover those points in Committee, we shall not hesitate to do so.

Mr. Gray: In Northern Ireland, the census asks for a distinction between Roman Catholics and Protestants, which information is important in the delivery of proper government in Northern Ireland. If the census is to aid the delivery of proper government on the mainland of Great Britain, can my hon. Friend tell us by what mechanism Government aid can possibly be allocated to any religious group on the basis of the information gained? The answer is not through the standard spending assessment, which takes account of race.

Mr. Ottaway: I shall come to the proposed question, but the issue of what is done with the information is a matter for the person who assesses it and tries to make a decision on what will be done with it. My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) alluded to the important point about whether much of the census can be replaced by market research. The census will cost the enormous sum of £254 million and I strongly suspect that much of the information gleaned from it is available from market research companies. The level of detail in the data that are held by private companies is remarkable. What is more, it is held on a postcode basis, which enables business and anybody else who wishes to to analyse the data. As usual, business is far ahead of Government and while we do not quarrel with the need for a census in 2001, an analysis should be made before the next census in 2011 of how much can be obtained from the private sector instead of through the lumbering process of the census.

Mr. David Taylor: The hon. Gentleman seems to be developing the theory that successive censuses are less valuable because market research organisations can provide alternative information. Would it astonish him to learn that much of the information that market research companies collect is rooted in the information collected in the census?

Mr. Ottaway: That may or may not be right, but much of the information is also obtained from examining the size of a person's house. Aerial photography plays an important part in assessing the wealth and prosperity of a particular region. I am not sure whether market research, which is being done not on a yearly, monthly or weekly basis, but on a daily basis, can wait 10 years for the next census.

The organisation Christian Research estimates that 65 per cent of the UK is Christian and that non-Christian religions comprise 8 per cent, with at least 27 per cent of the country being agnostic. That information is available already, before the need for a census. It leads to the very important point made by the National Secular Society, that if, for example, the census shows that 65 per cent. have indicated that they are Christian, one could get an inflated idea of the numbers of religious adherents. There is a very big difference between being a member of a particular religion and a follower of that religion, and the answer would not address the difference. That is an important point, which we shall raise in Committee.

With the Churches' attendances falling rapidly, those ticking the "None" box could quite conceivably be the largest category. It would be interesting to compare those professing to have a religion with attendance at places of worship.

I now come to the question of compulsion. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham referred a great deal to the speech of Lord Stoddart in the other place. If I had been Lord Stoddart I would have made exactly the same speech at the time. It was based on the fact that the Bill before the other place did not have the no-liability element that we have in the Bill today. In fact, it was a matter of some surprise to us that on Second Reading in the other place the Government argued for compulsion and for a fine. We welcome the fact that they have revised that view.

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend is only partly right about that. Obviously, the fact that failure to respond is not an

offence punishable by a penalty is an improvement, but the point that the noble Lord was making was that this information, whether given voluntarily or as a result of compulsion, could be of value to certain people, and he cited governments headed by somebody like Hitler. That was his broad point: that it could be used by a discriminating Government. He was not focusing particularly on whether disclosure was voluntary or compulsory.

Mr. Ottaway: I do not quarrel with that proposition, but if answering the question is voluntary—I shall come to the voluntary nature in a moment—it is a matter of choice for an individual whether or not he fills in the answer. Obviously, he will be aware of the consequences of doing so, and will have to accept the consequences.

Mr. Tyrie: Does my hon. Friend accept that if it is clearly indicated that a response is voluntary, the value of the information collected will be greatly diminished?

Mr. Ottaway: I suspect that that is right, but my hon. Friend knows as well as I do that an opinion poll based on, I think, 1,050 people is fairly accurate. If, say, 10 million out of a population of 50 million fill in the answer, it will be a fair guide to what is happening in society as a whole.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): Is not the truth of the matter that most followers of faiths are proud of their faith, and are therefore more likely to respond to the question than not? Those who do not will be those with no particular interest.

Mr. Ottaway: I think that that is right, but I repeat that it is a matter of choice as to whether an individual answers the question. It is impossible for us to try to second-guess here tonight exactly how these data will work out, but I repeat what I said at the outset, which is that that is not a reason for not trying. That is why we support the measure.

Mr. Gray: My hon. Friend is very generous in giving way a second time, and I am grateful to him. Does he not agree that the fact that the individual may or may not be proud of his particular religion is not at all a good reason for the state to collect statistics about how many people are in that religion? It is of absolutely no relevance. One might as well say, "I'm proud of my very active sex life" and therefore put that in the census—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"]—but I am not.

Mr. Ottaway: The House might be interested in my hon. Friend's sex life, but a discussion of that could fall foul of what you might have to say, Mr. Deputy Speaker. My hon. Friend is right: pride is irrelevant, but people who fill in the box do so out of personal choice, whatever the reasons may be. That is a principle to which the Conservative party very much subscribes.

My noble Friend Lord Weatherill moved an amendment to his Bill in the other place to remove the liability point. We agree with his sentiment that the arguments about a voluntary question should be taken seriously. Religion and religious belief are private matters. So are political beliefs, which is why we have secret ballots. Ballot forms are completed in confidence and according to personal choice.

In our judgment, it is essential that no one should be liable to a penalty for refusing or declining to answer the question. If the Bill did not make that exemption, it would not have the support of the Conservative party. The draft census forms states that it is compulsory to complete the census and that failure to do so attracts a fine. It adds that the liability does not apply to question 10, on religion, which covers the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester.

We welcome the removal of the fine, but consider that a note to that effect should be printed next to the question on religion in the census form. That would make it absolutely clear that the question is voluntary and that failure to answer it carries no penalty. We will table an amendment to that effect in Committee. If the Census Act 1920 has to be amended to address the point, that will be at the heart of the amendment. Some people do not read the small print on the front of the census form, and the voluntary nature of the question should be made plain for all to see.

Mr. Hogg: May I encourage my hon. Friend to go down the road that he is outlining? He will know that the document to which he has referred is only a draft, and that it is authorised by statutory instrument. Therefore, should not what appears by statutory instrument be set out on the face of the Bill? Only by that means can the House get the reassurance that it seeks.

Mr. Ottaway: My right hon. and learned Friend makes a good point which I should like to take time to consider.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) referred to the wording of the question, which appears in full in paragraph 10 of the explanatory notes. It makes it clear that the word "Christian" includes

> Church of England, Catholic, Protestant and all other Christian denominations.

As my hon. Friend says, that puts "Church of England" in a different category from "Protestant" and is therefore inaccurate and clumsy. The term "Protestant" is an umbrella term and is not a denomination in itself, as the question suggests. The "Oxford English Dictionary" defines the word as pertaining to

> a member or follower of any of the western Christian Churches that are separate from the Roman Catholic Church in accordance with the principles of the Reformation.

It is clear that the distinction is between Catholic and Protestant, and that the term "Church of England" should be included in the term "Protestant". Unless the Economic Secretary wants an enormous postbag on the matter, I suggest that she considers that point very seriously.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend said that we know what the question on religion will be because it is set out in the explanatory notes. I remind him that such notes do not form part of the Bill and have not been endorsed by Parliament. If the House gives the Bill a Second Reading tonight, there is no guarantee that the words that appear in the notes will appear in the census.

Mr. Ottaway: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, which gives the Government a good opportunity to reflect on the point that I have just made.

After this census, the Government will arguably have a fairly accurate picture of the religious breakdown of the communities of England and Wales. In October 1999,

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the other place considered the possibility of legislation against religious discrimination. There is a slight whiff in all this that some law might follow on religious discrimination. Summing up for the Government in that debate, Lord Bassam said that he was waiting for the results of research commissioned by the university of Derby before making any further decisions. I should be grateful if, some nine months later, the Minister could enlighten us as to whether the matter has progressed at all, whether the research is available and whether the Government have any preliminary thoughts on the matter.

This is a Bill for England and Wales. It seems right and proper to us that such a sensitive matter, which affects only the people of England and Wales, should be decided only by Members of Parliament representing seats in England and Wales. The 2001 census in Scotland will be the first for which the Scottish Parliament has had a legislative responsibility. Experience shows that religious attitudes north of the border can vary from those south of the border. This is a thoroughly appropriate matter for this Parliament to decide in England and Wales, and for the Scottish Parliament to decide in Scotland. Just as I do not for one minute seek to interfere in the Scottish process, I trust that Members of Parliament representing Scottish seats will not seek to interfere in this Bill.

This is a small but important measure and it has the Conservative party's support.

11.57 pm

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): I will be brief. My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) has already referred to the echoes that the Bill will have in the memories of some older people in the United Kingdom. In 1934, the German Government introduced legislation to include a clause in their census information asking for the religion of their subjects. My hon. Friend is right to say that the position in the United Kingdom is, thank God, nothing like that which existed in Germany then and, please God, it never will be.

Having listened to the debate, I can see no real reason for this information to be requested. The hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) said that it would give us a better understanding of the different needs of religious communities. I do not agree with her.

Fiona Mactaggart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Fabricant: In a moment. I agree that it is important to understand the needs of Hindus, Muslims—whether they be Shi'ite or Sunni—and orthodox, reform or liberal Jews. However, I do not understand—and perhaps the hon. Lady will elucidate this for me—how information from the census will help us to understand better the working of individual religions in this country and, indeed, the rest of the world.

Fiona Mactaggart: It will not help us to understand different religions. It will inform us where observers of various religions live so that we can ensure that public services in those areas fit their needs.

Mr. Fabricant: I thank the hon. Lady for her answer, but I still do not follow her logic. The hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), who has now left the Chamber—which is oh so typical of the hon. Gentleman—*[Interruption.]* Oh, he is there; he has moved. The hon. Gentleman said that it would help us better to provide food. I think that he was alluding to halal and kosher food. Again, I do not see his point, because whether halal or kosher food is available is determined not by the religion one was brought up in or adheres to, but what one chooses to buy in a shop. There are halal shops and kosher shops because Jewish people and Muslim people—*[Interruption.]* Ministers may laugh and mock, but they know nothing about the Jewish or Muslim religions. If the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Bradley) wants to intervene, I would be happy for him to do so. The point is that the shops exist simply because there is a demand for them. Kosher shops have existed for hundreds of years, and halal shops for more than 80 or 90 years. They did not come into existence because of the Bill.

Mr. Hogg: In response to the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), may I say that the Bill means that the police force would be informed from the census about where the Sikh community exists? I should rather expect the police in Slough to know that Sikhs live in Slough.

Mr. Fabricant: My right hon. and learned Friend makes a powerful point. I began by saying that some would hear an echo of the days of 1934 when the German Government took a census. The last thing that those who remember that period will want is for the police to know where particular religious communities exist.

Several hon. Members have mentioned that an overwhelming majority of the Board of Deputies of British Jews supports the Bill. Those Members have suggested that that means that the Jewish community supports it, but their argument is fallacious in the extreme. My pair, the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), has rightly pointed out many times—he is not always right, but he often is—that the board rarely speaks for the Jewish population. Many Jews will feel—perhaps unreasonably, but they will feel it none the less—disquiet about this sort of information being included in a British Bill.

To my mind, the Bill is very un-British. I cannot see what it is intended to achieve. I cannot see what help it will give to health care, social service provision or anything else provided by the state if we simply know the percentage of Jews, Christians or Buddhists among the total population.

Mr. Leigh: We are trickling around the issue. I have a great deal of sympathy for Muslims who want schools funded by the state as schools are funded for Catholics, Jews or members of the Church of England. Would it not be honest to admit that therein lies the real purpose behind the Bill? The Muslim community wants to be identified as a significant minority in certain areas so that it may argue for its own schools and facilities. Why not just admit that instead of trying to pretend that there is some bigger or wider issue?

Mr. Fabricant: I shall not go down that road, except to say that Muslim schools can be set up, provided that the people involved accept that non-Muslims must be able to attend, as with Jewish, Church of England and Catholic

schools, and that the national curriculum is adhered to. In addition, if most of the teaching is in English, there is no reason why Muslim schools cannot be state funded.

Mr. Leigh: You do not need a census to know that.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend is quite right.

I do not think that the Bill is a healthy one. Nor, from a legal point of view, is it elegant. I ask the Minister for an assurance that a clear statement will appear alongside the question saying that, although it is compulsory to answer—it is compulsory to answer all census questions—no penalty will attach to people who do not. Many people, particularly Muslims or those who have recently entered the country—*[Interruption.]* It is all very well for the hon. Member, Mr. MacShane, who has changed his name for a reason that I do not understand—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Gentleman would do well to remember that we use moderate language in argument in the House; I do not like the way that he is going.

Mr. Fabricant: I wanted to point out only that the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) tries to demonstrate that we should be open, yet, for some reason, he is ashamed of his original name. I find that strange and I do not understand it. Many people might suggest that it would be sensible for me to change the name Fabricant—it does not fit easily on a poster, but I see no reason to change. However, we digress—[HON. MEMBERS: "What was the hon. Gentleman's name?"] It was an elegant and proud Polish name. I see no reason why the hon. Gentleman should have changed it. Perhaps he thought that there was discrimination in the Labour party and that by adopting a Scottish name—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have heard quite enough of that from the hon. Gentleman. Has he finished his speech?

Mr. Fabricant: You are quite right, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I do not want to discriminate against the hon. Member for Rotherham—just as I do not want the Government to discriminate against members of the community who feel that they would be prejudiced by giving information of the type required by the Bill.

I ask the Minister to undertake that the question will be followed by a statement that no penalty will be attracted by failure to answer it. I hope that she will bear in mind the fact that many of the people filling in the census will be new immigrants. Because of that, they may not have a good command of the English language. The statement needs to be made plainly and clearly so that there is no misunderstanding—*[Interruption.]* The Minister claims that she does not understand what I am saying. If she goes out into the community, she will find that many people—including older people who have lived in this country for many years, as well as immigrants—are unable to read six-point text.

There must be a clear statement that there will be no penalty for not answering the question. If the Minister gives that undertaking, perhaps I shall not vote against the Bill.

12.7 am

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): An important principle has always lain beneath the good governance of the United Kingdom, but not beneath that of states such as the old Russia and present-day China; it is that the state should not have unnecessary information about private individuals. That is an extremely important principle: the state should know only what it needs to know about particular people.

That principle is upheld in many aspects of government—many of which have been advanced by Labour—for example, the Data Protection Act 1998. The whole principle behind that measure is to ensure that information about individuals is not known unless it is absolutely necessary. The same point applies to the Freedom of Information Bill. The Government will provide much information and will tell individuals what they know about them.

We have always espoused those important principles in this country. They were never espoused by totalitarian states—under Hitler, or in Russia or China. The fundamental question behind the debate is: why should the state need to know people's precise religious affiliations—if they have them? As we have heard, about one third of the nation would state that they have no religious affiliation.

We are trying to address some important questions. Is it possible for the state to know that information? Is it useful statistical information? Can the census actually collect it? Even if it can be collected, will it be useful to the state?

There are some fundamental difficulties in respect of the collection of such statistical information. A significant number of people with a religious affiliation will choose—properly—not to answer the question. I should be one of them. I am very much a practising Christian, but I see no reason why the state should want to know that. It is a private matter. I attend my little church in Slaughterford on Sundays; I am a profound, practising Christian. I see no reason at all why the state should need to know that. I imagine that many people across the nation take precisely the position that their religion is a private matter between them and their God and there is no reason to declare it on a form.

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): If answering the question is voluntary, the individual is at liberty to divulge that information if they choose. The hon. Gentleman has just done so and tomorrow's *Hansard* will record the faith that he follows and where he goes to church. What is the problem?

Mr. Gray: Neither of the hon. Gentleman's two points is particularly valid. The voluntary nature of the question is an important safeguard, but the Government's original drafting did not recognise that. It stated that information was compulsory and that people would go to prison or pay a fine if they did not answer. It was only thanks to amendments by my noble Friends in the other place that the voluntary element was introduced into the Bill.

If the hon. Gentleman is right to say that the voluntary nature of the reply means that it does not matter, and if a large number of people will not answer, what is the point of the question in the first place?

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gray: The debate has been rather broken up, when we should be thinking quietly and cooly about the logic behind the arguments. I came here tonight hoping to support the Bill—thinking, because of my convictions, that a question about religion would provide useful information. My remarks are the result of listening carefully, so I am reluctant to give way to many light-hearted interventions.

Mr. Foster: My question is not at all light hearted. Most faith groups seriously want to make their point. How will they have the opportunity to do so if not by this method? The provision provides an opportunity rather than imposing an obligation.

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman made the point earlier that because people take pride in their religion and want the public to know that they are profoundly affected by it, a good way to do that is through the census—as some form of PR exercise for the promotion of particular religions. That is contrary to the basis of the 1920 Act.

There are many religious organisations of one sort or another. I was pleased to attend the Elim Pentecostal church in Chippenham last Friday, whose members would say, "We have plenty of ways of letting people know our faith. We do not need to tick a box on the census." That apart, I am not sure that is a proper use of public money and public information systems, simply so that faith groups can demonstrate pride in their faith. If it is, many other questions could be introduced to benefit particular groups—such as one about political affiliations. I am proud that I am a Conservative and there are many proud Conservatives across the nation. We ought to have a box on the form that asks, "Are you or are you not a Conservative?" That would give me the opportunity to demonstrate my pride in being one. I do not believe that pride in one's religious convictions is necessarily a good reason for including a question about it in the census.

Given that a large number of people will refuse to answer the only question to which a reply is voluntary, that would—many statisticians agree—reduce the value of the responses. Also, many people would react to the question off the top of their heads. When most people in the Army are asked in a form to give their religion, they put Church of England even though they have not been to church for many years. What does one put if one is a lapsed Roman Catholic or a Christian by baptism who has since adopted the Jewish faith? The question requires a factual answer, with no opportunity for commentary or remarks about the profundity of one's faith.

Mr. Sayeed: There is a write-in section associated with that particular question on the proposed form, which gives the opportunity to amplify one's reply.

May I make one further point? John Rickman, who was the Clerk to the House of Commons at the end of the 18th century, said that the intimate knowledge of any country must form the rational basis of legislation and diplomacy. Does my hon. Friend agree with that?

Mr. Gray: I do. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his point about the Clerk to the House of Commons at the end of the 18th century who laid out 12 purposes for the census. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) said the 19th century. However, if he checks, he will find that Mr. Rickman lived at the end of the 18th century. He laid out 12 purposes for the census, and, as my hon. Friend said, the first is that the intimate knowledge of any country must form the basis of legislation. That is the case and for 200 years not knowing people's religious faiths has not prevented us from having the intimate knowledge to form a rational basis for legislation and diplomacy. If my hon. Friend is saying that, under the Government of every political persuasion for the past 200 years, we have been a poor Parliament that does not know a rational basis for legislation and diplomacy, he is incorrect.

Mr. Sayeed: This will be my final intervention on my hon. Friend's speech. The point is that more people with faiths other than Christianity live in this country than did in the past. We are increasingly a multi-faith, multicultural society. Some people might not like that, but it is a fact.

Mr. Gray: My hon. Friend is correct. I, for one, welcome that change in our society in comparatively recent years. That, in itself, is not necessarily an argument for increasing the number of questions on the census in the way that the Bill proposes; nor does it support what my hon. Friend said about the first purpose that the Clerk in the 18th century laid out for the census. Indeed, if, in the 18th century, the purpose of the census was to know about the nation, I do not understand why the fact that we are now a multi-faith society is particularly relevant.

Incidentally, I conform to the 70 per cent. of this nation who remain Christian and I am speaking in a Chamber that opens every day with a Christian form of worship. I suspect and hope that we will remain a largely Christian society.

Mr. Leigh: Much cant has been spoken in the debate and there has been a failure of honesty. The truth is that many Christians are nominal, lazy or will not fill in the form. The Muslim community, commendably from its point of view, is much keener and more vibrant and it is growing. Its members will fill out the form. Rightly, they are being pressed to do that by the Muslim community so that it can extend its influence in certain communities.

Mr. Gray: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I shall come to it shortly.

My first point was that the statistical information that is collected is likely to be inaccurate. I have touched on two ways in which I think that it will be inaccurate, but there are many others that we could discuss. For example, there is an important omission in that it lumps all so-called Christians together and lists other faiths individually. Statistically, that is nonsense and I very much hope that, in Committee, the Government will consider changing that provision. It might be interesting to have information on denominations in the Christian faith around the nation. However, the census is likely to provide statistically unsatisfactory information.

Mr. Peter Bradley: The hon. Gentleman said that he was one of the 70 per cent. of the people of this country who are Christian. From what does he derive that information if it was not census or quasi-census material?

Mr. Gray: I was quoting my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) who provided those figures. They may not be correct, and the information is anecdotal. It is important that the information should remain anecdotal, because there is no need for us in the Chamber to be able to say that 23,748,637 people are Christian and that 2 million are Muslim. There is no need for us to have that information; it is anecdotal. The Church of England does not know the figures for its membership, although the Church of Scotland has slightly better information on its membership because one has to sign up to become a member of that Church. However, many faiths do not know themselves how many members they have, and they do not have to know that. However, the Bill will introduce a new provision that will require the Government to know with precision and down to the last person how many people are members of each religion.

I said that 70 per cent. of the people of this country are Christian. That information is anecdotal and the figure may well be incorrect. The figure may be only 50 or 60 per cent., but that does not matter. The quality of people's faith is what matters, not the number of people who hold it. It is not about quantity, but about quality.

Mr. Fabricant: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Gray: I am trying to make a little progress, so I hope that my hon. Friend will forgive me if I do not give way now.

The statistical information that the question will produce is likely to be extremely inaccurate, anecdotal and, therefore, not particularly useful even to people on the left wing who love statistics. It does not surprise me that the statistical arguments for the question come from Labour Members, who love to have figures and to know the nitty-gritty details of what people do. Even to them, the statistics are likely to seem rather inaccurate. Certainly Christians, such as myself and others who consider what has been said during the debate, can make sure that the statistics are inaccurate by, in my case, putting myself down as nothing or as a Muslim or a Sikh, simply to undermine the value of the information.

Let us suppose for one second that, in Committee, the questionnaire or another part of the Bill is changed in such a way that the information would be 100 per cent. valid, although I cannot imagine how that would be done. Let us suppose, however, that after the 2001 census we know precisely how many people are Sikh, how many are Muslim, how many are members of the Wee Frees and how many are Roman Catholic. Now we move on to the second question, which is much more important: why should the state know that and what use will it make of the information?

The hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), who cares so much about religion in Slough that she is no longer in her place, made the point that Sikhs in Slough might be arrested unreasonably for carrying the ceremonial weapon that is required by their religion. I would hope that the Slough police are intelligent enough not to make such arrests, and if they are not, no amount of statistical production will make them more intelligent.

Moreover, as a Scot, I was wearing my kilt and skean-dhu in the Tate gallery and was questioned by a policeman about the knife down my sock, so I explained it sensibly to him. Finding out how many Sikhs there are to avoid their being arrested because of their ceremonial sword is about as sensible as finding out how many Scotsmen wearing kilts there are in London who might be arrested for wearing their skean-dhu. There is no sense in it at all. There is certainly no sense in a huge Government exercise such as this one to get round that particular difficulty concerning Sikhs.

My next point brings us to what some people believe to be the central purpose of finding out differences in religion, and that would be to allow the Government to allocate resources on the basis not of ethnicity, as they do at the moment, but of religion. The standard spending assessment has an ethnicity section, although I am not sure why. If a local authority has a high proportion of ethnic minorities, it will receive more money than those authorities that do not. That is a long-established principle of the division of the annual local government settlement. We have great debates about how important ethnicity is, and whether it is important if a local authority has more black or more Asians. All that is discussed in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions every year when it is divvying up the SSA.

I have heard nobody in this debate suggest that the ethnicity section of the SSA may be changed because of religion. Nobody is saying that if many Asians turn out to be Christians rather than Muslims, the SSA should be changed to take account of their religion. Anyone who suggested that would be wrong. I can think of no reason at all for saying that someone's religious faith should lead to a change in the Government's allocation of resources.

Education has been mentioned, and the provision of education with special denominational interests may be a reason for acquiring that detailed information. However, Church of England and Roman Catholic schools make up by far the largest category of such education, and denomination is the one piece of information that the census would not provide. It would not tell us how many Roman Catholics, members of the Church of Scotland or Methodists there were, so it would not help.

My school, Glasgow high school, had a good ethnic mix, and we made provision for kosher lunches and the rabbi came in to take special services while my father, who was a minister, took the services on behalf of the Church of Scotland. That happened not because we knew the general statistics but because the pupils at my school were roughly 50 per cent. Jewish and 50 per cent. Church of Scotland, and it was a perfectly sensible thing to do.

Glasgow corporation played a large part in respect of the costs of education and took account of those percentages in providing school dinners. I am glad that it did, and a number of my Jewish friends greatly enjoyed that particularly outstanding feature of Glasgow high school. However, knowing how many Jewish people there were in Glasgow would not have affected the way in which kosher lunches were provided at Glasgow high school. That knowledge would not have provided added useful information to Glasgow corporation, which, by counting heads, knew perfectly well how to work out the provision of kosher lunches at my school.

So far, no Member has come up with a convincing reason why the delivery of Government services or public services in general would be improved by the Government having such information. In the absence of that positive upside, we must return to what I said at the beginning of

[Mr. Gray]

these brief remarks: if the Government do not need to know, why should they know? I therefore challenge the Minister. He should not give us a lot of stuff about how many people from ethnic minorities we now have in this country, how many different religions we have, how interesting it would be to have such information or how proud people are to be members of a particular minority religion. We do not need to know any of that. We need to know only one thing: why should the Government have information, except when they need it? If they need this information, we need to know precisely why they need it and precisely by what means they would change the delivery of Government services as a result of having it.

Will the SSA system be changed? Will education provision be changed? Will the policing services be changed? How will the Government take account of the information? Which Government services will they change as a result of having it? That is question No. 1. Question No. 2, of course—*[Interruption.]* It is interesting that the Government Whip, the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Bradley), finds that very funny. These are serious matters, although he finds it difficult to take them seriously. Perhaps that says more about him than about the debate. Perhaps he would like to intervene. I will happily give way, but I fear that he may not get to his feet.

The intellectual content of the debate may be above the hon. Gentleman. Perhaps his son, who attends Manchester grammar school, will get to know more about these matters. I hope that Manchester grammar school—one of the finest private schools in England, to which he has chosen to send his son—will take account of the different religions of its pupils. I also hope that he will think twice about laughing during future debates. He looks a little cross.

There are two fundamental problems: what use the Government will make of the information and the fact that it will be dodgy in the first place. The Minister must answer those questions precisely and specifically. What will the Government do with those statistics?

12.27 am

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): I consider the Bill to be misconstrued and wrong on a number of grounds. If the national census is important to the Government, and if a number of intrusive questions are to be asked, the Bill should have been introduced by them in their time so that we could have had a debate before 10 o'clock at night. They have used the private Member's Bill route to advocate the measure, given it time after the main business of the day has been dealt with, and introduced it after 10 o'clock. That is offensive to the House.

That apart, the substance of the Bill is offensive. It is wrong for the state to ask questions about religion. No criminal penalty will be attached to failure to respond, but that does not make the Bill less offensive. Let us be in no doubt: answering the question is not voluntary. When advocating his amendment, whereby there would be no penalty, Lord Weatherill made it clear that he had taken such a route because although, ideally, he would have addressed the question of the census being voluntary, he had realised that he could not do that without wrecking the Bill. He had to send the Bill on to this House and said:

> I have reflected with care on what your Lordships have had to say . . . I feel that we should take the arguments about a voluntary question seriously. In the interests of progressing the matter smoothly, and so that, as the noble Earl and other noble Lords wished, the Bill may pass to another place in a fit condition, I am proposing an amendment which would have the effect of removing the liability to a penalty under Section 8 of the Census Act—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 3 February 2000; Vol. 609, c. 364.]

He was clear that the offence of failing to answer the question would remain, and that replying was not voluntary. The best ruse that he could invent to attempt to deal with voluntariness was removing the penalty.

I pay tribute to the Government for forcing the matter on to the agenda. It has forced us to examine the Census Act 1920 and question the validity of holding a census. It has forced us to read for the first time the Government's White Paper, "The 2001 Census of Population", which was published in March 1999. We would not have bothered to read that before coming across the Government's ruthless fanaticism for driving the Bill through the House.

The research that has been conducted on the census suggests to me, as someone who held ministerial responsibility, that the census is an example of research that the Government are good at starting but never know when to end. Like most Government research projects that I came across in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and in the Home Office, one of its main conclusions was that more essential research had to be undertaken, at great cost, over the next few years.

Other colleagues have mentioned John Rickman, the Clerk of the House of Commons. In 1798, he set out the justification for a census. As the House knows, the first census was conducted in 1801. He said that the main reason for a national census was that the intimate knowledge of any country must form the rational basis of legislation and diplomacy. John Rickman believed that the intimate knowledge of a country was necessary for legislation, but not that the state should have intimate knowledge of individuals' religion. Before the House gets carried away with John Rickman's point, it may be worth considering some other points that that distinguished Clerk made as justifications for the census.

If some hon. Members rely on only one of John Rickman's points for justification, I am entitled to rely on others to show that a census is no longer necessary and that the Bill may therefore be unnecessary. John Rickman's second point was that an industrious population is the basic power and resource of any nation, and that therefore its size needs to be known.

John Rickman's third reason for a census was that the number of men who were required for conscription to the militia in different areas should reflect the area's population. That point is no longer valid, as the Government have decimated our armed forces. Fourthly, John Rickman claimed that there were defence reasons for wanting to know the number of seamen. The fifth reason was the need to plan the production of corn and thus to know the number of people who had to be fed.

John Rickman's eighth point may still appear relevant to the Government. He said that, in a time when many feared the disaffection of the people, a census would

indicate the Government's intention to promote the public good. It seems that John Rickman, that distinguished and neutral Clerk of the House, may have been the first Government spin doctor because of his idea of doing something that the people would like. He said that the true size of the population, even after the effects of war, was probably far greater than the usual estimates and that that knowledge would

be the most consoling gratification to every lover of his country.

Another reason that John Rickman gave was that the life insurance industry would be stimulated by the results of the census. I shall not trouble the House with the full 12 reasons. However, they have probably been quoted in a slightly different form to Treasury Ministers and other Ministers over the past 200 years. Once Governments begin to undertake a huge statistical collection, they can never find the will to stop. All Governments of whatever political persuasion will always find the justification for asking yet more questions and processing yet more information, including information that they have not a hope of using or have no firm intention of using, but may come in handy one day.

Two hundred years later, in their White Paper, "The 2001 Census of Population", the Government have slightly different reasons from John Rickman. They state:

Government, local and health authorities, commercial businesses and the professions need reliable information on the number and characteristics of people and households if they are to conduct many of their activities effectively. This need is currently best met by conducting a census every ten years covering the whole of the population, and by updating the population estimates each year between censuses using data from . . . births, marriages and deaths . . . and . . . estimates of migration.

The Government continue:

However, over time, such data, especially on migration, accumulate inaccuracies, and a regular census is necessary to provide information for revising the annual population estimates.

. The Government must have a census in order to revise annual population estimates. Why? Why must the Government revise the annual population estimates and conduct a census? One statistical exercise is carried out to inform yet another statistical exercise, to which there may be very little point in the age of the internet, the market research data available, and the huge amount of other information that each and every one of us must provide to various Government Departments for specific purposes.

Mr. Sayeed: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. There were, I think, two censuses while he was a member of the Government. Did he protest against either of those?

Mr. Maclean: Of course not. I paid no attention to them at all, because in those earlier censuses there was no question of my fundamental human liberties being infringed by the Government asking about my religion. If the Government did not propose to ask about my religion or the religion of my constituents, I would probably have ignored the present census. It would not have been at the forefront of my mind. Because the Government have been obsessed with getting the Bill through and getting the religion question asked, I and no doubt some of my right hon. and hon. Friends have been rather suspicious of what the Government are up to.

Why is that vital? I did not think that the Government were proposing any other changes, but my hon. Friend's intervention comes at exactly the right point in my speech. I was about to say that until I began to look into the matter, I thought that the only change that the Government intended to make was to ask the question about religion. However, when I studied the March 1999 White Paper, "The 2001 Census of Population", I found that the religion question is not the only change that the Government propose.

The Government tell us in the White Paper that

there will be a slight increase in the number of questions compared with the 1991 Census.

They go on to state that the

significant changes from 1991 in the questions proposed are: new individual questions on general health, provision of unpaid personal care, time since last paid employment, size of employer's organisation

and the question on religion, if the Bill gets through tonight. There will also be revisions to the questions on relationship within the household, ethnic group and one's qualifications.

The White Paper states that

the Government will continue to consider whether or not to include a question on income, having regard to the risks to the Census as a whole in so doing . . . the Government will make final proposals on whether or not the question should be included in the Census itself once research into possible means of securing relevant information from alternative sources has been completed.

When the Minister replies to the debate, it would be relevant for her to tell us the Government's intentions with regard to a question on income. Although the Bill proposes to add a question on religion to the 1920 Act, we cannot make a judgment on the single question on religion without knowing the Government's intentions on the other questions that they propose to add.

Mr. Edward Davey: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The questions to which the right hon. Gentleman refers were debated by a statutory instrument Committee of this House and passed without a vote.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman's point of order is timely, as I was beginning to feel that the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) was going wide of the Bill, which deals with one particular point. I suspect that it is outside the scope of the debate to put the questions that he has been putting to the Minister.

Mr. Maclean: I am grateful for your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is very helpful. I was approaching the matter cautiously as I did not want to stray from the subject of the debate. If the Minister can confirm the intervention by the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey), that would be helpful. If all the other matters have been dealt with, we can focus purely on the one question before us tonight: the new question on religion—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am the one who, from the Chair, is trying to help the right hon. Gentleman to focus on this particular point.

Mr. Maclean: I am grateful for that help once again, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

[Mr. Maclean]

The question that we must address tonight is whether we give a Second Reading to a Bill that includes, for the first time, an intrusive and offensive question asking people to state their religion. I shall not return to previously traced ground, but if other matters have already been added to the 2001 census, it helps us to consider whether this is one more straw that may break the camel's back.

It is indicative of the nature of this Government, and relevant to the point that I was making, which was that, like all Governments, they want to ask more questions. They want to collect more statistics, whether they can use them or not.

Mr. Bercow: They do not like answering, though.

Mr. Maclean: That is true.

When one reads the explanatory notes to the Bill, one gets the feeling that the Government are scratching around trying to find some general justifications for the offensive question on religion that they are asking. As has been alluded to by some of my right hon. and hon. Friends tonight, the answer is out there, plain for all to see. Various religious groups are quite clear about the purpose of the question, because they have been demanding that the Government ask it, certain in the knowledge that they will encourage all their religious adherents to answer it and that most of the more idle Christian population will not bother to answer it, or will find it offensive.

Many people fill in forms by stating that they are Church of England Christians. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) said, when, in the Army, one is asked to state one's religion, one picks the easiest answer. Those serving in Scotland pick Church of Scotland, and those serving in England pick Church of England. Many of those who are not strict religious adherents to a particular faith will find the question offensive and may not answer it. We shall therefore get distorted results.

Some of my hon. Friends have already suggested that the reason the Muslim community is so keen on this question is because it intends to ensure that all its religious adherents answer it faithfully and thoroughly, so that a maximum score will be marked down for some of those religions. On the other hand, a large number of members of the Christian religion may not answer the question—they may decline to answer it or not bother to answer it. We shall therefore get distorted results.

We can see from the explanatory notes to the Bill that, on the basis of those distorted results, the Government intend to allocate resources according to some of the answers that they get to the religious question. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) may have been right in the assertions that he made earlier—that the Bill has some dangerous precedents, that there is a danger that it will cause distortion, and that the Government will seek to move funding away from rural areas to inner-city areas, where they pronounce that they have identified a particular religious minority desperately in need of financial help. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] It is no good Labour Members saying "Oh, oh." We have seen it time and again. The Government did that with police funding, directing funding to inner-city areas. After conducting research that showed that there was a rural sparsity problem, they still refused to allocate proper funding to rural areas.

Mr. Forth: Can my right hon. Friend imagine any circumstances in which taxpayers' money is likely to be diverted by the Government to a Christian community as a result of answers that might be given to the census?

Mr. Maclean: Of course one cannot envisage that in the case of the present Government, but it would be wrong in any event. It would be entirely wrong to direct resources to an area containing a large Christian population, and away from any other area. That should not be a relevant consideration. When my Muslim constituents and my Christian constituents are waiting for cataract operations, and when the waiting list is constantly growing under this Government, their religion is irrelevant; it is the shortage of resources in the health service that matters. I would find it deeply offensive if I discovered that any of my constituents who were members of a minority faith had been given poorer treatment—or better treatment—because of their religion. Religion should be irrelevant to the determining of resources from either local authorities or central Government.

There is a smell here. It comes from what some Labour Members have said, from some of what has been written in the press, and from some of the pronouncements made by members of ethnic communities. There is a suggestion that the Bill, and the amendment that it proposes, are seen by them as yet another vehicle for the distortion of Government funding, and as a stick with which to beat the Government. When they get the figures that suit them—showing high populations of certain religious communities in certain parts of the country, in comparison with, perhaps, Christian communities or others—they will use it to extort funds from the Government. The Government know that. If that is their purpose—and we know that it is—they should come clean tonight and simply say so.

Let us not pretend that there is a vital need for the statistical information. Let the Government come clean and tell the House that they want the Bill to be given a Second Reading because they want to buy votes in certain parts of the country.

12.45 am

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Thank you for calling me, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We have plenty of time. Let me begin by saying what a pleasure it is to see here the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Bradley), the deputy Chief Whip. It is fascinating to note that he can be so upset by mention of the fact that he is a patron of Manchester grammar school. I think that he said "Cheap" 20 times; let us see how many times he says it now. However, it is nice to see him on the Front Bench, and it is nice to see him listening so carefully.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I recommend the hon. Gentleman to stick closely to the terms of the Bill. I do not think that gratuitous comments of that kind are helpful to the debate.

Mr. Paterson: Some factual errors were made by the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), who, as a

Catholic, should know that he has the privilege of being a Member of Parliament thanks to a Conservative Prime Minister, the Duke of Wellington, whose Government passed the Catholic emancipation Act—the Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829.

Earlier, the hon. Gentleman made great play of the fact that this party, of which I am proud to be a member, had not spoken up, and had never made any progress, on the rights of religious minorities in this country. I think it important to get across that the first real breakthrough after the glorious revolution was the emancipation Act, which gave Catholics the right to be members of the armed forces and Members of this House.

The real history of this country lies in our ability to adopt wave after wave of immigrants from a kaleidoscopic variety of backgrounds and cultures, and to integrate them in our society without conflict. That is a record of which we should be extraordinarily proud. Several Members mentioned Jews. The last pogrom in this country took place in York in 1260; no other country can emulate that record. I am glad to see my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) nodding. I believe that he comes from a Jewish culture.

Mr. Bercow: So do I.

Mr. Paterson: As does my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow).

The history of Jewish immigrants symbolises— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. This historical passage is going outside the scope of the Bill. The hon. Gentleman has not been able to relate it to this narrow measure. I must request him to talk about the Bill, and leave remoter issues.

Mr. Paterson: I am grateful for that. The point that I make is directly related to the Bill because the Bill seeks to carve the country up into ghettos. It is a recipe for this country's ghettoisation. The trick that we have learned over the centuries is to assimilate different cultures. The Huguenots, for example, came over after the revocation of the edict of Nantes. They kept their religion.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May I say seriously to the hon. Gentleman that he would do well to take heed of the rulings that I am giving from the Chair. If he does not, I will require him to cease.

Mr. Paterson: I am most grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Brian H. Donohoe (Cunninghame, South): Just sit down.

Mr. Paterson: I will speak. We have plenty of time.

The real lesson is that the measure turns its back on our successful assimilations of previous centuries. What is worse, it is driven, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) said, by the power of attracting public funds to ethnic groups.

We already know that, since the war, the Welsh and the Scots have managed to paint themselves as afflicted minorities driven down by the English. As a result, they receive 25 per cent. more public funds than they raise in taxation.

Hon. Members: Order.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May I say to the House as a whole that we will have a properly conducted debate. Determining orderliness will continue to be the responsibility of the occupant of the Chair.

Mr. Paterson: Thank you again, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The information that will be gleaned from the census will probably not be valid. We have the extraordinary subsection (1A), which says that

> no person shall be liable to a penalty under subsection (1) for refusing or neglecting to state any particulars in respect of religion.

Mr. Swayne: Can my hon. Friend assist me? Although no penalty applies for failing to answer the question, clearly, the penalty of a £1,000 fine still applies to those who give false information with respect to the question, but how is that to be policed? Ethnic information is certainly verifiable. I cannot understand how religious information can be verifiable. Surely one's religion is what one says it is.

Mr. Paterson: That is a pertinent point. It calls into question those who do not want to give their religious denomination and reply by stating, incorrectly, "None." That is a valid point.

I have listened carefully to contributions by Members on both sides of the House, but I have not yet heard any practical advantages from putting through the measure. The hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) said that the police would learn the number of Sikhs in Slough. It is their business to know how many Sikhs there are in Slough. They should know already. The fact that some faulty information will almost certainly be gleaned from the census will not benefit policing in Slough. *[Interruption.]* Is the hon. Lady trying to intervene?

Fiona Mactaggart *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Paterson: Apparently she is not. There is no practical gain. There is the ability to gain faulty information and to draw conclusions that may have damaging effects on this country long term. For that reason, I shall oppose the measure.

12.54 am

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): I see that the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), who I believe is a Conservative Front-Bench spokesman, is just leaving the Chamber.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Mid–Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed) for introducing and explaining the Bill. I share the disappointment of many hon. Members and of the faith communities that the Bill was not able to receive an unopposed Second Reading on the previous occasions when it was presented before the House.

[Miss Melanie Johnson]

The Government recognise the importance of having a clear picture of the diversity of faith communities in the United Kingdom, to make it possible to deal with the concerns and needs of all sections of the community. *[Interruption.]* The census is, indeed, a once in a decade opportunity to do that, reliably and consistently, for local areas across the country.

I am grateful to some of my hon. Friends, and to the hon. Members for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed) and for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway), for shedding the only light cast on the subject in this long debate— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. May I say to the House that the debate will be assisted if there are no more sedentary comments?

Miss Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

My hon. Friends the Members for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) and for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) spoke about the value of the census and, particularly, of asking the question on religion.

I remind hon. Members that the explanatory notes explain very clearly—that is what they are for—why the information is being collected. Paragraphs 2 to 5 explain the background to the matter. Bearing in mind the hour and the time that we have spent discussing the matter, I shall not read out the paragraphs, especially as some of them have already been quoted.

The basic reason for collecting such information, however, is so that it can be used to inform planning, policy and services. As some hon. Members have recognised positively in their speeches, the United Kingdom is now a very ethnically and religiously diverse community. We need that information to provide the right services while recognising people's individual ethnic and religious perspectives.

Mr. Gray: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Miss Johnson: I shall not give way. I have only just started my speech, and am attempting to reply to a two-hour debate in which many points have been made.

Some hon. Members have repeatedly but very mistakenly used the word "intrusive" to describe the question. Such a description is a travesty of the situation. The Bill emphasises that answering the question is voluntary. The form will also make it clear that it is a voluntary question, and we make it absolutely plain that there will be no penalty whatever for not answering it. Opposition Members have not recognised, as they should have done, that there is no intrusiveness in a question that is purely voluntary.

Many Opposition Members have maintained that the record of those who answer the question will be scrutinised by the Government. However, the Government will not come anywhere near any of that information, whether it is provided by the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) or by any other hon. Member or member of the community. The Office for National Statistics collects that information, the confidentiality of which is guaranteed for a full 100 years, and which is used purely for statistical purposes.

I was therefore shocked to hear many hon. Members effectively making an attack not only on the value of the question value but on the overall notion of the census. Many Departments think that the question would be extremely useful in planning services. Moreover, as the hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire said, very many religious organisations have actively supported—indeed, campaigned—for the question to be included in the census. They have done so because they think that the information is important.

Recently, I communicated with organisations on the Bill's failure—because of objections by only a couple of Opposition Members—to make progress under the private Members' Bill procedure. I received representations from organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain, the Bahai Community of the United Kingdom, the Council of the Churches for Britain and Ireland, the Jain Samaj Europe, Inter-Faith Network for the United Kingdom, the Inner Cities Religious Council, the Churches Commission for Inter-Faith Relations and the archbishops of the Church of England.

Mr. Forth: Will the Minister indicate which religious groups will benefit from the distribution of resources resulting from the census information proposed?

Miss Johnson: The point about the collection of information is that it is to enable us to plan services in the best possible way for the entire community, of whatever religious, ethnic or other background—just as we collect all sorts of other information on the basis of the census. Such information is used in planning many services.

I was shocked for much of the debate because Conservative Members were displaying quite a few prejudices: their true colours were very clearly revealed. Many other people will be shocked by some of the remarks that have been made. "Shocked" is the most appropriate word in this context.

Mr. Gray: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Miss Johnson: I shall not give way at the moment.

The right hon. Members for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) were both Ministers in previous Tory Governments. They were both heavily dependent—if they were not, it is even more shocking—on census data in the planning of the services for which they were responsible and in respect of which officials in their Departments would have brought forward information closely based on the information collected in the census.

I was intrigued by the remarks of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst about the fact that the Bill was receiving some Government support. I have been reminded by my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Mr. Jamieson) of the considerable co-operation of the right hon. Gentleman when he was an Education Minister with the Activity Centres (Young Persons' Safety) Bill, a private Member's Bill introduced by my hon. Friend which reached the statute book in 1995 with a considerable degree of Government co-operation and support, including the right hon. Gentleman's strong support in the Committee that dealt with it. So I am not surprised if the right hon. Gentleman finds himself in some difficulty with the responses that rightly came from Labour Members to some of his remarks.

The right hon. Gentleman related the religious question to the ethnicity question, which, as a Schools Minister, he repeatedly used as a basis for funding schools and determining standard spending assessments—again a clear indication that such questions can be useful. Indeed, the right hon. Gentleman showed no caution when he was a Minister in thinking that there was relevance in using such statistics in order to determine something.

Mr. Gray *rose—*

Miss Johnson: I have already given way to the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst.

Mr. Fabricant: It is called courtesy.

Miss Johnson: I shall give way.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I was not sure until the very last moment whether the hon. Lady intended to give way to the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray), but we do not need any further help from the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant).

Mr. Gray: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. I could see in her eyes that she was just about to, which is why I persisted.

The Minister has said several times that the information will be useful in the delivery of Government services. She has now briefly mentioned SSAs, and she seems to be indicating that information about the religious breakdown of the nation will be used in the delivery of local government services through the SSA mechanism. Will she confirm whether the current study of SSAs being carried out by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions will take account of the information which will be gained next year with regard to the religious affiliations of the people surveyed?

Miss Johnson: Those are not questions to be determined tonight. We are here to give the Bill a Second Reading. I am well aware that a number of points that hon. Members have raised are matters which can be discussed later or which will be more appropriately dealt with when the Bill—if it receives support this evening, as I trust it will—goes to a Standing Committee for proper, detailed consideration.

When it approves the Bill, Parliament will bring census legislation in England and Wales into line with that in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Subject to the passing of the necessary secondary legislation, that will enable information on religion to be available from the 2001 census throughout the United Kingdom, and will have the added advantage of giving us a United Kingdom picture.

Well-informed hon. Members will know that the draft orders for the other aspects of the 2001 census have already been debated elsewhere in the House. As the hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed) remarked, those orders were agreed without a Division. From that, it is clear that they were not considered controversial.

To underline the importance that the Government attach to the need for information on religion to be collected, we have agreed to provide time to facilitate the further progress of the Bill. The Government will do everything possible to do that in time for a question on religion to be included in the 2001 census in England and Wales.

Subject to the Bill passing through the House and receiving Royal Assent, the Government propose to lay before Parliament an amendment to the census order providing specifically for particulars in respect of religion to be added to those that have already received the approval of this House for inclusion in the 2001 census.

Conservative Members refer to the explanatory notes when it suits them, but seem reluctant to read them in their entirety. Paragraph 13 states that the Office for National Statistics has taken legal advice, which holds that the Bill is compatible with the European convention on human rights and meets the requirements of the Human Rights Act 1998.

The Office for National Statistics also consulted widely about the inclusion of a question on religion. The religious affiliation sub-group of the 2001 census content working group comprised members of a wide range of faith organisations. As well as those mentioned by the hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire, the organisations involved included, among others, the Muslim Council of Britain, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Network of Sikh Organisations, the Buddhist Society, the National Council of Hindu Temples, and the Zoroastrians, as well as a number of representatives from the Christian Churches in Britain.

We have assessed the public reaction to a question on religion in the census. Some Conservative Members seemed fearful about pride in this matter, but I believe that many people are proud of their religious affiliation, whatever it might be, and will want to answer the question.

The Government have been mindful of the particular sensitivity of such a question. We took careful note of the concerns expressed in the House of Lords when the Bill was debated there. Consequently, the Government supported an amendment to the Bill that would remove the statutory penalty for people who refuse or neglect to state in their census returns the particulars in respect of religion. I should make it clear, however, that the statutory requirement—under the terms of the Census Act 1920—to respond to all other census questions would remain.

Mr. Tyrie: The Minister has asserted that the question will be left voluntary, but Lord McIntosh did not agree. He told the House of Lords that it would not be a good idea, because

> making a question voluntary seriously affects the response not only to the question itself where response bias could devalue the information obtained, but also as regards other questions because people are confused about some questions being voluntary and others being compulsory.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 27 January 2000; Vol. 608, c. 1717.]

Does not the Minister agree that making the question voluntary devalues the census?

Miss Johnson: As the Minister most closely involved with the Office for National Statistics, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the statisticians are strongly motivated to ensure that we have as good a statistical result as possible. The Bill would not be before the House if it did not have the ONS's support as being perfectly sustainable, and the outcomes—

Mr. Hogg: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am sorry to trouble you with a technical point, but the

[Mr. Hogg]

Minister who is in charge of the Bill has told the House that it is compatible with the European convention on human rights. You will know that clause 19 of the Human Rights Act 1998 requires that a Minister of the Crown must make a declaration of compatibility in writing, and before Second Reading. The only declaration of compatibility in this case is in paragraph 13 of the explanatory notes, which contains a legal opinion taken by the Office for National Statistics. That is not the same as a declaration of compatibility by the Minister.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The occupant of the Chair has absolutely no responsibility for ensuring that these matters are dealt with in the correct way: it is not a matter for the Chair.

Miss Johnson: This is, of course, a private Member's Bill, not a Government Bill, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Before I conclude, it is worth mentioning that the 1851 census included a question that is sometimes thought to be about religion, although that is not strictly the case. The census included a voluntary survey of churches, chapels and other places of worship with respect to the numbers attending services on the census day and the average attending in the month before, together with some other information about places of worship.

Perhaps we can learn from some of the ideas that lay behind that census. In the first census of the new millennium, we need the census information that will be collected to reflect the religious diversity that is now very much a part of the United Kingdom, to ensure that we accurately reflect that in the services that we provide and that we get it right for all communities and all religions.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 194, Noes 10.

Division No. 238] **[1.12 am**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bayley, Hugh
Beggs, Roy
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Day, Stephen
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Drew, David
Efford, Clive
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hayes, John
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Heald, Oliver
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Lidington, David
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Ottaway, Richard
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Randall, John
Rapson, Syd
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shaw, Jonathan
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wilson, Brian
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Jim Dowd and
Mr. Don Touhig.

NOES

Chope, Christopher	Paterson, Owen
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*	Swayne, Desmond
Fabricant, Michael	Tonge, Dr Jenny
Gray, James	
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas	**Tellers for the Noes:**
Maclean, Rt Hon David	**Mr. Eric Forth and**
Nicholls, Patrick	**Mr. Edward Leigh.**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

COMMITTEES

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With permission, I shall put motions 5 and 6 together.

Ordered,

SELECT COMMITTEE ON BROADCASTING

That Mr. George Galloway be discharged from the Select Committee on Broadcasting and Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown be added to the Committee.

EUROPEAN SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

That Mr. Allan Rogers be discharged from the European Scrutiny Committee and Mr. Bill Rammell be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Keith Bradley.]*

PETITIONS

Basic State Pension

1.26 am

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): I rise to present a petition bearing the signatures of 1,600 members and supporters of the Glossop, Hadfield and District Pensioners Association, who declare that pensioners in the Glossop and Hadfield area of High Peak are dissatisfied with the 75p rise in the basic state pension.

The petitioners therefore request that the House do address the basic level of state pension as soon as possible and in future restore the link between the basic pension and the annual rise in earnings.

The petition is signed on behalf of the petitioners by Mr. Raymond Matthews, secretary of the Glossop and Hadfield Pensioners Association.

To lie upon the Table.

BSE Incinerator

1.27 am

Mr. Colin Pickthall (West Lancashire): I rise to present a petition collected by Councillor Cynthia Derek and Mrs. Sandra Rocker, comprising 2,000 signatures of the citizens of Burscough in West Lancashire, which states:

That the citizens of the area entirely and utterly oppose the proposed BSE Incinerator which private interests wish to open on Burscough Industrial Estate, in that it is a totally inappropriate position; would pose threats to the health of the local population; would severely damage the horticultural industry in the vicinity and would put at risk other firms on the Industrial Estate, particularly those engaged in the food industry.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your honourable House do request the Secretary of State for DETR to ensure that the proposal is subjected to normal local planning procedures and that the ambiguity in the Planning Guidance covering Incinerators be amended and corrected to protect citizens all over the U.K.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray . . .

To lie upon the Table.

Combined Heat and Power

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

1.28 am

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): Even at this time of night, it is a great pleasure to speak about combined heat and power, which has been called the Cinderella of energy policy because its many environmental, economic and social benefits have not been fully recognised. Recently, that has changed and CHP is at the core of the UK's drive to attain diverse, secure and sustainable energy.

Combined heat and power enables the supply of electricity and heat, usually in the form of steam, from a single fuel source at high conversion efficiencies—typically 70 to 80 per cent. Demand is met by CHP at a lower level of fuel consumption, generating significantly lower carbon dioxide emissions. CHP can also be linked to community heating. A network of heating pipes can supply homes, businesses and a wide range of other consumers. CHP is essentially about energy efficiency. Conventional power stations are typically 34 per cent. efficient. The much-talked about gas-fired combined cycle gas turbine power stations are, according to the Department of Trade and Industry, on average just 48 per cent. efficient. Only when CHP plant is brought into play do we get efficiencies of more than 70 per cent.—and up to 80 per cent. with some small-scale CHP schemes.

In the past few days, the royal commission on environmental pollution has published a detailed and thorough analysis of what we need to do if we are to be serious about tackling climate change. It calls for reductions of up to 60 per cent. in UK carbon emissions and sets out a series of scenarios for achieving that. It says that we need a new way of looking at energy policy—one that does not focus just on electricity production, but recognises and develops the market for heat. In that context, the royal commission has emphasised that CHP is a technology of which we need to make much wider use.

Many global corporations increasingly recognise, too, that their future lies in part with combined heat and power. It is significant that a major global energy player, ABB, should announce just two weeks ago that it was reinventing itself by divesting itself of more conventional power-generating technologies and that, in future, it would focus on knowledge-driven products. For ABB, that includes wind power, micro-turbines and, in the context of this debate, combined heat and power. Other global companies like ABB, such as BP Amoco, are already at the fore of developing their CHP capacity. I am sure that more big energy players will now follow the global market leaders.

Indeed, in the UK, CHP is at work at more than 1,300 sites, including the Palace of Westminster, throughout Whitehall and at Kodak in my borough where many of my constituents work. Kodak has its own 70 MW combined heat and power plant. Like other major industrial sites that have switched on to CHP, its scheme saves it money directly and helps the site compete effectively by reducing a core business cost. I gather that, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Minister, both Sunderland general hospital and the Crowtree leisure centre have put combined heat and power schemes to work.

I am delighted to say that the Labour party has had a long-standing commitment to CHP. In our manifesto, we said that we would be

> committed to an energy policy designed to promote cleaner, more efficient use and production, including a new and strong drive to develop . . . combined heat and power.

Just six weeks after we took office, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister launched, with the backing of the Combined Heat and Power Association and the Confederation of British Industry, a high-level campaign designed to raise awareness of CHP in the minds of business leaders. We said, too, that we would introduce a pro-CHP bias in the planning regime for new power plants and that we would set a target of at least 10,000 MW of CHP by 2010. Both those commitments are in place and 1,400 MW of new CHP capacity has been approved in the past three years, although, as I shall outline later, it remains to be seen how much further capacity will be built in current market conditions.

Each new CHP scheme produces its own set of benefits, with distinct rewards for the businesses with the foresight to commit to CHP. One particular example is Kemsley Mill, a major UK paper producer, where PowerGen CHP has installed and financed an 80 MW CHP scheme. Some £4.5 million per annum of energy savings have been achieved, with a reduction in primary energy use of 31 per cent. Carbon dioxide emissions have been reduced by 320 kilotonnes per annum, sulphur oxide emissions have been eliminated and nitrogen oxide emissions reduced by 92 per cent. That has improved local air quality, and traffic movements have been reduced and noise levels have come down significantly.

CHP also offers us considerable opportunity for our social exclusion agenda. St. Pancras Housing is one of more than 60 residential CHP schemes that the Combined Heat and Power Association has helped to develop. The St. Pancras scheme, at this pioneering housing association's head office next to Euston station, has cut the energy bills of 100 tenants by 20 per cent. Three years ago, it was able to get rid of standing charges, and the metering system that it uses puts to shame the ones that many of us have at home. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to ensure that, in the work of the Government's ministerial group on fuel poverty, the real benefit of CHP and community heating is not overlooked and is reinforced.

Crucially, CHP also benefits the environment. The CHP industry has cut UK carbon emissions by over 9 million tonnes in the past 10 years. Every gigawatt of CHP that is put to work cuts UK carbon emissions by some 1,000 tonnes, making it one of the most cost-effective ways of making those cuts; hence the royal commission's strong support for CHP in its report. The Government believe that over half of all industrial carbon savings could be delivered by the wider use of CHP.

CHP also helps us to build a competitive economy. In the right circumstances, local generation is a key way of improving business performance by reducing costs. It does that by removing the need for costly long-distance transmission of power and by being highly efficient in the process. The challenge, surely, is to ensure that we have a regulatory framework that continues to deliver and enhance those rewards. I was pleased to hear that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe confirmed that the Office of Gas and Electricity

Markets will focus on that in its new environmental action plan. I hope that Ministers will now concentrate on monitoring Ofgem's implementation of that action plan.

A practical example of that exists at BP Energy, which has worked with English China Clays at its Marsh Mills and Par Harbour sites in the south-west and put CHP to work, delivering energy savings of some £972,000 per annum.

CHP also holds out the prospect of vital new investment and extra jobs. The UK CHP industry has invested over £1 billion in helping the UK to improve its business performance through the better use of combined heat and power. Achieving our new CHP target will, in turn, stimulate some £3 billion of new private sector investment.

Energy for Sustainable Development, a leading EU energy consultancy, suggested in a recent report that if we can achieve just two thirds of our CHP target by 2010, there could be an estimated 34,000 new jobs in the CHP sector.

Local councils also have a crucial role to play in the development of CHP, and I welcome the specific support that the Government have already given to the development of new CHP schemes in Southampton, Manchester and Tower Hamlets, all of which have developed effective partnerships with the private sector. Manchester city council and the London borough of Tower Hamlets have private finance initiative pathfinder schemes, which have secured the support needed from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to attract significant private sector investment.

The scheme that London Electricity has developed for the Barkantine estate in Tower Hamlets will, I hope, help to demonstrate how CHP can assist in harnessing the private sector to tackle the challenge of social exclusion that blights all too many inner-city communities. I hope that the Government will take forward and recognise that potential in their work on fuel poverty.

Despite that, only a small part of the potential for CHP is being exploited. The energy technology support unit has suggested that there is the economic potential almost to quadruple the use of CHP in the UK. Figures from the Building Research Establishment suggest that 1 million homes could be connected to CHP by 2010. BG Technology estimates that, in the long term, between 4 million and 6 million houses would be suitable for domestic CHP.

Why are we under-achieving on that potential? Uncertainty in the market is making investment decisions difficult. Talk of electricity prices falling by between 10 and 30 per cent. in the next couple of years and predictions of medium-term gas prices rising by almost as much add to the uncertainty of the impact of the new electricity trading arrangements. Inevitably, customers want to wait and see what happens.

Essentially, the market arrangements that Ofgem is busily building seem to focus largely on those with the capacity to trade large volumes of power in new computer-based energy markets. The trading screen seems to be replacing the reality of a power station. Smaller players do not have the capacity for year-round, 24-hour trading arrangements. As the Director General of Ofgem has outlined to the Combined Heat and Power Association, more work needs to be done to enable the small players sensibly to band together and trade. That problem has been reinforced by the sheer costs for small players of getting involved and representing their position effectively. I hope that the Minister will urge his colleagues in the Department of Trade and Industry seriously to consider the issue of market inequality among the players in the industry.

CHP is about long-term decisions; the short-termism of today's energy market is therefore a key issue which the Government will need to consider in their forthcoming CHP strategy. All arms of the Government, too, need to make sure that they are consistent in their view of the industry's potential. There is concern that we do not have the measures in place to achieve the Government's new 10 GW target. I understand that the DTI's energy projections appear to be based on an assumption that the 10 GW CHP target will not be met. I also understand that that view was echoed in a recent address to the Society of British Gas Industries.

The Government's climate change consultation paper also appears to place a less firm emphasis on CHP than the DETR's previous consultation document, despite strong support for CHP in the responses. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister and his colleagues will remain resolute in their commitment to the CHP target and give the industry the confidence it needs to invest by making sure that their message is consistent. Some further concerted and cross-cutting departmental action is needed.

In his pre-Budget statement to the House last November, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced that CHP would be exempt from the new climate change levy. That was widely welcomed, but it now seems that Customs and Excise is determined to put up the price of CHP power by putting the levy on power exports from CHP schemes. That seems entirely illogical in environmental terms and will significantly distort inter-company competition as some companies will get power levy-free when they use it themselves. Those that buy it in across the grid system from a CHP plant will have to pay the levy. I urge the Government to do what the Chancellor said last November and just exempt CHP from the levy. That is essential to counter the current market conditions—in particular, gas prices are rising—and the potential impact of the new electricity trading arrangements.

The excellent Utilities Bill, which is going through Parliament, will set the market framework for at least the next 10 years. In particular, the new energy efficiency standard of performance provisions are most welcome. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister can confirm that they will give Ministers the power, should they choose to use it, to introduce arrangements for CHP similar to those planned for renewables. We also need to ensure that the Government have the powers to take a lead on embedded generation. The royal commission specifically said:

> Embedded generation represents a major strategic challenge for the National Grid Co plc, both technically and financially as well as for the distribution companies: We did not see any signs that the company has yet appreciated the scale of the challenge or begun to take the steps needed to place itself in a position to respond to it . . .

The commission recommends that the Government should therefore take the lead in addressing those challenges. I hope that my hon. Friend will be able to comment on that.

I also hope that the Government will reinforce their drive for CHP in their planning consents regime for larger power plant to encourage power station developments,

[Mr. Gareth R. Thomas]

but not just to take the easy option and build less efficient electricity-only power plant. We need to encourage companies to seek out customers for heat—or, indeed, for cooling—and in doing so move beyond purely short-term rewards to achieve the best environmental impact possible from the fuels that they use.

Focusing on CHP presents the Government with a real opportunity to create the conditions for a sustainable and competitive energy market and to lead the world in the drive for an entirely different energy agenda that brings together the benefits of liberalisation and the challenge of environmental change.

1.43 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) has raised an important issue and I shall do my best to reply to the points that he made. However, we may have to follow one or two up in correspondence.

Combined heat and power cuts energy costs for industry, business, the public sector and domestic users and significantly reduces greenhouse gas emissions. It has a vital part to play in helping the United Kingdom to meet its climate change commitments. That is why the Government are committed to promoting the widest use of CHP wherever possible. Only yesterday—although by now it must have been the day before yesterday—I visited Hickson and Welch, a chemical company in Castleford, where an impressive new CHP system is under construction. As my hon. Friend said, there are several such schemes in Sunderland. He referred to the one at Sunderland general hospital, which I opened some years ago.

The United Kingdom's combined heat and power capacity has already doubled in the past 10 years. It is now reducing energy costs by more than £500 million annually and cutting CO_2 by approximately 4 million tonnes of carbon a year. Some of the biggest savings are in core industries such as steel, chemicals, paper and food and drink production. United Kingdom business and the environment are therefore benefiting. As my hon. Friend rightly said, CHP and community heating also have a part to play in alleviating fuel poverty.

As part of the draft climate change programme, the Government have announced that the target is at least to double CHP capacity to 10,000 MW in the coming decade. We are taking practical measures to encourage CHP. For example, the exemption of good-quality CHP from the climate change levy is the clearest possible evidence of our support. Schemes that fully meet the good-quality criteria that we are setting will not pay a levy on their fuel inputs, heat outputs or on electricity generated when it is used on site or sold directly to other users. That provides a strong incentive to invest in CHP. However, I duly note my hon. Friend's comments on the restriction on electricity exports, and I can assure him that the Government will keep the levy's operation under review.

Combined heat and power will also be crucial to helping energy-intensive users to meet efficiency targets under negotiated climate change levy agreements. Indeed, that will be vital in some sectors if the agreed energy or carbon savings are to be achieved. Eighty per cent. discounts on the levy are the reward for sectors that deliver the agreed targets.

Combined heat and power is one of the technologies that is eligible for enhanced capital allowances. In 2001-02, £100 million will be available, and up to £140 million the following year, with more to follow if take-up is good. As energy services companies make up a large part of the CHP market, we are considering changes to legislation so they are not excluded. Low-carbon technologies, such as CHP, will also be promoted by a new body called the Carbon Trust.

My hon. Friend asked whether the new electricity trading arrangements would be CHP friendly. I can confirm that they will. We are working with the Department of Trade and Industry and the regulator, Ofgem, to ensure that the new electricity trading arrangements allow smaller, locally based embedded generators, such as CHP and renewables, to operate efficiently.

Ofgem and the Government are looking ahead to, and preparing the UK for, a future in which embedded generation plays a much larger part than it does at the moment. We want to ensure that CHP and other embedded generation is treated on the same basis as conventional generation. We also want to ensure that it has fair access to the wider networks at fair prices, and that it is fairly rewarded for the benefits that it brings to the network through its focus on local solutions on sustainable energy.

Our work on embedded generation will cover individual domestic customers and renewables, which also need effective access to the market. It will consider net metering arrangements. That exercise involves the embedded operators and users, generators, distribution network operators, the Government, and the regulator. There is consensus that energy is moving into a new world, and we want UK systems, structures and regulatory regimes to be ahead and ready.

The stricter consents policy for power stations has had a positive effect on CHP. As my hon. Friend rightly says, some 1,400 MW of CHP capacity have been approved in the past three years, including more than 1,200 MW under the stricter consents regime. We expect the majority of that to be built. Indeed, some 500 MW are already under construction and expected to come on line this year or next year. However, as with all commercial decisions, it is for the companies concerned to decide when, and whether, to proceed with any given project.

This stricter policy is due to be lifted as soon as the new electricity trading arrangements are in place, which is expected to be in the autumn. We have restated our strong commitment to CHP and have made it clear that we will require developers seeking consent to show that they have explored the opportunities to use CHP. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry said that in a statement on 17 April. We shall be discussing with developers the information needed, and I note my hon. Friend's comment that the system must be robust.

Our action in derating electricity generating plant and machinery in good-quality CHP schemes from April next year is further evidence of our commitment to treat CHP fairly, putting all CHP schemes in industry in line with those in the generating industry.

I can confirm that the Government are taking powers under the Utilities Bill to set energy efficiency standards of performance obligations on energy suppliers to encourage and assist consumers to use less energy. For the avoidance of doubt, let me say that CHP is defined as a form of energy efficiency, so energy companies can attain their obligations through supporting CHP—for example, in community heating.

The Government can also set specific CHP obligations, if they wish to do so. At present, we do not envisage that being necessary. We believe that the CHP exemption from the climate change levy, exemption from business rates, enhanced capital allowances, the review of CHP's access to the grid and other measures will deliver the new CHP target, but the power is available, if it is needed.

Studies have shown that the economic potential for CHP in the UK is between 10,000 and 20,000 MW—that is, up to 25 per cent. of the UK's electricity generation capacity by 2010. We have set our new target of at least 10,000 MW in this context, and we remain convinced that it is realistic and achievable. The discussion at the Society of British Gas Industries which my hon. Friend quoted has been misreported.

We will shortly publish a comprehensive strategy on which we will consult widely to bring together all the positive measures that I have outlined. A cornerstone of the strategy is the encouragement of good-quality CHP, as that is the key to maximising environmental and economic benefits. We have consulted on proposals for a CHP quality assurance programme to assess and monitor all types and sizes of CHP. That is crucial for operating the climate change levy for good-quality CHP.

The proposals provide a practical method for accurately measuring the quality of individual CHP installations, and they gained broad support from the industry and others. On 17 May, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment announced the key decisions following consultation. The Government's full response will be published shortly.

All these actions are designed to stimulate CHP growth, which means new CHP users. To help them make the most of the opportunities available, we have launched the CHP club, which is a new initiative designed to help CHP users to exploit the opportunities available. Run under the energy efficiency best practice programme, it is particularly targeted at new and potential CHP users, as well as helping existing users to extend their schemes.

The club will provide members with a single point of access to all the facilities open to them. It will enable users to access information, exchange experience, ask questions, and share good practice. By providing independent, authoritative advice, and by enabling users and potential users to share their knowledge and practical experience, the club will act as a hub of support for CHP. The CHP club will play an important role in unlocking the UK's CHP potential.

I hope that I have said enough to reassure my hon. Friend that the Government take the issue seriously. If there are points in his remarks that I have not properly addressed, we can follow them up later.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at six minutes to Two o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 21 June 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Order for further consideration, as amended, read.

To be further considered on Wednesday 28 June.

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Punishment Beatings

1. **Mr. Michael Connarty** (Falkirk, East): If he will make a statement on the incidence of punishment beatings in Northern Ireland. [125476]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Peter Mandelson): From 1 January to 11 June this year there were 111 paramilitary-style attacks, comprising 54 shootings, with 33 by loyalists and 21 by republicans; and 57 assaults, with 33 by loyalists and 24 by republicans. The Government condemn without reservation the activities of those on both sides who plan, carry out and attempt to justify these barbaric attacks. We call on all political leaders to use their influence to bring these attacks to an end now.

Mr. Connarty: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is time we stopped calling the attacks punishment beatings and started calling them illegal paramilitary acts, underlining the fact that, now that we have democracy in Northern Ireland, we should also have the rule of law and demilitarisation? In that vein, we should be asking the groups' representatives to stamp out their use of violence. We should make it quite clear to the UFF that it should not threaten citizens with shootings for acts of vandalism as it has done in the past few days.

Mr. Mandelson: I echo my hon. Friend's sentiments. The fact is that politics is now working in Northern Ireland and there is no excuse for anyone to turn away from politics to the violence of the past. My message to those who think that they can go around threatening violence or stirring up trouble—particularly as we enter the marching season—and get away with it is simple: they will not get away with it.

There is no place for violence and I will be watching very carefully indeed to see whether, in the coming weeks and months, there are any paramilitary organisations involved in violence of any kind, be it in Belfast, Drumcree or elsewhere. If there is evidence of such involvement, I will draw the appropriate conclusions about the state of the ceasefires and the implications for any further prisoner releases.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): Since the Secretary of State has been paying careful attention to statistics, he will be well aware that the evidence and the statistics show that the terrorist organisations have been able to switch the level of their terrorist mutilations on and off at will over the past two or three years. Is he further aware that those are simply a means of these people imposing their will on their respective communities and trying to introduce mafia rule throughout Northern Ireland? Intelligence reports show that they are trying to extend their influence beyond the major conurbations and into the towns and villages of Northern Ireland. What intelligence reports, rather than evidence, does he have that Mr. McCoy was murdered by the IRA?

Mr. Mandelson: I am not going to comment on a particular case about which I have no evidence. I of course condemn the cold-blooded murder of Edmund McCoy. It is not yet clear who is responsible. The Chief Constable has said that he retains an open mind. The police investigation continues, but if it becomes clear that the Provisional IRA was responsible, that will have a direct impact on my assessment of the state of its ceasefire.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Does the Secretary of State agree that the full implementation of the Patten proposals through the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill should further undermine what little legitimacy these vigilantes can claim as local peacekeepers and law enforcers, and that the two symptoms of that happening would be, first, the reduction of paramilitary beatings and, secondly, the elimination of paramilitary flags, which are often used to mark out an area of assumed control by paramilitaries on both sides?

Mr. Mandelson: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we are making a fresh start, a new beginning, in policing in Northern Ireland. That is what the Patten report and the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill, which is in Committee, are all about. If we successfully introduce those reforms, it will make a positive contribution to the new political dispensation that we want in Northern Ireland, in which violence should, must and will play absolutely no part whatever.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I think that we should stop, now, calling these attacks punishment beatings, as my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty) suggested. Of the criminal assaults committed by loyalists, how many can be laid at the doorstep of the Ulster Defence Association? What is my right hon. Friend's reaction to the latest threat by

spokesmen of the UDA to sever the ceasefire? Are we now looking forward to a dissident or Continuity UDA, or is a dissident within the UDA making this threat?

Mr. Mandelson: I do not want to speculate about the genesis of yesterday's statement, except to say that, disturbing as it was, the response to it was very encouraging indeed. It was condemned right across the political spectrum, from loyalism to republicanism, as well as by the mainstream parties. I believe that Northern Ireland political opinion was united in the view that threatening violence is simply unacceptable in today's society. I think that we should draw encouragement, therefore, from the comprehensive condemnation of that statement. They should draw the obvious conclusion that that type of threat will not be tolerated by any part of Northern Ireland's society any more.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): Does the Secretary of State agree that there is still an utterly unacceptable level of beatings by paramilitaries? Will he say that those beatings in themselves constitute a breach of the ceasefire? Will he confirm that, in as much as the beatings have been carried out by the so-called Ulster Freedom Fighters, that will influence his policy on prisoner release?

Mr. Mandelson: I will certainly confirm that. I keep all the ceasefires under constant review. If I receive any evidence whatsoever that the ceasefires are being breached by any of the paramilitary organisations, it will lead directly, when the time comes in the next few weeks, to my assessment on the further planned prisoner releases which may take place. I assure the hon. Gentleman and the House that I take those actions and threats and any breach of the ceasefires very seriously indeed. I will draw the appropriate conclusions, and I will take the appropriate action.

Mr. Robert McCartney (North Down): Does the Secretary of State appreciate that it is his limited definition of what constitutes a breach of ceasefire—namely, attacks on military or security personnel, economic targets or members of the opposing community—that is feeding and encouraging those beatings, which are not seen by those who perpetrate them as falling within the Secretary of State's definition of a breach of the ceasefire?

Mr. Mandelson: I do not accept that for one moment. I have left all the paramilitary organisations in no doubt whatsoever about how I will interpret the ceasefires and their maintenance, how I will assess whether there is a breach of those ceasefires, and what conclusions I will draw. I have made public statements; I have made private statements. They are in no doubt at all about the consequences that will flow for further prisoner releases if there is any breach of the ceasefires.

Paramilitary Organisations

2. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): What estimate he has made of the number of people who have joined Continuity IRA and the Real IRA since 1998. [125477]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): Only broad judgments on such matters can be made based on intelligence information. However, whoever those people are, and however many of them there are, the security forces remain vigilant and able to combat their threat. Both of the Governments and the people of Ireland, north and south, are united as never before against those groups and their evil activities.

Mr. Fabricant: I thank the Minister for his answer. What estimate has he made of the number of prisoners who have been released early but have joined either Continuity or Real IRA? Does he believe that any of those early-release prisoners might have been involved in the recent Hillsborough bombing or the bombing at Hammersmith bridge, in London?

Mr. Ingram: Obviously, we never share intelligence information on such matters across the Dispatch Box. I would, therefore, never speculate on those particular estimates. Any released prisoner is subject to licence conditions. To date, only one of the more than 300 prisoners who have been released has been in breach of that licence and has been returned to prison. We have made it very clear that any breach of the licence as provided in law will be viewed very severely and treated appropriately, as we have shown in the past.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): Given yesterday's statement by the West Belfast UFF and the continuing activities of groups such as Continuity and Real IRA, will the Minister assure the House that paramilitaries in either community who refuse to renounce violence and killing will be pursued vigorously?

Mr. Ingram: I can give that absolute assurance, as I did in my earlier comments. The security forces at all levels remain highly vigilant against the activities of those groups. We need the co-operation, however, of the wider community in bringing them to justice. I again make the plea that anyone who has evidence on the activities of those individuals or on the groups of which they are members should bring that information to the security forces, so that we can bring them to justice.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): What evidence have the Government that those two organisations—the Continuity IRA and the Real IRA—may be coming together and acting together in operations as one? What representations are being made to the Government of the Republic of Ireland to take drastic action to prevent those two organisations from expanding further?

Mr. Ingram: I think that everyone aware of the level of those groups' activity in Northern Ireland will know that the level of co-operation between the security forces north and south of the border has never been higher as they try to bring those responsible to justice. Every effort will be made in that regard, but we do not hide the fact that the dissident groups pose a very potent threat. The solution does not lie only with the security forces. It is down to everyone, north and south, to condemn those groups unreservedly and, if they have evidence, to help the security forces and the justice system to bring them to justice.

Decommissioning

3. **Mr. Martin Salter** (Reading, West): When he expects to receive a further report from General de Chastelain. [125478]

4. **Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (Cotswold): What assessment he has made of when progress will be made on arms decommissioning. [125479]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Peter Mandelson): The Independent International Commission on Decommissioning is responsible for supervising progress on putting paramilitary arms completely and verifiably beyond use. It is a matter for General de Chastelain to decide when it is appropriate to provide a report. In the first instance, that will depend on when the two independent arms inspectors, Mr. Ramaphosa and Mr. Ahtisaari, report their findings to the commission.

Mr. Salter: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Sinn Fein said on Monday that it wanted all commitments made by the IRA to be fulfilled. However, does my right hon. Friend agree that the sooner the independent weapons monitors can visit the IRA arms dumps, the more firmly entrenched the peace process will become?

Mr. Mandelson: Yes, I do. Building confidence across the community in Northern Ireland depends on measures such as the one to which my hon. Friend referred. I hope that Mr. Ramaphosa and Mr. Ahtisaari will be able to begin their inspection shortly. It is, of course, a matter for them to take forward. However, when they do, I am confident that they will be able to report progress to the decommissioning body. I look forward to that happening without much further delay.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Is it not the case that paramilitaries are still carrying out punishment beatings, maimings and killings, and that they continue to run protection rackets? Is it not therefore an absolute precursor to the Belfast agreement that quantifiable and verifiable arms decommissioning should take place before the agreement can be fulfilled?

Mr. Mandelson: Yes, I broadly agree with the hon. Gentleman. However, the difference is that we have moved on from talking about the arms issues to getting a process of decommissioning under way. The Provisional IRA has made a clear and unequivocal commitment to put arms completely and verifiably beyond use. We have never had such a statement from the IRA before. That is what the Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act 1997 requires, and I look forward to action being taken to fulfil that commitment without further or undue delay.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): Martin McGuinness made the statement on Monday that all commitments by the IRA should be fulfilled. Does not my right hon. Friend interpret that as a very encouraging sign that all parties are now fully committed to the peace process? Should we not celebrate that progress, and make sure that the peace process is fully in place?

Mr. Mandelson: Yes, I strongly echo the sentiments expressed by my hon. Friend. This is the first Question Time to be held since the new institutions in Northern Ireland, the Executive and the Assembly, were restarted, and I know that all hon. Members will applaud the resumption of their work. Of course difficulties remain, but the difference now is that we have a political process, within which we can deal with the differences that remain in Northern Ireland. That process may creak and strain a bit as we try to digest a particular problem here or there, but the important thing is that we have a process within which politics can work and the difficulties can be resolved. That process should continue to enjoy the full commitment of all those parties and organisations in Northern Ireland who believe in a democratic and peaceful way forward for that society.

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): Does the Secretary of State share and understand the frustration of Unionists in Northern Ireland who know that if they publicly press the IRA to fulfil its commitments—not just those made in May, but those made over a period of two years—the reaction will be that, somehow, we are pressuring the IRA? General de Chastelain shares that frustration in terms of any statement that he may make to encourage disarmament by paramilitaries. If he says anything, he will be deemed to have lost the confidence of those organisations. [HON. MEMBERS: "Question!"] I always worry that some of the Secretary of State's colleagues are not very keen to hear criticism of the IRA—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The House is waiting for a question from the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Maginnis: My question is whether, in terms of the Belfast agreement, it is obligatory for the Irish Government and our Government to work together consistently to ensure that promises are fulfilled. The Irish Government advise Unionists. Why do they not put pressure on the IRA?

Mr. Mandelson: There is within the hon. Gentleman's words an extremely sound point. It is this: on the one hand we do not want to start issuing deadlines and ultimatums and appear to be seeking to impose undue public pressure on people to fulfil the undertakings that they have made for fear that that would have a counter-effect. On the other hand, the public and all the political parties in Northern Ireland want to maintain the pressure on everyone to fulfil their side of bargains and deals that have been made. It behoves us all—the British Government, the Irish Government, the American Government and everyone across the community in Northern Ireland—to keep people up to the mark in terms of what they have agreed to do, without making unreasonable demands in terms of the timetable within which they do it.

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): As it is now some six weeks since the Provisional IRA made what appeared to be a positive statement that it would put its arms

verifiably and completely beyond use, and as it is some three weeks since the Executive was set up and it is now successfully running, does the Secretary of State share my concern that there have yet to be any confidence-building measures by the IRA, and the longer that takes the more confidence will drain away?

Mr. Mandelson: I do not yet share the right hon. Gentleman's concern because I maintain my confidence that the IRA, having made commitments, will honour those commitments. I have said in the past that IRA statements for good or ill have a certain rugged honesty about them. I know that people will be extremely disappointed if what the IRA has said it will do is not done before further time elapses.

Mr. MacKay: Naturally, I hope that the Secretary of State's confidence will not be misplaced, but I take him back to what the Prime Minister said at the Dispatch Box a few weeks ago—that the confidence-building measures which we hope will happen very shortly are only the first stage and they must be very quickly followed by the decommissioning of all illegally held arms and explosives, as the IRA promised to do under the Belfast agreement. Will the right hon. Gentleman again confirm that that must happen quickly after the confidence-building measures?

Mr. Mandelson: I do confirm that. The IRA has made a clear and unequivocal statement to put its arms completely beyond use. All this must be independently verified under the supervision of General de Chastelain's commission. I believe that it will happen, but if it does not I have confidence in General de Chastelain and his colleagues to blow the whistle and sound the alarm if they believe that the IRA is resiling from its commitments.

British–Irish Council

5. **Mrs. Maria Fyfe** (Glasgow, Maryhill): If he will make a statement on the progress being made on the British-Irish Council. [125480]

7. **Mr. Hilary Benn** (Leeds, Central): If he will make a statement on the progress being made on the British-Irish Council. [125482]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. George Howarth): The next summit meeting of the British-Irish Council is likely to be held after the summer. At its inaugural summit in December, the members of the council agreed an important and wide-ranging work programme covering subjects such as transport, drugs and the environment. These are being taken forward by each of the participating Administrations. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. Before we proceed, the House must come to order. Conversations are much too noisy and the Minister can barely make himself heard.

Mrs. Fyfe: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Will he join me in paying tribute to the work done over the past 10 years by the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, which has worked behind the scenes to promote understanding between our two islands? Does he agree that the British-Irish Council could profit from that experience?

Mr. Howarth: Like all institutions, the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, and all the other bodies associated with it, has been important in maintaining dialogue and bringing people together to discuss issues of common interest in a period when that would not otherwise have been possible. I share my hon. Friend's sentiments—the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body has been important in creating space and opportunities that would not otherwise have existed.

Mr. Benn: What distinct contribution does my hon. Friend think the council has to make to taking forward the peace process in Northern Ireland? In view of the answer that he has just given, could he build on those parliamentary links by including Assembly Members from across the British Isles as a way of demonstrating that the political process is now working?

Mr. Howarth: As my hon. Friend implies, the process has the capacity to develop and to go in new directions. However, I think that the council's important contribution is to look at areas of policy in which there is a common interest—not just issues of security and political development but health, for example—and consider how they can be taken forward. The problems of the past in Northern Ireland were of a divided society and two divided communities. The future must be in finding ways forward, not in looking back.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): When the British-Irish Council next meets, will the Minister use his best efforts to persuade it to make representations to the Irish Government to appoint a High Court inspector to investigate the operation of International Investments Ltd. in Dublin and its Irish subsidiaries, which resulted in more than £7 million being lost by British and Irish investors? Will the hon. Gentleman accept from me that the failure of successive Governments to appoint a High Court inspector suggests that there may have been a cover-up, and that if such a decision is made, even at this late stage, it could be a confidence-building measure?

Mr. Howarth: I think that the hon. Gentleman will, on reflection, accept that that is not an appropriate matter for the Government to raise at the British-Irish Council. If, however, he believes that it is a matter of importance to Northern Ireland, it is open to the First Minister, the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble), to use the opportunity that the British-Irish Council creates to raise it.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Will the Minister confirm whether the next meeting of the British-Irish Council will consider policing in Northern Ireland, particularly the issue of future policing meeting the requirements of the European convention on human rights?

Mr. Howarth: The Patten proposals are being considered in Committee under the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill, and there is a declaration on the front of the Bill, as there is on all legislation, that it is compatible with the European convention on human rights. In general

terms, as my right hon. Friend the Minister of State said earlier, there is a great deal of scope for co-operation between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland on policing. We take those opportunities seriously. We also recognise that it creates a better environment in which to police not only terrorism but some of the problems associated with smuggling across the border.

Security Situation

6. **Mr. Tony McWalter** (Hemel Hempstead): What recent progress has been made in creating a more normal security environment. [125481]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): In line with the Chief Constable's announcement on 9 May, work has commenced to demolish the Cookstown base and the Cloghoge observation base in South Armagh and to vacate Fort George in Londonderry and the observation posts at Broadway and Templer House in Belfast.

The Belfast and East Tyrone roulement battalions have also been withdrawn, leaving 13,500 troops in Northern Ireland—the lowest number since 1970.

Mr. McWalter: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer and congratulate him on the work that he has done on that matter. May I seek his assurance that the number of the security forces will not increase significantly during the difficult period ahead—with parades and other such activities?

Mr. Ingram: I cannot of course give my hon. Friend that assurance; as we have said constantly, the level of the security presence will depend on the degree of threat. Obviously, considerable amounts of public disorder sometimes justify a higher security presence on the ground. We are ever alert and ever vigilant. We shall take whatever measures are necessary.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [125506] **Mr. David Chidgey** (Eastleigh): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 21 June.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further such meetings later today.

Mr. Chidgey: The Prime Minister may not be aware that my constituents in Eastleigh have just lost their post office in Pitmore—to add to the hundreds of others that are closing across the country. He will be aware, however, that the Post Office has just lost £264 million because its new computerised system cannot even pay for itself. Does that not demolish the claim that a new, modernised Post Office can recoup the revenue it is losing because benefit payments are being transferred to bank accounts? When will the right hon. Gentleman produce a sound plan to provide our post office network with the strength it needs to ensure that it serves us in the future?

The Prime Minister: The short answer is that we shall be doing that in the next few days. Of course, we accept not only that it is important to introduce the new technology—that is important for post offices—but that it is right to give them a role and a function for the future. The Government have indicated that we are prepared to support that.

As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, the difficulty with the Horizon project that we inherited when we came into office is that hundreds of millions of pounds—literally—were wasted on it. As a Government, we have had to make provision to try to get ourselves out of that situation. When we publish our plan, I hope that it will give the rural post offices a sound and viable future, but one that is allied to modern reality.

Q2. [125507] **Mr. Paul Goggins** (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister join me in congratulating Age Concern and the citizens advice bureau in Trafford on the success of their recent pensioners benefit take-up campaign? During a period of 18 months, they helped 715 pensioners to claim an extra £827,000 in benefit. Will the Government enhance the work of those organisations by doing something that the Conservatives never did and ensure that, in providing help for all pensioners, they give priority to the poorest?

The Prime Minister: There may be 700 in my hon. Friend's constituency, but across the country more than 400,000 pensioners have been contacted so far to make them aware—if they are poorer pensioners—that the new minimum income guarantee support is available for them. About 1 million pensioners will be up to £20 a week better off. Of course, all pensioners get the £150 winter allowance, and the over-75s will get free television licences. The one thing we know for certain is that each and every one of those things will be taken off them by the Conservatives.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): The Prime Minister will have seen the news report that the Government may soon receive advice to end the availability of beta interferon on the national health service. It is, of course, a preliminary report, but the right hon. Gentleman will understand that it will have caused immediate and deep concern to thousands of families. Will he now acknowledge that, after three years of a Labour Government, there is more rationing in the NHS than ever before?

The Prime Minister: First, as the right hon. Gentleman says, it is indeed a preliminary report. It is important to emphasise that no one who gets beta interferon at present will be affected by the report. However, it is important that we end postcode prescribing in the NHS. I remind him that it was his Government and he who introduced it.

Mr. Hague: It is no good the Prime Minister talking about postcode rationing. Now there is a threat of rationing where no one gets it, and the postcode is Downing street, SW1. Have not the Government tried to pass the buck by adding, after the passage of the original

legislation, the criterion of affordability to the remit of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence—NICE—when its advice should be based on medical considerations? Ministers should decide on affordability in the NHS. As the drug is in use all over Europe, is it not vital that, whatever happens, there is continued freedom to prescribe in particular cases, backed up by an exceptional medicines fund within the NHS—as we have proposed?

The Prime Minister: Let me correct the right hon. Gentleman on two facts. First, nobody who gets the drug now will be denied it. Secondly, he said that it is available to all multiple sclerosis sufferers elsewhere in Europe. In fact, in France, Germany and Italy only 12 per cent. of MS sufferers receive it.

As for the right hon. Gentleman's claim that he is opposed to any form of cost-effectiveness being involved in the test, let me remind him of the document that was put out by the previous Government in 1995 when he was Secretary of State for Wales. He put out a Government document, "New drugs for multiple sclerosis", to the health service, saying that the key aims were to target the drug appropriately at patients most likely to benefit. The document then had a chapter on resource implications and funding and said that providers would need to consider the likely impact on resources of continued prescribing and, in particular, the impact on hospital drugs projects.

Let us have no more of this opportunistic pretence that somehow, when the right hon. Gentleman was in government, people had all the drugs they wanted. In fact for the first time, rightly, there is now an independent institute that can advise the Government. This Government has increased the drugs bill by 9 per cent. in real terms.

Mr. Hague: Whatever the right hon. Gentleman is responding to is an entirely different question from the one that I actually put to him. The chief executive of the MS Society said today that

> thousands of people are waking up this morning with the icy fingers of dread closing round their hearts.

[Interruption.] Those are the words of the chief executive of the MS Society.

Do not the Government have a responsibility to find a way through this issue for the future? Instead of trying to attack other parties on the issue, why does the Prime Minister not respond to a constructive proposal? Will he tell us, when he answers the question, whether he will look seriously at our proposal for an exceptional medicines fund that will reimburse GPs directly for expensive drugs in particular cases, and will avoid arbitrary rationing by health authorities?

The Prime Minister: If the right hon. Gentleman does not like to be reminded of what he did in office, let me just quote—[HON. MEMBERS: "More, more."] The right hon. Gentleman asked me to comment on his proposal, so let me read what his health service spokesman said three weeks ago about it. He said:

> In any limited budget, priorities have to be set . . . There will therefore be a system of more clear . . . and transparent priority setting. Anything else would simply mean putting our heads in the sand and pretending the problem doesn't exist.

As a result of the national institute coming into being, we will now, for example, make taxanes for the treatment of cancer available to everyone. The logic is that we have an independent institute that advises us. Of course it is important to examine how much money the health service can spend, but we are the people who are giving it the biggest increase that it has ever had.

I remind the right hon. Gentleman that although it is all very well to put his proposal to me, there is one flaw with it, and perhaps he will respond to it when he next rises to speak. Under his proposals for private medical insurance, he will take £1 billion out of the health service—money that will no longer be there to be used for beds, nurses, doctors or drugs. That is why our proposals are rather better.

Mr. Hague: The Prime Minister cannot escape his responsibilities—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The House must come to order.

Mr. Hague: The Prime Minister cannot escape his responsibilities with trivialised fiction about Opposition policies when we are asking him to respond to a specific proposal. There is now a serious problem of arbitrary rationing in different health authorities. There is a solution on the table—an exceptional medicines fund, which would reimburse GPs directly. We are asking him only whether he will look at that proposal instead of trying to blame everybody else for every problem that ever comes his way. Will he look at that proposal?

The Prime Minister: First, the right hon. Gentleman is right to say that an arbitrary system is in place. It is called postcode prescribing and it was introduced by his Government. Secondly, I have told him that finance is the flaw in his proposal. Unless we can fund everything that we want to fund, we cannot fund the drugs that people need. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will give us an explanation. How will he fund his proposal when £1 billion would be taken out for private medical insurance?

Mr. Hague: The Prime Minister knows—*[Interruption.]* Once again, this Government blame everybody else for every problem. They blame problems that they created on the Opposition. They blame the media for the way in which the Government get publicity—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Hague: No one is proposing to reduce the national health service's budget. The proposal is to use NHS money to set up an exceptional medicines fund and use it in a particular way, otherwise the problem that is now arising with beta interferon will arise on many other issues in future. If the Prime Minister thinks that he is not responsible for finding a way through that, when thousands of people are desperately worried about these things, he is not fit to hold the office of Prime Minister or sit on that Bench.

The Prime Minister: I appreciate that people are worried. However, the right hon. Gentleman is proposing

to take out £1 billion for private medical—*[Interruption.]* Is it his proposal to have private medical insurance tax relief? A nod of the head would do. The problem with the right hon. Gentleman's exceptional drugs fund is finance. The question is, therefore, who can the nation trust with finance and the health service? We are putting in the largest ever settlement for the NHS. The right hon. Gentleman is committed—or has been until today—to private medical insurance that would take £1 billion out of the NHS. Under this Government, there are 5,500 more nurses and 2,000 more doctors, and the new hospital building programme is under way. All of that would be cut.

How can the right hon. Gentleman say that he would fund absolutely everything that he wants in the health service when he has a tax guarantee in place that would mean tax cuts for a few at the very top and savage cuts in public spending? Just for once, let the right hon. Gentleman get up and explain his policy.

Mr. Hague: The Prime Minister should not worry, as it will not be too long before I am answering the questions and he is asking them. We will get some answers then. If the Government are not prepared to consider a single constructive proposal because they did not think of it themselves, they will continue to betray the NHS.

The Prime Minister: I have already said that the entire basis of the right hon. Gentleman's proposal is that there should be a £1 billion fund. That is the cost, is it not? I have been asked to consider the proposal, so I will. How can the right hon. Gentleman spend £1 billion more when he is dedicated to taking £1 billion out? I would have thought that even he could work out that numeracy and literacy.

The plain fact is that, of course, there are problems, as there always have been in relation to drugs in the NHS. However, the question is whether we carry on with the old postcode prescribing or have an independent body to advise us. We have established an independent body—which was the right thing to do—and are funding it. What the right hon. Gentleman would do would mean that people would lose their ability to get those drugs, as his finance plans have a £1 billion deficit which he cannot fill.

Mr. Joe Ashton (Bassetlaw): Is my right hon. Friend aware that, in two and a half weeks, a decision will be taken on whether England will host the world cup in 2006? Is he aware that the Football Association and the Government have mounted a magnificent campaign over the past two years, pointing out to the world that we have the best stadiums and organise football better than any other country? They have also pointed out that our police have no problems with crowds in Britain. The hooligans go abroad, but in this country we have a magnificent record of crowd control—*[Interruption.]* We do. The statistics show that the figure for arrests is 10 per cent. of what it was 20 years ago.

Will my right hon. Friend ask television and the tabloids, and some Tories, to start backing England and telling people how good we are, instead of constantly retelling the events of a Saturday night abroad with a bunch of hooligans? Tory Members are dwelling on that as much as some of the tabloids are, and it is time that we started shouting our support for England.

The Prime Minister: Nothing could excuse the appalling behaviour of those hooligans, who are not connected with football but are simply mindless thugs. It is worth pointing out that the last tournament that we hosted here, Euro 96, was very well policed, very peaceful and very friendly. I have no doubt that the same would happen again.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): Why does the Prime Minister think that today's World Health Organisation report rates our health service ninth in Europe and 18th in the world?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased that the right hon. Gentleman has asked me that question as it enables me to say two things to him. First, one would think, to read the reports, that we were rated 18th out of about 20; we are 18th out of more than 190 countries in the world. Of course, that is not to say that we do not need to do a lot better, and it is true that we fall behind France in the table. However—this point will interest Conservative Members who want the American health care system in this country—we are in front of the United States and in front of Germany, Sweden, Canada and Australia. There is a lot more that we need to do, but in many ways, particularly on the fairness of funding, the report was complimentary to the UK.

Mr. Kennedy: Such was the commendable detail of that reply that one might almost think that the Prime Minister had received advance warning of the question. Funnily enough, however, after this morning's press reports, this was one of the quieter mornings outside my office, and there was nothing to be heard at all.

Is it not a fact that the number of people waiting for consultant appointments has doubled, that the waiting times are as persistently long as ever, and that on the eve of the last election the Prime Minister said that the country had only 24 hours left to save the health service? Which 24 hours was he talking about, and is not it time that, in government, Labour started sticking to the pledges that it made in opposition?

The Prime Minister: If the right hon. Gentleman wants to discuss election pledges, I point out that the Liberal Democrat pledge on the health service was to spend £500 million more. We are spending billions more on the national health service. As for the in-patient waiting list pledge, that has been met. It is correct that the out-patient lists went up, as they did for many years, but they are now coming back down. There are more nurses and doctors in the health service.

However, nobody should be in any doubt that there is an awful lot more to do, which is why we are publishing the national health service plan in the next few weeks. We need more nurses in the health service, we need better equipment, and we need better systems to reduce waiting times and lists. All those things have to be done, but they will be achieved only by the combination of investment and reform to which we are committed.

As for the WHO report, as I said, 18th out of 190 is not good enough, but it should debunk any absurd notion that Britain has a third-world national health service; it does not. We should be proud of our health service but recognise how much more it should be improved.

Mr. Gwyn Prosser (Dover): Last night in Dover, local people gathered at the docks near the area where 58 people were found dead in the back of a container lorry on Monday night to hold a vigil to remember the dead and express the compassion of the town. As we come to terms with that terrible tragedy and as the Prime Minister considers what areas he should look at, such as international co-operation, to ensure that similar tragedies do not occur in future, will he investigate the following reports? First, it is alleged that some four weeks ago the 60 victims were deported from Belgium without an escort. Secondly, it is reported that the tell-tale characteristics that drew the attention of the customs officers in Dover were detected by those in Zeebrugge some time before the vessel left, and when timely intervention could have saved lives.

The Prime Minister: The short answer to the last two points is that I do not know whether those allegations have any substance. Of course they should be looked at, although it is important that, until we know the full facts of what happened, we reserve judgment. No one could fail to be appalled at the tragic loss of human life or at the wickedness and evil of that trade. It can only be tackled by having the right measures here, which is why it is important that we now have measures that allow us to detain people who come here and to search the vehicles, to ensure that we penalise and punish properly those who are engaged in the trade.

That emphasises yet again the need to take action at international and, in particular, European level. It seems almost certain that those people travelled through several European countries before they came here. That underlines, once again, the need for some of these issues, particularly that of organised crime—and it is organised crime—to be tackled on a Europe-wide level.

Q3. [125508] **Dr. Vincent Cable** (Twickenham): Can the Prime Minister clarify Government thinking on civil liberties? The Government have recently restricted the freedom of movement of people from outside Europe into this country; they are proposing to restrict, through surveillance, internet business operations—but at the same time they have upheld the civil liberties of football hooligans who wish to travel freely between this country and the continent, and upheld the freedom of an American rapist to operate his trade in this country. What is the consistent thread running through those Home Office decisions?

The Prime Minister: First, let me correct the hon. Gentleman on a point: there is no question of intercepting everyone's e-mail. There are intercepts now in telephone communications, and intercepts in e-mail will be done on the same basis for very necessary reasons. There are circumstances, especially with organised crime and the drugs trade, in which we need such powers. All Governments have recognised that in the past. As for football hooligans going abroad, this Government have introduced measures to restrict their movement and to impose not just domestic but international banning orders. Following the announcement by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on Monday, we shall consider what further measures we will take.

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): Is my right hon. Friend aware that a report was launched yesterday on an online consultation with the survivors of domestic violence and with parliamentarians? Is he further aware that 90 per cent. of those who referred to their children in that consultation spoke of their fear of further violence or abuse, because the courts almost automatically grant child contact orders to violent parents? Will he undertake to review the legislation and the Government's domestic violence policy, "Living without fear", to ensure that we protect those most vulnerable women and children?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend knows, we have in fact taken several measures to strengthen the law on domestic violence and to ensure that acts of domestic violence are properly reported. I am aware of the report to which she refers, and we will of course look into it and study its findings very carefully.

Q4. [125509] **Mr. David Amess** (Southend, West): How does the right hon. Gentleman justify the fact that the Chancellor of the Exchequer used two different rates of inflation so that the increase in tax on petrol—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. I shall issue some Members with editions of "Erskine May"—they can read the appropriate chapter—because of the farmyard noises they are making, which are not allowed in the House.

Mr. Amess: I have brought some food for them, Madam Speaker.

How does the right hon. Gentleman justify the fact that the Chancellor of Exchequer used two different rates of inflation so that the increase in tax on petrol was three times the increase in the basic retirement pension?

The Prime Minister: Very simply, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor used precisely the method for calculating pensions that has been used since 1987. I have no doubt that the hon. Gentleman will remember that from his days as Member of Parliament for Basildon.

Q5. [125510] **Mrs. Eileen Gordon** (Romford): Is the Prime Minister aware that many of my constituents in Romford work for Ford at Dagenham, either directly or for contractors that work within Ford, or for companies that rely on Ford for work? Obviously, they are deeply worried about their futures because of the proposed closure of the assembly plant. I know that he has taken a personal interest in this issue, and I thank him for that, but can he tell me and my constituents what support is being given to the work force, what assurances he has had from Ford about its long-term future and commitment to Dagenham and the United Kingdom, and whether he believes them?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly continue to take a personal interest in this matter. We will make sure that Ford sticks to the commitments it has given, which are

important. It is worth emphasising that Ford still employs more than 36,000 people in the United Kingdom. This is a very important country for Ford as a market in Europe.

We will play our part in helping the people who have been or will be affected by the announcement of job losses. We have announced a comprehensive plan for the regeneration of Dagenham, including retraining, assistance for small businesses and the development of a science park. Ford has committed funding for that, but I well understand people's anxieties. It is true that the time when the job losses will take effect is some way off, but we will want to work closely with the company to make sure that all the undertakings it has given are indeed honoured.

Mr. Michael Mates (East Hampshire): In the context of the Prime Minister's much-vaunted health initiative, is he aware that a fine hospital in my constituency with a long-standing reputation for excellence in orthopaedic surgery, the Lord Mayor Treloar, is standing idle with two state-of-the-art theatres, two further theatres and upwards of 50 beds available, because the health authorities want to knock it down and sell the land for development? If he really means what he says, will he look at that scandalous waste of resources in an area with orthopaedic waiting lists of between a year and 18 months, and show us that his initiative is more than just fine words?

The Prime Minister: I am not aware of the particular situation to which the hon. Gentleman draws my attention, but of course I will look into it for him. He says that we offer only fine words on the national health service. However, this year alone we have put in an additional £2 billion. The facts are, of course, that waiting lists are still too high and waiting times are still too long. Precisely for that reason, we need the extra investment in nurses, doctors and hospitals. We are committed to that.

Q6. [125511] **Mrs. Sylvia Heal** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis): Does my right hon. Friend recall that at every stage of its parliamentary process, the minimum wage was opposed by the Conservative Opposition? Although I welcome their policy U-turn on the minimum wage, has he heard rumours that they would exempt many of this country's small firms, which would mean that more than 2,000 workers in my constituency and millions across the country who benefit from the minimum wage would be betrayed? Does he agree that that would indeed be a betrayal and that the Opposition's new-found commitment to the minimum wage is no more convincing than their new-found commitment to the national health service?

The Prime Minister: Following the earlier exchanges on the policy of the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), it is interesting that when my hon. Friend mentioned the Opposition's policy, or non-policy, of exempting small firms, one half of them nodded their heads and the other half shook theirs. That is the state of the Conservative party.

I am proud that the Labour party introduced the minimum wage and I believe that it provides good protection for low-paid workers. However, it is also important that it is combined with other measures such as the working families tax credit. For that reason, there is a concerted attack involving the issues of skills and poverty, and encouraging people back to the workplace. We now have almost a million extra jobs in the British economy.

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking): Given the Government's expressed desire to help Gulf war veterans, will the Prime Minister personally consider the case of my very brave constituent, Paul Connolly, who was a civilian attached to and working with the military in the Gulf conflict? Paul Connolly is now a very sick man with a bad kidney disease. His life expectancy is not great. The disease may well have been caused by exposure to depleted uranium. He was a civilian as opposed to a member of the military, and it seems that no Army or other pension is available to him. He lives on £70 a week incapacity benefit. Will the Prime Minister consider very carefully those civilians who did so much in the conflict and who are now suffering?

The Prime Minister: I will, of course, look carefully at the case of the hon. Gentleman's constituent, and I understand that both he and Mr. Connolly have been in contact with Ministers at the Ministry of Defence. Detailed research, which will take some time, is under way, but I know of the concern of many of those people who are Gulf war veterans, either military or civilian. We are trying to ensure that the research is a priority, and I will look into the case of the hon. Gentleman's constituent.

Q7. [125512] **Mr. Dennis Turner** (Wolverhampton, South-East): I have very good news for the Prime Minister. Is he aware that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health—bless him—last Friday announced a £12 million, state-of-the-art cardiac centre for Wolverhampton? That investment will improve the health and life chances of thousands of our citizens in Wolverhampton and the black country. Is not that an example of good old-fashioned public spending in modernising our health service?

Hon. Members: Give us an answer!

The Prime Minister: It is a hard question, but the answer is yes. It is not just that cardiac surgery centre which is a good example, but the new hospital that I opened in Carlisle last week. There are another 30 new hospitals being opened and every accident and emergency department in England is being modernised, with more nurses and doctors. Yes, there is a long way to go, but under this Government we will get there.

European Council

3.32 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair) *rose—*
[Interruption.]

Madam Speaker: Order. Will Members who are leaving please do so quietly?

The Prime Minister: With your permission, Madam Speaker, I wish to make a statement. Together with my right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Foreign Secretary, I attended a meeting of the European Council in Feira, Portugal, on 19 and 20 June. A copy of the Council's conclusions is available in the Library of the House.

I also had a series of meetings in the margins of the Council, with the Prime Minister of Belgium on illegal trafficking in people and football hooliganism, with the Prime Minister of Greece, Mr. Simitis, in the wake of the appalling killing of Brigadier Saunders, with the Spanish Prime Minister on economic reform, and with the French Prime Minister on French plans for their presidency.

The most contentious issue at the Council itself was the question of how best to tackle the problem of cross-border tax evasion within the European Union. For many years, the Commission, and indeed most member states, have argued that the best way to deal with that issue is through tax harmonisation—by requiring all countries to introduce a withholding tax on savings income paid out to non-residents. For our part, we have argued consistently that an EU-wide withholding tax would not only be seriously damaging for the City of London, but would be completely ineffective in tackling tax evasion. However, we have also made it clear through the long and complex negotiations that we fully agree with the objective of fighting international tax abuse caused by banking secrecy.

The outcome that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and I achieved at Feira was fully in line with the principles and objectives we set out. It was, as I said yesterday, a personal triumph for the Chancellor. This is a comprehensive agreement, which fully protects the competitiveness of the City. All 15 countries have now agreed to accept exchange of information, not a withholding tax, as the way forward for the EU, and implementation of the European Union regime will depend on the progress made in agreeing similar measures with third countries and dependent territories. Even in the transitional period, only two of the 15 countries have said that they will definitely retain a withholding tax. This is an excellent agreement for Britain and for Europe, and it shows once again how the strategy of positive engagement in Europe both protects and indeed enhances the country's national interest.

That was also demonstrated at the last European Council at Lisbon, where we agreed a radical 10-year programme of economic reform for Europe. Since Lisbon, there has been progress in taking this agenda forward, including directives on electronic commerce and electronic money, agreement in respect of copyright, and new proposals on public procurement. At Feira, we agreed a charter for small enterprises, a new strategy on scientific and technological research and a hugely ambitious action plan on electronic Europe which will underpin efforts to create a dynamic knowledge economy in Europe. At the same time, we invited the Commission to accelerate work on the single market in financial services, energy liberalisation and aviation.

Heads of Government discussed the proposed charter of rights. I made clear my view that the charter should pull together in a single document the rights that European citizens enjoy, that it should be political in nature, not legally binding, and that it should not impose new legal obligations on member states. The House will welcome the fact that there was a good deal of support for that approach from other Heads of Government. The charter will be one of the main issues for discussion at the Biarritz European Council in October.

On enlargement, we agreed on the need to keep up the momentum in negotiations with the candidate countries.

On the European Union's preparations in the intergovernmental conference, we heard a progress report from the Portuguese presidency, setting out the options for re-weighting votes in the Council of Ministers in favour of the larger member states such as the UK, for reforming the size and structure of the Commission and for looking again at which issues should be decided by qualified majority voting.

We also discussed the arrangements agreed at Amsterdam to allow closer co-operation among a group of member states. Such arrangements of course already exist, for example in Schengen. We will need more such flexible co-operation in an enlarged European Union, but, in this context, the Council reaffirmed in its conclusions the need for coherence and solidarity in an enlarged EU.

We also made further progress on European defence. Close working links between the European Union and NATO are being put in place, together with special consultation arrangements with those European allies who are not in the EU. The priority now is on how Europe will deliver on the headline goal that we set ourselves at Helsinki, and that will be the focus of work in the next six months. We also adopted targets for the civilian aspects of crisis management, such as the provision of police officers.

Finally, we discussed a range of international issues—Russia, the Balkans, the middle east peace process, and Africa on which President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa addressed the Council.

The summit was, again, a successful one for Europe and the United Kingdom. I have no doubt at all that it is vital for British industry, British jobs and British influence that we continue the policy of constructive partnership with the European Union and, under this Government, that is precisely what we shall do.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): I start by welcoming several elements of the communiqué, including the commitment to the internal market and greater co-operation on tackling drugs. I congratulate the Prime Minister on one particular diplomatic triumph: after many years of difficult negotiation, carefully crafted compromises and repeated isolation, he finally got the Foreign Secretary and the Chancellor to talk to each other. Having said that he will not fight over every headline any more, he is leaving the job to those two, and they are extremely good at it.

I offer the Prime Minister our strong support for his reported attempts to stop incorporation into the treaties of the charter of fundamental rights. Must he not also ensure

that it is not attached, even as an annexe, to the treaties; that it is not adopted in any way that could lead to it later becoming politically binding; and that it does not contain any new rights from those already discussed? Can he give all those assurances today? Will he comment on the fact that, while he has been trying to prevent it becoming legally binding, his Members of the European Parliament voted on 16 March to make it legally binding? When will he get an increasingly divided Labour party under control on this subject?

On the withholding tax, the Prime Minister has claimed success for the Chancellor over resisting something which, of course, he could have stopped at the very beginning. Has not a Commission spokesman said of the Government's comments that their "relentless spin" is "grossly misleading"? What a surprise.

Was it not a great mistake to continue at the summit down the path of an EU security and defence policy that is increasingly autonomous of NATO? The Prime Minister's assurances on the matter seem to be undermined by the comments of the French Minister responsible for European affairs, who said last week in connection with defence policy:

> We don't agree with the "Americanisation" of the world . . . We are saying that together we can build a new superpower . . . and its name will be Europe.

Do not such comments suggest that those who say that there is no danger to NATO from the initiative are rather naive?

Will the Prime Minister comment on reports this morning that Turkey has indicated its intention not to allow NATO to lend weapons or equipment for the automatic use of the EU, and its statement that the decision taken at Feira is not the final one? Is there not a danger that the initiative is beginning to drive a wedge between members of NATO, of which we have always warned?

Midway through the crucial intergovernmental conference, was it not a unique opportunity to put the case for the type of Europe that the British people want to see? Was it not the ideal time to set out a comprehensive vision of a Europe that is more flexible, outward looking and reformed? Why did the right hon. Gentleman not stand up at Feira for the vision of a more flexible Europe in which nation states can work together? Is it not time that he put the case for greater flexibility, given that he was apparently ambushed by President Chirac and Chancellor Schröder, who told him that they would proceed with closer integration themselves, whether he liked it or not? Why does the Prime Minister instead continue to be carried further down the alternative, integrationist route? Why, after Feira, is a further loss of the British veto on European legislation still on the cards? Why is the French presidency still poised to launch an ambitious so-called social agenda, as it has promised? Why will rights and powers continue to be lost from our national Parliament?

Why, after the summit, is there still no specific timetable for enlargement? The Prime Minister claimed yesterday that the IGC agenda was focused on the reforms necessary for enlargement, so why is he not pressing for reform of the policy which, more than anything else, is holding up enlargement—the common agricultural policy? Why, after all the talk, is real CAP reform still not on the agenda?

One issue was noticeable by its absence from the statement: the single currency. The Prime Minister has now issued a helpful clarification, saying that he is in charge of the Cabinet; now that he is in charge, let him tell the country where he stands. Does he agree with the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry that the Government should be putting the case now for the euro; or does he agree with the Chancellor and the Minister for Europe that they should not? Does he agree with the Chancellor's assertion that the Treasury is the guardian of the so-called five tests, or with the Deputy Prime Minister, who immediately contradicted that assertion? Perhaps he agrees with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who is reputed to have told friends that the Chancellor has a territorial fetish about the euro. All those Ministers agree that they want to scrap the pound, but they cannot agree on whether to do it openly or by stealth.

In the meantime, the cases for real reform in the EU and for flexibility are not being put, so the case for ever-further European integration is winning by default. While the Cabinet is busy tearing itself apart, Europe continues to move in the wrong direction.

The Prime Minister: The one advantage of all that is that the right hon. Gentleman has tried to put forward some policies of his own. It is worth analysing them.

Incidentally, on the question of divisions among Members of the European Parliament, I spoke to one or two MEPs from both the Conservative and the Labour groups. The one point on which they were agreed is that there is no group less disciplined and more disunited than the Conservative group in the European Parliament.

Let me go through the right hon. Gentleman's policy positions. First, it is absolutely clear from his remarks that he would block defence progress altogether. He says that the defence initiative that we have undertaken is in danger of dividing people and pulling NATO apart. NATO has endorsed the defence initiative—it is in favour of the defence initiative—for a perfectly sensible reason: it is an initiative to be undertaken when NATO does not want to be engaged in peacekeeping and humanitarian tasks. It is fully accepted by everyone that that is sensible. If we opted out and took no part in the debate in Europe, it would be run by those who are hostile to the whole idea.

The right hon. Gentleman says that we never needed to fight the withholding tax. Only a few months ago, the shadow Foreign Secretary said:

> The debate is no longer about whether the withholding tax is going to be imposed on Britain. It is now simply about how much damage it will cause and to whom—

so the right hon. Gentleman might have been a little more gracious. Now we see the important difference between our two parties. He would say that we should have vetoed the measure right from the start. It is true that we could have done so, but, as a result, on every other issue on which we needed other countries' support to get things done, we would not have had their support, because we would not have put our case positively or constructively, or argued for it, but simply wielded the veto and then found the veto used against us in ways that we did not like.

The right hon. Gentleman goes on about the policy on the euro being somehow by stealth, but the Government are committed to a referendum on the euro. He will not allow people a referendum on the euro in the next Parliament, even if it were in the interests of British jobs, industry and investment. If he rules out the euro on

[The Prime Minister]

principle for the next five years, why not rule it out for ever? The truth is that he has a principal policy position, which is to rule out the euro for the next Parliament, but to contemplate it for the Parliament after that. I cannot imagine anything more foolish as a policy for this country.

The right hon. Gentleman wants us to go faster on enlargement—that is what he said. His policy is to renegotiate the treaty of Rome and to block the treaty on enlargement until that renegotiation is followed through. He is shaking his head, but the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) is nodding. The policy of the Leader of the Opposition is to block enlargement. To achieve that renegotiation, he needs every other state in the European Union to agree. Not one agrees with him. In other words, he would have to go to a European summit to block the very enlargement that he has the cheek to stand at the Dispatch Box and tell me that he wants more of.

As for the extension of qualified majority voting, we know why the right hon. Gentleman has come up with that policy. Let me ensure that I have it right: any extension of qualified majority voting results in a referendum. Is that right? *[Interruption.]* This is the only way to get policy out of the Conservatives. One has to resort to cross-examination. Therefore, any extension of that voting would result in a referendum.

The shadow Foreign Secretary also said that, if this Government agreed to a treaty at Nice, he would reopen negotiations if the Conservatives were elected and, presumably, he would have a referendum on that. Doing so would put the entire position in Europe in a state of complete chaos.

How come any extension of qualified majority voting deserves a referendum? When the right hon. Gentleman and other individuals on the Conservative Benches were all Ministers at the time of the Maastricht treaty, they denied the British people a referendum. The largest extension of qualified majority voting was agreed by a Conservative Government, first in the Single European Act and secondly at Maastricht—but there was no referendum. The Conservatives have done that because Mr. Sykes has come along with his money and made them do it. If anyone believes that it was a coincidence that that new policy was announced one day and that Mr. Sykes divvied up the money the next, they must be very naive indeed.

Now, there is one major difference between us on Europe, quite apart from everything else. The policy of the Labour party and of the Government is not for sale; the policy of the Conservative party is.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): The Prime Minister shares the incredulity of many hon. Members of all parties that the much-vaunted new referendum come-what-may approach of the Conservative party did not even merit a question from the Leader of the Opposition between last week and this week, which probably tells us all that we need to know about consistency from that quarter where Europe is concerned.

On the withholding tax, does the Prime Minister agree that the welcome progress that the Government have made, both before and after the summit, must be followed up at a more global level as well as closer to home? What further proposals do the Government have to help to bring pressure to bear on offshore financial centres that operate within our jurisdiction to make good the progress achieved?

On the charter of rights, given that the right hon. Gentleman has said that the "gravity" of opinion is now swaying in a British direction, does he agree that, as the European convention on human rights has already been incorporated into Scots law—a considerable issue with which to grapple—and that that prospect is forthcoming for English law later this year, there may well be an argument for the EU as a body subscribing or becoming a high contracting party to the ECHR? If we are to move in that direction, rather than the charter direction, we believe that there is a strong case for a proper written constitution for Europe that clearly delineates the powers, responsibilities and jurisdictions of all levels within the EU. Does he agree, and is that something that the Government will further consider?

Finally, on the euro, if the message—largely credible—of the summit was that, where Britain engages rationally and positively, effective influence can be exerted, does not the same argument apply to the development of the eurozone and our participation in it? Given that our influence is virtually nil because we do not subscribe beyond the position already adopted by the Government, whose words have been mixed words of late, does the Prime Minister recognise that those of us who favour increasing engagement in the argument are worried that the headcase tendency wants to take this country out of Europe? Membership of the euro is but a fig leaf for that argument. The danger is that the prepare-and-decide policy espoused by the Government is beginning to look very much like the wait-and-see policy of the right hon. Gentleman's predecessor. Will the Prime Minister at all costs resist the temptation to follow his predecessor's lead, which we know ended in tears?

The Prime Minister: Let me revert for a moment to the headcase tendency. I meant to say that it is truly bizarre that the Conservative party is committed to a referendum on any extension of qualified majority voting, even a minute extension, but will not offer an opportunity for a referendum on the single currency in the next Parliament.

On the withholding tax and exchange of information on tax issues, yes, it is important that we pursue that. One of the most important aspects of the agreement that was secured is that we are pursuing, in parallel, exchange of information at an international level with countries such as the United States and Switzerland. That is important. Exchange of information, greater transparency and an end to banking secrecy are all worthwhile objectives, because they help to make sure that people pay the tax that they owe. However, it is important that we do not end up with the EU adopting rules to that effect, and find that, in a global economy, money simply goes to tax havens elsewhere. That is why we must pursue the matter at an international level.

On the charter of rights, I do not take the view that the Conservative party takes. It is sensible that we have a strong commitment to human rights and liberties in the European Union. We need to make sure that that does not unintentionally result in new laws which we in this country have not had an opportunity to scrutinise properly. We must guard against that.

With respect to positive engagement, this country's position is far stronger in Europe than it has been for many years. *[Interruption.]* Conservatives Members said that we just give in. That is after a summit at which the others changed their minds on the withholding tax; we did not change ours. Conservative Members cannot get their minds round that.

On the eurozone, we play a constructive part now in European economic policy. In one sense, because of the Lisbon economic summit, we have been leading the debate on that, along with other countries. It is important that the five economic tests are met for successful British participation. The position of the previous Government was not the previous Prime Minister's fault. Some members of his party were in favour of the principle of the single currency and some were wholly opposed to it.

That is not the present situation. We are in favour of the principle of British membership of a successful single currency but, for it to work, the five economic tests must be met. That is a sensible, pragmatic position. It allows us to make the tests, as the vast majority of the British people would want. Moreover, by allowing people the final choice in a referendum, our position is democratic as well.

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): After the breathtaking lack of generosity on the Conservative side, may I congratulate my right hon. Friend and the Chancellor on their success in getting the European Union to accept that tax evasion should be tackled on the basis of exchange of information, rather than through a withholding tax? In his view, would the same excellent result have been achieved if, instead of using patient and tough diplomacy, we had threatened to use the veto?

The Prime Minister: No, it would not. The tragedy of the Conservative party's position is that, despite what people say has been its tradition, for the first six or seven years, even under Margaret Thatcher, it was prepared in the single European market, for example, to combine effectively with other countries. Indeed, it gave up a larger extension of qualified majority voting power than has been done since, apart from under the Maastricht treaty, which it signed.

It is so obvious that when we are in co-operation and partnership with 14 other countries, the sensible way to get the best for one's own country is to form alliances, to engage constructively and to be positive. That approach yields results for this country.

The Conservative party would now be blocking the very enlargement that is the next focus of the European Union. *[Interruption.]* It is no good Conservative Members saying that they would not. They are committed to blocking enlargement unless they renegotiate the treaty of Rome, and they cannot point to any country that is prepared to agree with them on that. The dangers of a destructive approach are not only connected with Europe; a destructive, negative approach to Europe is a betrayal of the British national interest.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): Does the Prime Minister recognise that, although virtually no serious politician is advocating that Britain should leave the European Union, British public opinion is steadily moving in that direction, and that that movement will become an irresistible political flood unless the steady erosion of British democratic sovereignty is seen to be ended?

Did the right hon. Gentleman at the European Council over the weekend, and will he at Nice when the next treaty is being negotiated, make it clear that Britain will not permit any further extensions of majority voting, and that we shall retain our right to protect our vital national interests, as was promised to us in the 1972 referendum, by retaining our power of veto where we believe that our national interest is threatened?

The Prime Minister: I suppose that it is of some consolation to the hon. Gentleman that increasingly he is the voice that represents where the Conservative party is today. He says that the tide of opinion is moving in the direction of withdrawal from the European Union. I do not think that that is true, and I believe that it would be disastrous for the British people.

Three million jobs are dependent on the EU. More than 50 per cent. of our trade is with the EU. When the hon. Gentleman says that any qualified majority voting is a bad thing, I beg to differ with him. It is important in certain instances, especially in the completion of the single Europe market. That could not be completed unless we had qualified majority voting rather than a veto. In areas such as tax, defence or social security, I shall fight hard to retain the veto. Elsewhere, I shall consider what is in the British national interest. I regard the Single European Act as being in the British national interest, as is the single market. It would be wrong for the United Kingdom to divorce itself from Europe. Whether that is popular or unpopular, we should continue saying it if we truly have the best interests of this country at heart.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Does my right hon. Friend share my sense that Conservative Members have never been as quiet following a European Council statement, perhaps indicating that over the withholding tax their fox has been shot? Does he agree that having referendums on every issue that comes out of the forthcoming intergovernmental conference would bring the business of the European Union to a standstill and would delay enlargement indefinitely? Is it not the case that the Tory party's stance on this issue has nothing to do with national interest and principle and everything to do with the £20 million that is on the table from Paul Sykes?

The Prime Minister: That is right. Mr. Sykes has made it clear that he believes—he is entitled to do so—that Britain should get out of the European Union. He has made it clear that he wants and requires a referendum on any extension of qualified majority voting and on any treaty that is agreed at Nice. The Conservative party has now agreed to those policies. However, they would be disastrous policies for the country. We would be a laughing stock in the rest of the world if we ended up saying that any extension of qualified majority voting would result in a referendum of the entire British people. If we went one further, which is what Conservative policy is now, and said that we would block enlargement unless there were a renegotiation of the essential treaty— *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members say that they will not do that.

[The Prime Minister]

The Conservatives' policy is to go for a new position under the treaty of Rome where, as the Leader of the Opposition said, one can pick and mix and match any policy one wants. I cannot think of even another conservative party in Europe that supports such a thing. I do not know whether any Opposition Members can. If there is not even a conservative party that supports that, and there is no Government who support that, it will not happen. Yet the right hon. Gentleman's position is that he would block any treaty on enlargement unless such a provision were agreed to. It is impossible to think of a more irresponsible and foolish policy. In my view, it is directly linked to those people who now fund the Conservative party.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Is there any aspect of the eventual decision whether to join the euro that depends upon political as well as economic judgment?

The Prime Minister: The short answer is that the tests are economic tests. We have resolved the political issue. Of course, there are political implications. There are constitutional implications. But each of those has been resolved by the Government. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. I wish that right hon. and hon. Members on the Opposition Front Bench would not cry out. I expect better behaviour from those on the Front Bench.

The Prime Minister: In the Chancellor's October 1997 statement all those issues were resolved, which is why we have said that, in principle, successful membership of the single currency is in the British national interest. We have also said, rightly, that if the test is the national economic interest, those five economic tests have to be met. That is a sensible position. It allows us to engage constructively. I simply say—I imagine that the right hon. Gentleman agrees—that if the Government, or any Government, were to say that we were ruling out the single currency, there would be a flood of inward investment out of this country virtually overnight.

Mr. Roger Casale (Wimbledon): Does my right hon. Friend agree with the conclusions of the report of the European Scrutiny Committee on the intergovernmental conference that, as institutional reform is an essential precondition of enlargement, the IGC should focus specifically on the institutional reform issues left unresolved at Amsterdam, so that enlargement can take place?

Does my right hon. Friend have an answer to the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), who, in last week's debate before the Council meeting, asked what was the point of seeking constructive engagement, of trying to reach consensus and of further institutional reform of the EU at this stage? Many Labour Members were left with the distinct impression that many Opposition Members failed to see the point of the EU at all.

The Prime Minister: The point of enlargement is clear. This country has entered into a binding commitment to help enlargement. As the EU enlarges, it simply makes no sense whatever for us not to debate and then decide the key things that have to change to make enlargement work. If the EU expands from 15 to 20 or 25 countries, it will obviously be important to take account of that in the institutions of the EU. That is why the intergovernmental conference is necessary, and that is why it would be completely irresponsible to block it.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): Why is the Prime Minister so implacably opposed to a flexible Europe? Why do we not say to our European partners, "We don't want to stop you doing what you want to do, as long as you don't make us do what we don't want to do"?

The Prime Minister: I am not opposed to a flexible Europe at all. As I said in my statement, enhanced co-operation must be part of our discussions in the European Council in Nice. What I am opposed to, however, is Britain opting out to the slow lane in a two-speed Europe, and letting other countries determine the circumstances in which we can then join the fast lane. That has been one of the great dangers of British foreign policy towards Europe for a number of years. I am all in favour of enhanced co-operation, but I want to know its terms and rules, and I want to make absolutely sure that in determining that, we do not opt out of the debate and then find that others have determined how Europe develops, and that we have lost influence in it.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): Did any discussions take place on the increase in killings and kidnappings and the continued ethnic cleansing of minorities in Kosovo that was almost certainly carried out by the Kosovo Liberation Army, now called the Kosovo Protection Corps? Did any discussions take place on the discovery of the huge cache of arms approximately half an hour from Agim Ceku's headquarters? Will the KLA be allowed to ethnically cleanse Kosovo?

The Prime Minister: There was an extensive discussion on Kosovo in the summer. There are significant problems with some of the extremists on the Kosovan side who attempt to drive Serbs from their homes. However, we should not ignore the fact that enormous progress has been made in Kosovo, despite its difficulties. We should never forget that if we had not taken action in Kosovo, 1 million more refugees—genuine asylum seekers—would be touring Europe.

We have much more to do; the United Nations force is working hard with the civil authorities, which are in a position to help to run the country. We are doing everything we can to prevent the sort of extremism to which my hon. Friend referred. However, it would be wrong for people to think that the whole of Kosovo was marked by such outrageous and wrong disturbances, and by elements of ethnic cleansing. On the whole, the new administration is settling down; elections will be held and there is every possibility of a stable future for Kosovo. It is obvious that the UN force will have to stay there for some time. However, I emphasise that if we had not taken action, the position would have been much worse.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Does the Prime Minister accept how deeply the Turkish Government were

offended by events in Feira at the weekend? Does he know that one of the greatest problems that faces European defence and security policy is the issue of secrets between us and the United States of America within NATO? How will he deal with that question? Has he discussed it with President Clinton? Has he reached a solution? In the light of increasing movement towards a common foreign, security and defence policy, how will he find the resources that should be made available for the sort of policy that he is pursuing? Average defence spending is 2.5 per cent. of gross domestic product, and to achieve the objectives, not only would that figure have to be increased to between 5 per cent. and 7 per cent., but the whole of Europe would have to be taxed on a massive scale.

The Prime Minister: The trouble is that one knows that the hon. Gentleman is simply opposed to anything that comes out of Europe. The defence proposals are for peacekeeping and humanitarian missions in circumstances in which NATO does not want to be engaged.

Mr. Cash: The Prime Minister knows that that is not true.

The Prime Minister: It is true. It is sensible for the European Union to have that facility. It is extraordinary if we are always in a position whereby even if the United States of America does not want to be involved, Europe has no capability for peacekeeping and humanitarian missions. The matter will be decided by unanimity. We take the lead in that debate and we are shaping it in the right way. There are issues that relate to intelligence; I have no doubt that they can be resolved. As I said earlier, both NATO and the United States support the initiative.

If we did not support the initiative but turned our back on it, what would happen? There would still be a common defence policy and a common security policy in Europe, but this country, which probably has as much to contribute to such a policy as any other European country, would not be part of the debate and the discussions. I emphasise to Conservative Members a point that would be immediately recognisable to any Conservative Prime Minister of the past 30 or 40 years: if we do not co-operate positively and constructively in Europe, this country suffers. We gain nothing by isolation or by being at the margins. If we engage in such a policy, we undermine the very national interest that we want to advance.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Was Wim Duisenberg right or wrong to suggest that there was a window of opportunity for entering the euro, and might a decision not to join now be an historic mistake of Messina-like proportions? Will my right hon. Friend look at the case study of the Inveresk Paper Corporation, which has plants in the Chancellor's constituency and in mine? The company is very efficient and used to export to Europe, but finds that the strong pound makes that impossible. Not only that, but its home markets are now invaded by Europe, driving people to extraordinary lengths to maintain a traditionally important industry.

The Prime Minister: I do not believe that any issue concerning the exchange rate on a day-to-day basis can be a reason for joining or not joining the euro. We have to take a longer-term perspective and ensure that the economic tests and conditions that have been set out are met. The principal criterion is sustainable economic convergence. When one studies Wim Duisenberg's comments carefully, one sees that he believes, of course, that there is an opportunity for the United Kingdom to join the euro, but that it is important for the economic conditions to be right, and they are not right at the present time.

We have taken the sensible position, which is to prepare for the euro, to agree in principle that Britain should be part of a successful single currency, but to ensure that, as I said yesterday, we do not repeat the mistakes with the exchange rate mechanism and join in circumstances in which the economic conditions are not right. That is why our position is in the long-term interests of British industry.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): When the Prime Minister tells us that he will agree to a charter of fundamental rights that is political in nature, but not to one that is legally binding, is he not being a little naive, as experience tells us that such politically aspirational documents are used by the European Court of Justice as a guide for the judgments that it makes?

The Prime Minister: I think that at one point I was told that I was being naive over the withholding tax. The important thing about the charter of rights is that it is not legally binding. We will have pretty broad support on it from most other countries in the European Union Fifteen, and I think that people can exaggerate the dangers hugely. We have to deal with the question of whether the European Court of Justice could, by some side wind, end up extending our national legislation, or whether we can ensure that that avenue is closed off, which I believe we can.

Mr. Paul Marsden (Shrewsbury and Atcham): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and I congratulate him, the Chancellor and the Foreign Secretary on their achievements at the European Council. What progress has been made to bring to justice the killers of the British military attaché in Greece, and to prevent another such atrocity from being committed in the future?

The Prime Minister: First, let me repeat what I said yesterday—that we extend every sympathy to the family of Brigadier Saunders following this appalling terrorist act. I had a long discussion with the Greek Prime Minister about the measures that Greece is taking to find those responsible. For our part, we have said that we will co-operate with the Greek Government in any way, including giving them help—as we, unfortunately, have our own experience of dealing with terrorists. We will give any help that we possibly can to bring those people to justice. Brigadier Saunders committed himself to his country and did very valuable work for it, and it is an absolute tragedy that his life was cut short in that way.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): Will the Prime Minister consider using the term "murder" instead of "killing" for such terrorist acts, because the word "killing" tends to sanitise them in a way that the people of this country will not understand?

[Mr. William Ross]

Will the Prime Minister also reflect on the fact that, although our continental companion countries had a problem that led them to come up with the idea of a withholding tax, that is not the only means of cross-border tax evasion in the European Union? Is he aware of the huge sums that are being laundered following the cross-border smuggling of fuel between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, which is spreading, I believe, throughout the United Kingdom?

The problem of the differing rates of duty on tobacco and alcohol of late has led to similar problems in the south of England, at tremendous cost to the Exchequer. Has the Prime Minister discussed those matters with the Government of the Irish Republic over the past few days, and what action do the Government intend to take to end such smuggling operations?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Treasury has published proposals to address the smuggling issue. Of course I understand the concern about petrol price rises—although it is not unique to the United Kingdom. It is fair to say that in the past year, the biggest rises have really had more to do with the price of oil than with fuel duties. None the less, there is a price differential between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. However, we have other benefits in our country. It is important to recognise that although it was painful to raise duties in that way, it was necessary to do so because of the very large deficit that we inherited. I do not believe that interest rates would be at 6 per cent. today if the public finances were not in such sound order.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): What is our European partners' view of Britain's membership of the single currency? Are they enthusiastic, or even impatient, that we join? Does my right hon. Friend agree that once we are well in line with the convergence criteria, there will still be interest rate and exchange rate problems that rule out early entry? Although the euro has strengthened by 10 per cent. against the pound in recent weeks, do we not need a similar strengthening in the next year or two? In a sense, would not the general election, and the referendum, be better later rather than sooner?

The Prime Minister: The point that my hon. Friend makes is of course right, and shows why it is important that the economic tests are met. There is a convergence in long-term interest rates between us and the eurozone—between the United Kingdom and continental Europe. I think that this is the first time in my lifetime that that has happened. It has happened as a result specifically of the monetary and fiscal policy and measures that have put our country's economy on the strongest footing that we have had for several decades. However, there is still a short-term interest rate differential, and there are also the issues that my hon. Friend has raised. That is why, as I said, it is important that whatever the position in principle, in practice the economic tests have to be met.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): The right hon. Gentleman seems to think that once the economic standards are met and we join the euro, that will be the end of the matter. In his mind, other tests—such as the political one, and, some would say, the constitutional one—do not seem to be a problem. Can he correct any false impression that he has given today that he does not realise that joining would entail such implications?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I think that I can correct any false impressions. I am not saying that there are not political or constitutional issues. I am saying that as far as we are concerned as a Government and as a political party, we have resolved the constitutional issue in this way: we do not believe that there is a constitutional barrier to a single currency. If one believes that there is a constitutional barrier to a single currency, one's policy on joining should be "never". What is absolutely absurd is for Conservative Members to say, "Never—for five years."

I do not doubt that there will be a big debate, politically and constitutionally, on the single currency; of course there will. That is the very reason why, on an issue of this importance, we have said that there has to be a referendum. Therefore, if we recommend to people, should we be re-elected, that we should join the single currency in the next Parliament, there will be a referendum on that subject. I have no doubt that people will make their political and their constitutional points. All I am saying is that, as far as we are concerned, the key test is the economic one of whether joining is good for British jobs, British industry and British investment.

As I said, in my view, for any United Kingdom Government to rule out membership of a single currency would have a devastating effect on this country's power and influence and on jobs and industry within the European single market.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Thank you, Prime Minister. We are going to move on now.

Community and Amateur Sports Clubs (National Standards)

4.19 pm

Mr. Andrew Reed (Loughborough): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish national standards for community and amateur sports clubs; and for connected purposes.

First, I must declare an interest. I am a member of Birstall rugby football club and an honorary president of Loughborough Athletic football club, as well as a member of Leicester Tigers rugby club. However, my Bill is about helping our sporting tradition across the whole country.

My Bill is simple in its purpose, yet its benefits to sport could be enormous, because it will tightly define community and amateur sports clubs in law. Setting out that definition in the Bill will allow such clubs to be recognised by bodies such as, for example, the Charity Commission, the Inland Revenue, the Treasury and local authorities, for the purpose of deciding matters such as rate relief.

All hon. Members know—or we think we know—what we mean by the term "sports club". I am sure that all Members present today recognise the enormous benefits that such clubs bring to their constituencies. However, the Bill defines community and amateur sports clubs clearly so that in future we will all know exactly what we mean when we use the term "amateur sports club". I should like to pay tribute to Lord Phillips, who has done a tremendous amount of work in another place to develop a legal definition.

Sport is an integral part of British life. It provides enjoyment for millions of participants and spectators, and it can unite the whole country behind our top competitors and teams. Events in Belgium and on the cricket field over the past week or so have done nothing to dampen that enthusiasm, but sport is more than simply entertaining—it is hugely important too. It can play a key role in tackling social exclusion, stimulating economic regeneration and giving young people the best possible start in life through better health and education.

In the past, unfortunately, the value of sport has been overlooked. Many people have seen how it benefits individuals, without realizing how it helps society as a whole. Spending on sport has tended to be seen as an avoidable cost, not a necessary investment. As a result, other services have fared much better in the allocation of finite public resources.

Now is the time to act. Each of the main political parties has accepted sport's economic, social and educational benefits. It is one of the issues that crosses party lines in this House. Many progressive local authorities have set excellent examples for others to follow, and the Government have emphasized the importance of joined-up thinking, encouraging people to tackle multi-dimensional problems in new, integrated and imaginative ways. This is an area that needs genuine joined-up thinking across Government Departments, and I make no apology for using that overused phrase.

This Bill is not about Manchester United, Leicester Tigers, or Tim Henman at Wimbledon. It is about the local community clubs struggling to afford new nets, a kit or new balls for their youth section. It is about clubs that cater for sport for people with a disability, for increased participation among ethnic minorities and for women's sport. Their work is just as important, but is never properly funded.

The hon. Members who took part in yesterday's match against Wimbledon football club's disabled section at the millennium dome know only too well how hard it is to beat such players, and how important the game was for them. For the record, the House of Commons won 9-7.

In every community there are people—volunteers—who give their time and effort to make sport happen. Their efforts should be rewarded, not penalised. As the Rugby Football Union said on behalf of its volunteers:

> Finance is a key issue . . . we share the frustration that the extra funding they attract through fetes, car boot sales, and raffles is then decimated by government taxes.

Most importantly, for many people, sport counts. The 1996 general household survey found that 46 per cent. of the population participate regularly in sport and recreation, and that 71 per cent. had participated in the past four weeks. As a country, we spend more than £11 billion a year on sports goods. The leisure industry is one of the fastest growth sectors in the economy, accounting for 2.6 per cent. of total consumer spending. However, at the same time Britain is increasingly described as a nation of couch potatoes, and a wide range of studies confirms that trend. Evidence is growing that many local sports clubs are closing, and participation rates are falling.

Last year, the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport concluded that active participation in sport

> complements academic elements of education; and

it encourages social skills. Authoritative research indicates that exercise and participation in sport help combat social exclusion and improve health. There is proven research to show that participation in sport has a positive impact on crime, particularly among young people. The new sports action zones could make a real difference in tackling social exclusion in some of the most deprived areas in our country. I hope that the health benefits of a nation taking regular exercise are self-evident.

The Government are committed to the principle of volunteers helping to rebuild communities, and earlier this year called for a step change in volunteer action. I recognize that volunteering at a local sports club may not be the first thing that springs to mind when we talk about the giving age, but what could be more giving than the referee who gives up his or her weekend to make sure that competitive games are taking place all over the country? What could be more giving than to run around and be abused and unloved? Right hon. and hon. Members should know all about that.

Unpaid members of sports clubs and volunteers provide the bedrock of competitive and recreational sport in the United Kingdom. In 1995 it was estimated that 1.5 million people freely gave of their time to help provide sporting opportunities. That volunteer investment is estimated to be worth £1.5 billion per annum.

The Government's sports strategy, "A Sporting Future for All", recognises that, and places heavy emphasis on the role of sports clubs in delivering a better sporting chance for future generations. It says that people need

> the amateur sports club with well trained adult volunteers to make sport and healthy exercise a life long habit.

[Mr. Andrew Reed]

It also rightly recognises that sports clubs offer the only chance of keeping young people participating in sports after they have left school or college. For many, including myself, they offer sport at a suitable level. I still compete week in, week out, albeit at a very low level. They are also the grounding base for our future elite athletes—although I fear that it is too late for me.

At present, many sports clubs are treated as businesses in terms of taxation and local authority rates. Although it is obvious that the richest football clubs have great wealth, we all know that the fact that there is big money in football—for example, the £1.1 billion deal for the television rights to the premiership—does not mean that every football club is rich. Indeed, some would argue that money is disappearing from the grass roots as fast as it comes in at the top. Because all sports clubs are treated in the same way, many are heavily penalised, and my Bill would make a difference

The Bill has received widespread support from the sporting community, including the Football Association, the England and Wales Cricket Board, the Rugby Football League, the Amateur Swimming Association, the Rugby Football Union, the Lawn Tennis Association, UK Athletics, Sport England and the Central Council of Physical Recreation, as well as many local clubs throughout the country, such as the Lincoln Canoe Club, the Heather Sparkenhoe Cricket Club, York District Sports Council and—an excellent example of a community and amateur sports club—the Liverpool Harriers and Athletic Club.

There will be increased rate bills for many sports clubs arising from the revaluation of properties this year. Most importantly, many sports clubs do not receive rate relief because many local authorities find it difficult to afford the 25 per cent. that is required after offsetting from the national non-domestic pool. Rate relief also varies too much between different parts of the country. Some local authorities are very good and give 100 per cent. rate relief despite only getting 75 per cent. back from central Government. The CCPR estimates that rate relief for sports clubs would cost the Treasury just £35 million per annum, which is not too high a price to pay.

It seems clear to me that a legally defined status for community and amateur sports clubs would clear up that sorry mess. As it stands, the law stops short of recognising the promotion of any particular sport as a charitable purpose per se. I understand that the issues are complex, and that there has been consultation about the status of community and amateur sports clubs following the test case of North Tawton rugby club in Devon in 1995. I know that the Charity Commission has been looking at the matter closely, and I hope that it can see the massive discrepancies caused by the current definition.

We are not asking a great deal—simply for clubs to be put on the same footing as arts organisations. My Bill would define the status of clubs that would qualify under the Recreational Charities Act 1958. The Government's social exclusion report, PAT 10, recognised the need for the charitable status route in the case study of community work carried out at Leyton Orient community sports programme.

Sport is most effective when delivered in partnership with local authorities, central Government and sports governing bodies and their member clubs. Sports clubs offer a focal point for local communities and are one of the key links in the chain of talent identification and development.

This short Bill would simply define the legal status of community and amateur sports clubs. Its scope is limited and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Andrew Reed, Mr. Gareth R. Thomas, Mr. Ian Pearson, Mr. David Drew, Mr. Andrew George, Mr. Alan Simpson, Miss Anne McIntosh, Mr. Bob Blizzard, Mr. Crispin Blunt, Mr. David Taylor, Mr. Bob Russell and Gillian Merron.

COMMUNITY AND AMATEUR SPORTS CLUBS (NATIONAL STANDARDS)

Mr. Andrew Reed accordingly presented a Bill to establish national standards for community and amateur sports clubs; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 21 July, and to be printed [Bill 146].

4.30 pm

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. We keep getting news that our English football team, and, unfortunately, our tug-of-war team are all losing. I seek your guidance, Madam Speaker, on how one can get a victory recorded in *Hansard*. As the president of the House of Commons sailing club, I am pleased to tell you that the House of Commons has just beaten the House of Lords, bringing the series equal at six all. We are looking forward to next year, when perhaps we can take the lead in that series as well.

Madam Speaker: I am delighted to be given that news, and to know that this House licks the other place in some things at least. On Monday night I was very disappointed when, yet again, we did not win the tug-of-war, so that news is very well received. Thank you.

Orders of the Day

Children (Leaving Care) Bill *[Lords]*

Order for Second Reading read.

4.31 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Three years ago, the Government published Sir William Utting's review of the safeguards for children living away from home, which revealed a dismal catalogue of failure. Many children who had been taken into care to offer them help and protection had been neither protected nor helped. Some had actually suffered harm at the hands of those supposed to help them. Others had just been badly let down. They had been moved from placement to placement, from school to school, and were then turned out to fend for themselves when they reached 16. We know that three quarters of looked-after children leave care with no qualifications of any kind. Many experience unemployment and homelessness.

These grim facts point to a failure of the whole system, for which we must all accept responsibility. However, the Government have a special responsibility to provide leadership, proper resources and clear direction in children's social services. We are now doing those three things.

Perhaps more importantly, we need radically to change the system so that we begin to develop the same ambition and aspiration for children being looked after that we all naturally want for our own children. Such cultural changes within any service will take time—everyone accepts that—but with this Bill, and with the new resources coming on line in quality protects, we have a golden opportunity to make this step change, which is so badly needed.

This will mean a major programme of change—a modernised service offering a clear framework for delivering the care, security, support and opportunities that children need. Whatever difficult and traumatic experiences they had before being taken into care, children who are looked after by local authorities are entitled to the same opportunities as all children. They are entitled to a good education, to the health care and other specialist services they need, and to consistent support, advice and practical help to guide them into adult life. This has not always been the case, but it must be so in the future.

Today we are concerned with young people in care. The risks that they face include unwanted parenthood, failure at school, failure to gain employable skills, and failure to find a job or somewhere to live. The Bill addresses all these issues, and forms part of a concerted effort to improve the life chances of looked-after children.

Quality protects is a key part of this effort to tackle the social exclusion of young people. Eighteen months ago, my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) launched the quality protects programme to modernise children's services and tackle the failure of the local authority care service with a £375 million investment in children's social services.

When my right hon. Friend launched the programme, he asked us to keep two questions in mind. Would this have been good enough for me when I was a child, and would this be good enough for my children? That is the approach that we have followed in developing quality protects. We need to understand that these children are not just someone else's problem—they are the children of our country, the children of us all. That approach also underpins the Bill.

The programme of reform that we have launched since 1997 is a major challenge to local authorities, the health service and the voluntary sector. It sets a series of new objectives for children's services, aimed at raising standards through the whole cycle of the "looked-after" regime. It includes ensuring that looked-after children gain maximum life chances from educational opportunities, health care and, of course, social care.

It will help to ensure that, by the time young people come to leave care, they already enjoy good prospects for their adult life. Through all of that, we want to ensure that young people leaving care are not isolated as they enter adulthood, and that they participate socially and economically as full citizens of our country.

Those are tough objectives, but we believe that they are achievable. Indeed they must be achieved if we are not to fail children in care once again.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): Recently, I held a conversation with a young person who spent a considerable amount of time in care as a child, and who expressed grave scepticism about the ability of local authorities to deliver on that ambitious and far-reaching programme. Can my hon. Friend reassure me on the Government's commitment to ensuring that local authorities do just that?

Mr. Hutton: I can certainly reassure my hon. Friend. Furthermore, I pay tribute to the work that he has done as a Member in drawing attention to those matters. We have taken on board the issue of monitoring the performance of local authorities; we have a new system of performance assessment for them. We also have new powers, under the Local Government Act 1999, to intervene—if necessary—when a social services department is failing.

The early signs of progress under quality protects are most encouraging. There is much more to do, as I am sure my hon. Friend and the whole House would accept. It is certainly true that no local authority will be able to opt out of the programme of change that we have developed. The challenge is being embraced with some enthusiasm by local government.

My hon. Friend and I and many others in this place have been concerned for some time about the support that care leavers receive from local authorities. There has been an increasing trend to discharge young people from care early. Every year, about 5,000 young people aged 16 and 17 leave care. The proportion of care leavers aged between 16 and 18 who left care at the age of 16 increased from 33 per cent. in 1993 to 46 per cent. in 1998. That is completely unacceptable. It is part of the disturbing pattern of too many children and young people leaving care without a single qualification and of too many being unemployed and homeless.

We are determined to reverse that trend. The Government believe that care leavers should be able to expect support from their parent—the local authority.

[Mr. Hutton]

I am pleased to see that services for care leavers are beginning to improve. The Bill will ensure that they improve for all eligible care leavers, right across the country.

In July last year, we published a consultation document entitled "Me, Survive Out There?", setting out all those issues and our proposals for dealing with them. We had a very good response. More than 160 organisations, authorities and individuals replied; more than 83 per cent. of the responses supported our proposals. We are most grateful to all those who replied. The Bill is the result of that consultation exercise.

We believe that local authorities' responsibilities towards young people in and leaving care should correspond more closely to those of responsible parents. That means providing support and assistance for children beyond the age of 16. That is why clauses 1 and 2 place new responsibilities on local authorities to assess and meet the care and support needs of children aged 16 and 17 who are in their care, or who have left care. Such support includes providing accommodation and maintenance as necessary for the child's welfare.

In future, the local authority that last looked after a child who has left care will be responsible for continuing support wherever that young person is living. That will clear up the unacceptable confusion about responsibility that often occurs at present.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): The Minister will recall that we recently corresponded about the care case of a child who is being looked after by grandparents. Often, grandparents step in to provide a stable background when parents are unable or unfit to look after their children. However, a problem arises if the grandparents want to adopt the child, to give it an even more stable background, because the local authority relinquishes any system of support for the child. Does the Bill contain any provisions that would overcome that problem?

Mr. Hutton: I am familiar with the issue raised by the hon. Gentleman through our correspondence. However, the measure is about children who are being looked after by local authorities. I am not entirely sure whether the case he described would fall within it. He asked about post-adoption support arrangements. The Bill contains no provision for such matters. The arrangements that we are discussing are for looked-after children—the children who remain within the parental responsibility of a local authority. The wider issue of the arrangements for adoption and any reform of those arrangements are with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. He is considering the report that he received last month, and announcements will be made in the usual course of events to deal with that issue.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the regulations that flow from clause 2 be subject to the negative procedure, which does not allow for debate, or to the affirmative procedure, which does?

Mr. Hutton: The regulations under clause 2 will be subject to the negative procedure. However, the arrangements in relation to clause 6 that affect benefit entitlement will be subject to the affirmative procedure. The hon. Gentleman huffs and puffs about the negative versus the affirmative procedure, but he often huffs and puffs. However, he should not be surprised by the regulatory arrangements that will be made under the Bill, because it uses the normal procedures. When the Bill affects a person's benefit entitlement, that will be a perfectly appropriate issue to come before the House under the affirmative resolution procedure.

It is wrong for the hon. Gentleman to suggest that the House will not have the opportunity to consider the proposals in the normal course of events; of course it will. I shall be very interested to learn whether he wishes to take part in debate in the Standing Committee about the regulations. We should look forward to his contribution, but I would be surprised to see him there. However, stranger things have happened.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): In answer to the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson), the Minister said that he thought he had sufficient powers to cope. However, in this mobile age, is he aware that social workers face increasing difficulties in keeping in touch with families and children? Do we have enough social workers to do that job?

Mr. Hutton: Social workers do an important job and it is the responsibility of Government to make sure that they have the right resources and can attend the right courses so that they obtain the educational and professional qualifications that will enable them to develop their skills as their careers progress. We are doing that. The Bill is specifically about looked-after children, and its arrangements will significantly improve the ability of local authorities to keep in contact with children who leave care. That is one of the most fundamental aspects of our proposals. We all accept that social work is not easy. Social workers do difficult jobs, sometimes in very difficult circumstances. We want to ensure that they have the support that they need.

Clauses 1 and 2 will place new responsibilities on local authorities. In future, the local authority that last looked after a child who has left care will be responsible for continuing support. Responsible local authorities will have a duty to keep in touch with the young people wherever they move to, an issue to which the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) alluded. That duty will apply beyond the age of 18, and at least until the age of 21. No longer will local authorities be able to forget their responsibilities to the young people who leave their care.

It is important that young people are helped to prepare and plan for their future to enable them to achieve their aspirations. That is why from their 16th birthday—or as soon as they become eligible under the new arrangements—young people in and leaving care will have a pathway plan. The plan will map out a clear pathway to independence and will cover education, training, career plans and the support to be provided by the local authority.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): My hon. Friend said that the Government should, as far as possible, reflect for children in care what parents want to do for their own children. Does he agree that we should be trying to reduce

the number of age limits in the Bill, because parents try to maintain their help and support for their children no matter what their age? Will he keep that aspect of the Bill under review?

Mr. Hutton: That is an intriguing question, but I am not sure how a Bill such as this could be constructed without any reference to age limits. That would be a difficult job.

We are trying to align more closely the responsibilities of good local authorities with the behaviour of responsible parents. There are key milestones in the life of a young person, and reaching the age of 18 is one of them because it is the age of majority. The Bill will allow a local authority to continue to support a young person beyond the age of 18. We are therefore giving local authorities important new responsibilities, which meet what my hon. Friend and I both accept is a need to ensure that these young people get the support that they require.

Does my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Ms Shipley) wish to intervene?

Ms Debra Shipley (Stourbridge): I was hovering; I thank my hon. Friend for anticipating my wish to intervene.

I welcome and applaud the Government's excellent and long-overdue initiative on pathways, and thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) for getting it going. Professionals in the front line in my Stourbridge constituency welcome the initiative, but have doubts about its resourcing. Machinery and pathways will be put in place and people will act as parents. However, parents not only give their children support and caring, but put a lot of money into their upbringing. Will my hon. Friend comment on that?

Mr. Hutton: My hon. Friend said that I anticipated her intervention; she has anticipated a matter that I wish to discuss in due course. Of course we will not ask local authorities to discharge new responsibilities if they are not properly resourced. We are not unreasonable. I am sure that my hon. Friend will understand that some decisions about resources connected with the Bill must wait for the spending review that will be announced later this summer. However, we will implement the Bill sensibly, if that is what my hon. Friend is concerned about. We certainly will not put local authorities in a position in which they have to discharge extensive new responsibilities without being provided with resources.

I was trying to set out some of the aspects to be covered by the pathway plan. We want young people themselves to be directly involved in drawing up their plan, along with other interested parties. The plan will be reviewed regularly to develop alongside the young person's changing circumstances and ambitions. The plan will continue in effect and be regularly reviewed until the young person reaches the age of at least 21; it will continue beyond that when the young person is in education or training.

We also intend to introduce a parallel duty to provide these young people with young persons' advisers. Many young people are unaware of the services available to them or how to access them. It is essential that, under the new arrangements, young people receive the support and assistance they need in a co-ordinated and accessible way. The young person's adviser will provide a single point of contact for the young person and will be easily contactable in times of crisis or whenever advice is needed. He will be able to put the young person in contact with other specialists, such as careers advisers. The adviser will be responsible for overseeing the pathway plan and ensuring that the young person receives the advice and support to which he is entitled. The adviser will be expected to fulfil the local authority's duty to keep in touch with young people who have left care.

The Bill also deals with support for young people aged 18 and over.

Ms Ann Coffey (Stockport): Before my hon. Friend leaves the subject of the young person's adviser, will he say something further about who that designated person might be? For example, does he envisage that the adviser will always be a local authority social worker, or will other people employed by the local authority or voluntary agencies be able to take on that role? As he will be aware, young people leaving care often have a lack of trust in the social work system.

Mr. Hutton: My hon. Friend is right. As she intimated, there is no reason to restrict who can act as a young person's adviser, and we do not intend to do so. There is no reason why the young person's adviser has to be a local authority social worker, and that will not always be the case. We intend to develop that in regulation-making powers under the Bill, which relates to a matter to which the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) alluded. There will be an opportunity for hon. Members and those outside to be consulted on that.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): The Minister mentioned possible regulations on young persons' advisers. Will he confirm that those regulations will specify the need for the adviser to be culturally and linguistically appropriate to the young person? In Wales, for example, Welsh-speaking advisers would be needed to advise Welsh-speaking young people. Certain areas of England would need minority language and ethnic minority language-speaking advisers to be available for young people. That is an important aspect of such advice services.

Mr. Hutton: I certainly accept the hon. Gentleman's concern in relation to Wales. Regulations made under this part of the Bill will be the responsibility of the National Assembly for Wales, not my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. I am sure that the National Assembly will want to ensure that any such regulations cover the points to which the hon. Gentleman has referred.

I have forgotten what point I had reached in my speech, but I do not suppose it makes a great deal of difference, so I shall continue.

We believe that young people continue to need help and support even after they leave care and legally become adults at 18. However, they must be supported as adults, in the adult world. The Bill provides that the responsible authority must continue to keep in touch with such a young person until he is at least 21, and must continue to provide him with a young person's adviser and a pathway plan.

The Bill also introduces a new set of duties to assist those young people. The responsible authority has a duty to provide general assistance, in cash or in kind, and

[Mr. Hutton]

assistance with the costs associated with employment, education and training until the young person reaches 21, so long as his welfare requires it. If he is in education or training, the responsible authority must assist, if necessary, until the end of the agreed programme of education or training, even if that takes the young person past the age of 21. If the young person is in higher education, the responsible authority must provide vacation accommodation, or the means to secure it, if necessary.

Since the pathway plan will continue to be revised and updated at least every six months to take account of the young person's changing needs and achievements, it is possible to envisage a case where someone coming late to education started his GCSEs at, say, 20, did well and was supported by the local authority through A-levels, a degree and even beyond.

It is important to be clear about what those new duties mean. This is not the same duty to accommodate and maintain which applies to the younger group of 16 and 17-year-old eligible and relevant children. There will be no changes to the benefits regime for those of 18 and over, and they will be expected to find the bulk of their funding through the same routes as anyone else. The new duties are, however, a significant advance on the present position, whereby those young people are able to fall back only on local authority powers, not duties, to assist them—powers that we know are not used as extensively or as consistently as we would like.

Mr. Dawson: Will my hon. Friend confirm that the new duties on local authorities will ensure that those young people for whom it is appropriate will be able to remain in foster care and residential care beyond the age of 18?

Mr. Hutton: Yes, I have no difficulty in giving my hon. Friend that assurance.

The Bill also extends authorities' powers to assist care leavers with education and training, which are both important. Currently, they can do so up to the age of 24 only if the young person starts the course before the age of 21. Clause 4 will get rid of that restriction, allowing local authorities to provide assistance whenever the young person starts the course. That provides a further safety net for young people aged 21 to 24 who fail to take up education options while the authority still has a duty to assist them. As I said, clause 4 also places a new duty on local authorities to assist such care leavers in higher education with vacation accommodation where it is needed.

All those new arrangements for young people in and leaving care will be underpinned by a new financial regime, the foundations of which will be laid by clause 6. We believe that one reason for the trend of children leaving care at 16 is the perverse financial incentive for local authorities to push them on to benefits and so on to the benefits budget. The new financial arrangements will remove that incentive and recognise that young people in and leaving care need proper support and guidance, and not just cash.

The funds from income support, housing benefit and jobseeker's allowance—to which those young people are entitled—will, therefore, be transferred to a new budget, to be allocated to local authorities to support those young people properly. The budget will be based on local authorities' existing spend on that group, drawing in additional resources from the children's social services special grant and making extra money available to ensure that local authorities are able to fulfil their new duties to this vulnerable group.

We want local authorities to act more like responsible parents towards the children in and leaving their care. We recognise that, at present, certain 16 and 17-year-olds, such as disabled children and lone parents, are eligible for income support even if they live at home with their parents, which acknowledges that they have special needs. The new financial arrangements will continue to recognise that those groups have special needs.

Ms Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): Many young people in Wales, particularly those from the Voices from Care group whom I have met, have expressed great concern about their transfer to the local authority from the benefits system. They are concerned that they might not have access to some of the services that they can use at present, such as crisis loans, and that the regulations that guide the benefits system will not apply. Can my hon. Friend reassure me on those points?

Mr. Hutton: I am very anxious to reassure my hon. Friend on those points. Young children leaving care will not be worse off under the proposed arrangements. There is every possibility that they will be better supported by local authorities. That aspect of our proposals drew strong support from children's organisations in the consultation exercise undertaken on "Me, Survive Out There?". They could see the benefit of it.

We are trying to make it easier for children to get the support that they need. The benefits system is a complex one through which to navigate a path and many young children leaving care do not get the support that they need from that system. We shall not reduce the amount of support for young children leaving care—far from it. We are looking at ways to increase the support that young people can enjoy in future.

The new financial arrangements will continue to recognise that those groups have special needs. Clause 6 contains provisions that will allow the Secretary of State to except certain groups from the new financial arrangements, and we intend to use that power to ensure that disabled children and lone parents keep their present entitlements to income support.

In combination with other related initiatives to help that age group, the Bill should mean that fewer young people will be discharged from care as soon as they reach their 16th birthday; more young people will stay in contact with the responsible authority and receive support for as long as they need it; more young people will live in suitable accommodation and maintain a stable tenancy; more young people will be in education, training and employment; and fewer young people will become socially excluded—that means fewer will be sleeping rough, in prison, dependent on benefits and living in poor and unsuitable conditions.

Young people of 16 and 17 will no longer be forced to rely on the benefits system for their support. The local authority will be under a duty to provide for them, whether they stay in care or not. To ensure that no one

loses out, we shall set minimum standards for support in statutory guidance. I hope that that will reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, North (Ms Morgan).

The new duties to assist care leavers until they are at least 21 are especially important for education and training. Young people coming through the care system are likely to have lost ground relative to their peers. We shall give them the chance to catch up and gain the qualifications that are so important to making a career in the modern world.

The Bill and the other initiatives that we are taking forward, including our strategies to tackle social exclusion, should ensure that young people in and leaving care get a fair deal at long last. For too long many young people have fallen into the trap of poverty, joblessness and homelessness after leaving care, because no one gave them the help they needed. The Bill will provide that helping hand and give care leavers a better opportunity to realise their true potential.

In legislating in this way, and by means of the other steps that we are taking, the Government are making two very clear statements. First, we will act to correct injustice and poor provision wherever we find it. We will put the interests of those young people who have been badly let down by the system first and foremost, and we will make the necessary investment now to secure their futures.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): I am glad that my hon. Friend is determined to take action, under the Bill and other measures, where standards fall below what is expected. Will the Government be assisted by the children's rights director or a children's rights commissioner in ensuring that they live up to their word on that?

Mr. Hutton: Yes, certainly the children's rights director will have a specific remit on the regulated services for which the National Care Standards Commission has responsibility, including children's homes and local authority adoption and fostering services. The children's rights director will have an important contribution to make in ratcheting up the standard of services.

Mr. Kidney: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for being so patient with me. Clearly, the children's rights director will be involved in children's homes under the new National Care Standards Commission, but what about all the other looked-after children who are not in children's homes? Will a director or a commissioner assist my hon. Friend in ensuring that the new entitlements are secured for those children?

Mr. Hutton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I said in response to his first intervention that the children's rights director clearly has a responsibility, especially in adoption and fostering services. I am sure that he will find—he knows about the subject—that many looked-after children are in foster placements, so the role of the children's rights director goes beyond regulated children's homes.

The Government's objective is to ensure that no looked-after child will go without help, that every child is included, that every child will have the chance to make the best of his or her life and that we will never allow another generation of looked-after children to be discarded in the way others have been.

The second clear statement that we are making is that we want to pursue those radical changes in partnership with all those who share our view that it is right and proper to put the needs of those who have been marginalised for too long centre stage in the programme of change.

The future holds out the prospect of further progress and opportunity in all those areas. Of course we have not yet done everything that needs to be done—a lot more needs to be done—but we have started a process that I believe can make a difference to the lives of some of the most damaged children and young people in our society. I am sure that the whole House wants to see that happen. I commend the Bill to the House.

5 pm

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I start by confirming for the record that there is a substantial degree of cross-party consensus in the House on the Bill, although it is perhaps not so clear that there is such a consensus in the Scottish Parliament. That is important in the context of the way that the Bill works, and I shall return to that point.

The Bill builds on the Children Act 1989, both in terms of the principles behind it and its very architecture. It responds directly to the recommendations and findings of Sir William Utting's review of safeguards for children living away from home, following the inquiry established by the previous Government. As the Minister explained, the Bill in its original form, as introduced in the House of Lords, sought to address the needs primarily of 16 and 17-year-olds either in or leaving care—that is, the needs of children. He described the perverse incentive in the present system for local authorities to shuffle children off their budgets and on to the social security budget, and the discontinuity in responsibility for the care of those who move away from their home local authority areas.

The Bill removes that perverse incentive, provides a series of duties to support 16 and 17-year-olds who are or have been in care and places the responsibility squarely on the local authority that last looked after those children. The Bill's objective, as the Minister described it, is to increase the number of 16 and 17-year-olds staying in care and to extend support to those who leave it. No one can argue with that objective. We have a moral responsibility to ensure equality of opportunity for children who grow up in care. We also have a pragmatic responsibility to address the issues that the Bill seeks to address: as the Minister also said, too many of those children and young people end up homeless or in trouble with the law, with their futures blighted by that poor start for the rest of their lives.

However, the Bill now goes further. As amended in the House of Lords, it extends the obligations of local authorities and, through that, extends the rights of adults who were formerly cared-for children, in some cases up to the age of 24. I shall say more about the implications of that later.

I say now, quite clearly and for the record, that this is a good Bill. It provides an extension of support for some of the most vulnerable children and extends that support to adulthood in ways that represent a sensible and largely cost-effective investment in young people leaving care, to try to secure their futures in the world beyond care. However, that does not mean that the Bill is perfect.

[Mr. Philip Hammond]

The Minister has spent the past 20 minutes or so detailing the purposes of the Bill and the positive benefits that it will bring. I found myself nodding for a great deal of that time. I shall not bore the House by repeating the arguments in favour of the Bill, but I shall outline the areas that we believe need further improvement—perhaps strengthening—or on which we need further assurances from the Government. Some areas are significant; others are more minor.

I hope that the Minister will take my remarks in the spirit in which I make them. They are intended to be a positive contribution to a constructive debate and are designed to make the Bill workable and robust. I can assure him that we shall engage constructively in Committee, with the aim of ensuring that the Bill that is reported back to the House will achieve the objectives that Members on both sides of the House share.

When the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), announced the measure in November 1998, he said that the principal objective was to ensure that local authorities' responsibilities for children up to the age of 18 and beyond corresponded more closely to those of a good parent. I confirmed then the Opposition's support for that concept and for the Government in the process of implementing the recommendations of the Utting report. I also confirmed our continued support for the Government in their efforts to ensure the safety of children living away from home and, for that reason, we supported the quality protects programme. I am happy to confirm again today our support for the broad thrust of the Government's programme for continuous improvement of children's services, so that we can work together to make steady advances. Within that broad support, however, we must reserve the right to probe the details where necessary.

I come now to some of the concerns that we have about the Bill. During its passage in the other place, important issues were raised about local authority obligations to those who are over 18—which is to say, adults—who have been in care but have now matured to adulthood. As the Minister recounted, local authorities have historically had powers in relation to people who were formerly in care, and the Bill as originally drafted would have strengthened those powers. However, on the basis of persuasive arguments advanced by my noble Friends and others in the other place, the Government agreed to amend the Bill to create obligations—as opposed to powers—for local authorities in respect of people between the ages of 18 and 21, and in some cases up to the age of 24 when those people are care leavers. By extension, those obligations create corresponding rights for those people.

As the Bill stands, local authorities have a duty to keep in touch with adult care leavers, wherever they are, and to re-establish contact with them if contact is lost, for whatever reason. The local authority will also have an obligation to appoint a young person's adviser and to maintain and review a pathway plan for all such people who were last cared for by that authority. I fully accept that for many young people that will be a welcome safety net, providing the reassurance that the family and the family home provides for millions of other, more fortunate, young people. It will be somewhere to turn to when things go wrong in their lives. It is also a significant step towards the Bill's goal of creating circumstances for care leavers that resemble, as closely as possible, those enjoyed by other young people. That is an entirely laudable objective.

However, we must remember that we are dealing with adults, and the obligation on the statutory services to maintain contact and to re-establish contact with those adults is—potentially—highly intrusive. Essentially, the local authority will be required to track the whereabouts of an adult care leaver, to monitor his life style, and to report and record what he is doing. At its most extreme, tracking people down and maintaining a pathway plan for them, once they are adults, could be sufficiently intrusive to risk falling foul of article 8 of the European convention on human rights.

Mr. Dawson *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Hammond: I see that the hon. Gentleman disagrees, but that is not intended to be a criticism of the fundamentals of the Bill. I remind him of the history. The Bill was originally drafted to deal with 16 and 17-year-olds and its scope has been extended, rightly, during its passage through the other place. However, that has introduced a complication, because what is acceptable in relation to a child, from an authority exercising a parental role, could—I emphasise that word—become oppressive in relation to an adult. Apart from the criminal justice system and the Mental Health Act 1983, I cannot think of any other significant areas that allow the statutory authorities to intervene in that way in the life of a competent adult. I stress again that the majority of care leavers will welcome the provisions as a safety net, but the duty to re-establish contact may be a step too far in some cases. The message to young people who have left care and moved on into adulthood must be that help and support is available if it is wanted, perhaps at the end of a telephone line. I am afraid that assertive outreach, if that is what is required in seeking to discharge the duty to re-establish contact, might be misguided, morally indefensible and potentially highly counter-productive for such care leavers.

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): The hon. Gentleman is making some interesting points; I have listened carefully to him. He used the term "competent adult". We will need to explore in Committee the issue that he is rightly raising. One concern that I have, not about the Bill but about the entire principle of how we follow through with young people leaving the care system, is that a number of young people—I know many from my work background—will never be able to cope without some assistance. The cut-off point is 24 years old—perhaps we need to make it 64; I do not know. The hon. Gentleman has touched on some important points, but the issue of competence must be explored in detail in Committee.

Mr. Hammond: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I look forward to exploring that issue with him in Committee. I do not claim to be an expert on all aspects of the subject, but I have racked my brains and cannot think of other examples of mentally competent adults, who have committed no offence, who have not fallen foul of the criminal justice system, being subject to such monitoring by statutory authorities.

The hon. Gentleman's point is that there will be some for whom the duty to re-establish contact will be clearly wrong and intrusive, and others for whom we will all feel that it is right. I suspect that the difficulty—we shall explore this in Committee—is definition. Unless there is some statutory procedure to define incompetence, which would render someone subject to continuous monitoring by the statutory authorities, the matter might be difficult to deal with.

Ms Shipley: The hon. Gentleman used the term "assertive outreach" and queried it. Would not a decent parent take exactly such a positive, assertive approach? A 22 or 23-year-old might well think that he is an adult and out on his own, but would not a parent say, "I want to help my child"? Surely that is what my hon. Friend the Minister is attempting to enact.

Mr. Hammond: The hon. Lady makes an interesting point. My own children are too young for me to claim any direct experience of the best way in which to deal with teenagers, but I was talking to a parent of late teenage children just last night who said that, if the child is determined to go their own way, the sensible parent very often stands back and waits for the call for help. I accept that that will not always be so, but we must recognise the significant difference between a regime that we can legitimately implement to look after children and one that seeks to track and monitor adults. I merely flag up the issue; it is not fundamentally fatal to the principles behind the Bill, but we will want to consider it in Committee.

I hope that the Minister agrees that, although a care leaver who is an adult should have access to such additional support, he must be respected as an adult and not stigmatised as merely an overgrown child. If the care leaver makes it clear that he does not want to be traced, contacted or planned for by somebody in a distant office, his wishes must be respected.

Mr. Frank Dobson (Holborn and St. Pancras): Does the hon. Gentleman therefore agree that, in fairness to the staff who might be involved, the House would need to acknowledge that the social worker and managers concerned would not be belaboured by officialdom or the newspapers if one such young person decided that they wanted to be excluded from the system and turned into a rent boy a year later?

Mr. Hammond: The right hon. Gentleman of course makes a good point. We will explore that in Committee. The idea that I had in the back of my mind was some exit procedure from the powers and responsibilities—but it should never be a permanent exit. I am sure that we would all want to assert that someone at the age of 19 who felt that he wanted to be left alone, that he was an adult and wanted to do his own thing—perhaps to go abroad—must always have the option of picking up the telephone, dialling the number and knowing that help was there when it was wanted. That is the way in which a responsible parent would respond.

The problem with the Bill as drafted is that it places a requirement on local authorities to use reasonable endeavours to re-establish contact with an adult care leaver. I understand that, under the quality protects programme, guidance to local authorities is that such contact should be made at least four times a year, at three-month intervals. I can envisage circumstances in which to be contacted every three months would be regarded as unnecessary and intrusive, for example, by an adult who had moved on from care, succeeded in putting that stage of his life behind him and was moving ahead in the world. I hope that the Committee will be able to explore that issue.

Mr. Dawson: I accept the tenor of the hon. Gentleman's remarks, but does he accept that he is in danger of creating a loophole that would enable the sort of local authority that, scandalously, encourages young people to leave care at 16, to renege on the responsibilities that the Government are trying to impose?

Mr. Hammond: Obviously, one does not want to create loopholes for irresponsible local authorities. A balance has to be struck, but I hold dear the rights and liberties of individual competent adults in our society, so I urge the House to think carefully about how we deal with people who, legally, are adults.

The second issue we must address is the balance between rights and responsibilities. By creating new and significant obligations for local authorities, we, by definition, create new rights for 16 and 17-year-olds who are in care or who are care leavers, and for young people aged 18 and over who have been in care. The hope is that many more will take advantage of the opportunity offered by that additional support to pursue further and higher education or training. Those who cannot or who choose not to do so will be supported and helped to find work. The object is to simulate as nearly as possible the support that a child could reasonably expect from his own family at that stage of his life.

Families are all different, but many—perhaps most, and certainly mine in my younger days—expect children and young people to acknowledge certain obligations in exchange for the support and maintenance they receive. Few of us will not remember being told at some point, "If you're not going to buck up your ideas, don't think you're going to lounge about for ever under my roof". So should it be for the children and young people covered by the Bill.

During the Bill's passage, I intend to seek assurances that it will be made clear—perhaps through regulations or directions issued by Ministers—that local authorities' support, for example, for continuing education must be matched by a commitment to learning by the child or young person, much as an averagely demanding parent would expect from his child. We should not expect local authorities, any more than parents, to continue to support a child in education if that support is abused—for example, by persistent truancy or disruptive behaviour in school or college.

Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): We were all young once. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that all young people make mistakes and that it important to allow care leavers to make those mistakes and have another go? We should not tell a young person, "You've got one chance and if you don't co-operate, you've

[Mr. Jonathan Shaw]

blown it." It is important that we give young people leaving care many different options and allow them to learn by their mistakes, like most young people do.

Mr. Hammond: I agree—no one would be minded to say, "One strike and you're out." However, let me develop my argument further, as it might answer the hon. Gentleman's points.

We must repeatedly ask ourselves what a child who was living with his family would reasonably expect from a parent in similar circumstances, and what the parent would reasonably expect of the child. In the case of a child covered by the Bill, the answer would seem to be compliance with the agreed pathway plan.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise a certain contradiction in his speech? He is saying that local authorities ought to have the same obligation as good parents. He was objecting to authorities having the power to monitor children and young adults, but now he is suggesting that authorities should have the power to compel. Care should not be conditional; it should be available.

Mr. Hammond: The hon. Gentleman has missed the essence of the point. The scope of the Bill was extended in the House of Lords, so we are dealing with two distinct groups: children under the age of 18, who are the legal responsibility of the local authority, which is their corporate parent, and adults over the age of 18, who may need support and assistance but who are legally adults, competent in their own right and entitled to be treated with the respect that that brings.

I am concerned that it is not clear from the Bill what remedies or sanctions will be available to a local authority, for example, to deal with a 16 or 17-year-old who persistently truants from school or college—who simply refuses to get on with learning—has his pathway plan changed so that he can go into training, refuses or fails to attend, has the plan changed again to say that he will be supported to find work, and fails to make appropriate efforts to do that. I hope that only a tiny minority would do so, but the local authority must have some sanction. No benefits will be payable under the system, so there is no question of those being withdrawn.

My understanding of the Bill is that the obligation on the local authority to maintain and support children in that age group is not subject to exclusions. I fear that that may send the wrong message to the minority of young people who do not want to play the game: the message that 16 or 17-year-olds who are minded to do so can reject education, training and work while the local authority retains the obligation to support them. If that is the case, it does not pass my test of what the reasonable parent would require of a child.

Ms Shipley: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman for the first time during the debate. It cannot be right to talk of sanctions and of withdrawing whatever from vulnerable young people. They have not had the best start in life and they have not had parental or family support. My hon. Friend the Minister wants to put in place a caring system, which will not give up on the young adult because he or she does not do as we would want. We are saying, "No, we'll keep in there with you. We will keep on and on and we will be there for you." As the hon. Gentleman said, he is probably talking about a very small number of young people. We can afford to support them over and over again. They are vulnerable and they have had a bad start in life.

Mr. Hammond: I hope that the hon. Lady is right and that it will only be a tiny minority, but I look forward to engaging in that debate with her if she is fortunate enough to be a member of the Standing Committee.

We will also want to seek the views of the people who will have to make the system work. There seems to be a parallel with the problems in schools. Everyone understands the desire not to exclude pupils and to try to include them for as long as possible, but doing so has consequences that have to be considered. I am thinking of the practical effect for those who are trying to make the system work.

Mr. Simon Thomas: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hammond: One last time, and then I must make progress.

Mr. Thomas: Will the hon. Gentleman take it from me that he is missing the trick? The pathway plan, which is agreed with the young person and his or her adviser, who is there to offer support, will introduce greater compulsion than exists at present. The Bill provides for more help, support and direction than is now on offer.

Mr. Hammond: The problem with the hon. Gentleman's analysis is that it is not clear to me—perhaps the Minister will make it clear when she winds up—what the sanction is, and how the system will deal with the child who persistently fails to stick to the agreed course of action in the pathway plan. That is the problem that I am identifying. I see it as a practical problem for the people who will have to make the system work. I hope that we can return to the matter in Committee.

The third aspect that I want to address relates to the engagement of voluntary organisations in the process. Many of the major organisations dealing with children and young people already have nationwide networks. They will often be in a far better position than any local authority can be to maintain contact in a mobile population, wherever individuals happen to be. They also carry less of a stigma than social services for the individuals concerned. The hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) alluded to the benefits of bringing voluntary organisations into the loop.

I want to make sure that the arrangements set out in the Bill allow local authorities to exploit to the full the potential of those voluntary organisations in discharging their duties under it. In my county, Surrey, working under the quality protects programme, there is already a multi-agency youth support service, including a leaving care team designed to deliver precisely what the Bill requires.

That service is provided by a voluntary organisation, which can reach and communicate with young people far more effectively than the social services department or

other statutory agencies could reasonably expect to achieve directly, and it does not have the stigma of statutory services attached to it. We want to ensure that such arrangements become the norm in delivering the services envisaged under the Bill or, at the very least, that they are properly considered as an option in determining a model of service delivery by an authority.

Mr. Hinchliffe: I look forward to the publication of the Conservative policy documents on children in care, to answer one or two concerns that I have. I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman's point about voluntary organisations, but I am concerned about the message that we send out. It started with Lady Thatcher. The Leader of the Opposition has mentioned the involvement of Church organisations—putting Church organisations in charge of children in care. I link that to the point made by the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), in the debate on care standards, that every child entering care should have an adoption plan. Whether the child is in care for 10 minutes or three days, he will have an adoption plan. The alternatives posed by the Conservative party seems to be that a child is either adopted or placed with the Christian Brothers—

Mr. Dawson: And sent to Australia.

Mr. Hinchliffe:—and sent to Australia, as my hon. Friend says. I should welcome further explanation. Does the Conservative party intend to produce a document that fits all the parts of its policy together, so that we can fully understand it?

Mr. Hammond: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that before he has to make the difficult decision of how to cast his vote at the next general election, he will have the benefit of the Conservative party's manifesto, which will include our proposals for children's services.

It is slightly disingenuous of the hon. Gentleman to misquote my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) on the subject of adoption. The hon. Gentleman knows very well what my hon. Friend meant. He was not referring to children in care for very brief periods; he was talking about children in long-term care and the desirability—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman can quote the words from the *Official Report*, but he knows as well as I and everyone in the Chamber what my hon. Friend was referring to. He was simply expressing the view that for children in long-term care, the objective should be adoption, wherever possible. I believe that the hon. Gentleman would not disagree with that view.

I shall deal now with local authority finance. I know that the Minister would be disappointed if I did not mention the financial aspects. The Minister told us that money spent in various ways, including benefits, on 16 and 17-year-old care leavers is to be re-branded in a ring-fenced special grant to local authorities. The Government made it clear in the House of Lords that the extension of assistance to over-18s that is provided for in the Bill would require new money, and that no commitment to bring that section of the Bill into force could be given until the outcome of the comprehensive spending review is known.

The cost impact on different local authorities will vary. The rules specifying which authority is responsible, as clarified by the Bill, will presumably lessen the burden on authorities in London and other magnet areas. We need to know from the Minister whether the funding will be made available on a reimbursement or a per capita basis for each category of child or young person on a local authority's books, as it were.

Given the pressure that many local authority social services departments are under, especially in the south-east, it is vital that funding meets the costs and does not provide any perverse incentives. We understand that funding arrangements will not be part of the Bill, but I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure us that, perhaps before it is considered in Committee, she will be able to make available draft proposals on the calculation of the sums that are to be paid, even if not on the amounts. Without that information it will be difficult, if not impossible, to receive a full and informed response from local authorities about the practical effect of the Bill.

Ms Shipley: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hammond: I would like to move on. I have been speaking for quite a long time already.

I shall take up the implications of the devolution settlement. The measure is what I am calling a new hybrid Bill—it involves both reserved and devolved matters. There may be consensus in this place on the Bill, but apparently that is not so in the Scottish Parliament. The sticking point there appears to be the withdrawal of access to benefits for 16 and 17-year-old care leavers. The Scottish National party has recently tabled an amendment to a Government motion that is supportive of legislation similar to the Bill. It ends by calling upon the Executive to delay any moves to introduce such legislation pending the results of its recently commissioned research into the effectiveness of provision.

Reading between the lines, that is an intention to try to slow down the introduction of similar legislation in the Scottish Parliament. It is possible that there may be a less smooth ride in Scotland, where the parliamentary arithmetic is less favourable to the Government.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): The hon. Gentleman has raised an extremely important point. Will he distinguish between the position of one political party which is not part of the coalition which is in government, and the position of the Executive in Scotland, which broadly takes the same view as the Government, but agrees that dialogue should continue between this place and the Scottish Parliament?

Mr. Hammond: Surprise, surprise, the coalition Executive takes the same view as the Westminster Government. The objection to which I am referring is an opposition objection in the Scottish Parliament. Whereas the Bill can expect a smooth ride through this place, with support from both sides of the House, it is not clear that similar legislation will enjoy a smooth ride with cross-party consensus in Scotland.

The Government's amendments in the other place—

Mr. Clarke: Does the hon. Gentleman not see the parallel between parents giving children the right to pursue their adult lives once they have been given that

[Mr. Clarke]

opportunity, and this Parliament, having devolved power to another Parliament, allowing it to exercise the very powers that we gave it?

Mr. Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is right. I am not qualified to say whether the Bill is the first measure that we have dealt with since the devolution settlement that contains both clauses that are the subject of devolved responsibility and clauses that are reserved matters. In this instance, clause 6 deals with the withdrawal of social security benefits.

There are complications in implementing such legislation. The Government who answer to this place can control, so long as they have a working parliamentary majority, the implementation of clauses 1 to 5, 7 and 8, but they cannot so directly control the implementation of clause 6 in Scotland. The Government's amendments in another place to clause 8 clearly envisage that legislation mirroring the non-reserved parts of the Bill may not be in place in Scotland when the Bill comes into effect in England.

The Government's proposed response is to delay implementation of clause 6, which removes the right to benefits for 16 and 17-year-olds, until Scottish legislation placing similar obligations on local authorities to those that the Bill seeks to impose on local authorities in England is in place. That shows a flaw in the devolution arrangement. Where non-reserved and reserved matters interact and the Scottish Parliament is disinclined simply to mimic English legislation within a time scale that fits the Government's purpose, there will be a gap.

In this instance, there is potentially a real danger. If clause 6 is not implemented in Scotland at a time when the rest of the Bill is in force in England and Wales, benefits will continue to be available in Scotland to 16 and 17-year-old care leavers after they are withdrawn in England. That will make Scotland precisely the magnet for young people who want to access cash benefits that London and other areas have been under the present arrangements. If local authorities are, as the Minister has told us, actively encouraging 16 and 17-year-olds to leave care and put themselves on to the social security budget, there must be a danger, depending on the financing arrangements for local authorities, that there will be an incentive during the interim period to encourage 16 and 17-year-olds to go north.

It is clear that there is no intention behind the Bill to encourage young people to migrate from the area where they have been looked after. Indeed, the intention is precisely the opposite. It is also not the intention to give an incentive to local authorities to push them out. However, the difficulties in relation to Scotland may undermine the Government's intentions and create in Edinburgh and Glasgow the magnets that we have seen in London. The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) may have read the Bill more closely than I and may be able to correct me, but it seems from my reading of it that young people may be able to have it both ways, with their local authority in England retaining a statutory duty to support them even when they move away, while being able to claim cash benefits in Scotland.

The inevitable conclusion is that there is a case for delaying implementation of the Bill until that can be done on a United Kingdom basis, to avoid unintended consequences. The ideal situation from the point of view of the Bill, if not from that of the devolution settlement, would be the Government prevailing upon the Scottish Executive to introduce the necessary legislation, reflecting the English legislation, within the same timetable. Otherwise, the Bill may not work as well as we all hope.

I have outlined our principal concerns. I hope that Labour Members will treat them as constructive contributions to the debate and as issues that can be thrashed out and resolved in Committee. If I am wrong on any of these concerns, I shall be the first to admit that. However, I think that they all require further investigation. Some of them are more serious than others, but none of them is fatal to the Bill or to any of its underlying objectives. They can all be accommodated within the Bill's structures, either by amendment or by ministerial clarifications and the use of regulations or guidance.

I re-emphasise that we support what the Government are doing with the quality protects programme. We support the Bill and we shall continue to support the cross-party consensus on building progressively on the Children Act 1989, to strengthen and broaden the protection that it offers to vulnerable children and young people wherever they may be.

5.39 pm

Mr. Frank Dobson (Holborn and St. Pancras): I wholeheartedly welcome the Bill, in part because it keeps promises that I made on behalf of the Government. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on the huge amount of work that he has done in fleshing out those original promises, and also on the speed with which he gathered up the topic when it was handed on to him by our right hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng) who initiated a great deal of the work, for which he did not receive as much credit as he should have done, and for which I received more credit than I deserved.

More importantly, I welcome the Bill because it is a major step towards ending what can only be described as Britain's abject failure to look after children in care. A great deal of attention was paid to the problem of molesting children in care, and rightly so, but, until recently, little attention has been paid to the general failure to provide decent care for young people who were in care.

Children in care form less than 1 per cent. of the child population, but 38 per cent. of young people in prison and 30 per cent. of young people who are homeless have been in care. It is also worth bearing in mind that, unless my memory is playing tricks on me, they are usually two to three years less mature than other children of their age, a matter which is relevant to the points made by the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) in relation to competent adults. Generally speaking, their mental development, their maturity, is a long way behind that of other young people of the same age, and we should bear that in mind.

We must remember that children and young people in care have been designated by officialdom on our behalf as needing care and protection. In many cases, it is clear that they have received neither. That was not just the fault of social services or individual care staff. We were all responsible for those failures—care staff, social services

managers, councils and councillors. Police, lawyers, courts and schools did not do their job properly. Voluntary organisations, including religious organisations, did not do their job properly. Neighbours did not give sufficient attention to what was happening. The news media did not give the matter sufficient attention, and nor did Government Departments. There was an abject failure on behalf of the Government's social services inspectorate. This Parliament did not give the matter enough attention. Ministers did not give it enough attention, and the previous Labour Opposition did not give the matter the attention that it deserved. There were some honourable exceptions in those categories, but not many, and the time has come to put things right.

The quality protects programme, launched in 1998, which relates to all children's services, is making a start. The introduction of the National Care Standards Commission will be a step forward, and the Bill, which deals particularly with preparing people for leaving care, delaying them leaving care and providing them with more help, and more concerted and thought-out help, after they have left care, will also be a huge step forward.

Almost half of all the children in care leave care in the year that they are 16. After that, the statutory duties on local authorities are too feeble to think about. They bring to mind the old saying that they offer every assistance short of actual help. Councils have the power to provide help, but they have no duty to do so after the age of 16. That legislative shortcoming, combined with the benefit rules, have provided a huge incentive for officialdom to encourage young people to leave care. That is wrong, as I think that we all accept, and the Bill changes all that.

Throughout the development of the policy, as my hon. Friend the Minister was kind enough to say, I always said that the basic questions should be, "Would this have been good enough for me when I was a child? Would this be good enough for my children now?" We have an obligation to provide for children in care nothing less than we would want to provide for our own children.

The Bill basically proposes two major changes. Children will be looked after until they are 18 rather than 16, and, all being well, that age limit will be raised later to 21. I shall come to that. It also specifies that a person—not a machine, a council or a department, but a person—will be responsible for helping these young people to plan their lives, and then for helping them to carry out that plan, initially when they are in care, and then after they have left care. The Bill tries to make society, as corporate parents, do what might be described as what normal parents do. We should aim to provide what John Betjeman once felicitously referred to as

> the love that in a family dwells.

It is difficult for officialdom to do that, but that is what we must try to achieve.

We asked officials to prepare a paper spelling out what ordinary families do or try to do, not necessarily continuously, but intermittently, for their own children between the ages of 16 and 21. The main thing is to provide a home to live in, or return to. Then there is the shoulder to cry on, the encouragement to do a bit more work at school or college, the morale-boosting chat before going to an interview, the consolation afterwards if the interview goes wrong, or the celebration if it goes right. Young people want someone to provide a lift when they want to go somewhere, a meal, or, when they are a bit older, someone to take them for a drink, someone to get the washing done, someone to touch for a tenner when they are skint, someone to keep an eye on them, someone who cares about them.

The intention is that, as a result of the Bill, and as a result of a lot of hard work by a dedicated staff, young people leaving care will have someone who knows and cares for and helps them, and they will both know what obligations one has to the other. That is what the Bill tries to provide. That is why it is so welcome. These changes in the law are necessary and they are long overdue.

Mr. Hammond: The right hon. Gentleman read out a list of parents' functions, which he used in the November 1998 statement, which I have here. Is it his understanding that the young persons' advisers to be appointed under the Bill will be able to carry out all those functions?

Mr. Dobson: I was spelling out what a normal family, if there is such a thing, and a normal home, tries to provide for its children. In so far as officialdom can attempt to do what a family does, we should try to enable the person who is designated as being responsible for a young person to do all those things, or to arrange all those things, in so far as that is possible. No doubt, others can think of other things. They are not just the more obvious things; it is the casual help, the feeling that there is some base to go back to, that there is someone there who cares and who will do a bit of thinking on the young person's behalf and try to help him or her. That is what most families try to do.

If that is to be done, additional resources will certainly be needed. There was some argument in the House of Lords, where the Bill was considerably improved, about the Government's intention to ring-fence the funding. It was argued that to ring-fence the funding for children leaving care would fetter the discretion of local authorities. Until local authorities can demonstrate a rather better record than they have had up to now, we should fetter their discretion. Some of them have exercised their discretion by actively encouraging young people to leave care. I may fall out with some of my friends in local government for saying that, but that is not as important as trying to ensure that some of the most deprived young people in the country are properly looked after in future. Apart from the additional resources, all the people responsible will have to make a new commitment.

As the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge said, the quality protects programme is already creating some improvements. I shall give one or two examples. In Blackpool, there is a significant increase in the number of people approaching their 18th birthday who are staying in care; in Thurrock, there is a fourfold increase in the number of young people who receive support after leaving care; In Tameside, 96 per cent. of young people who were born in 1980-81 and for whom the local authority is responsible have what it regards as appropriate accommodation. Matters were much worse in the past. All those developments should be encouraged.

We must make sure that policy developments in other spheres are not harmful to young people in care. I urge those—I believe that that includes Conservative Members—who say that all schools should be able to choose their pupils and decide their admissions policies to pause and ponder whether children in care are likely to

[Mr. Dobson]

be among the chosen. If the answer is no, the policy of schools choosing the pupils cannot be reconciled with a commitment to looking after young people in care.

We must consider when the age limit will change not only from 16 to 18 but to 21. The average young person leaves home at the age of 22. It cannot therefore be right to tell young people in care, "You're on your own" when they are 18, any more than it is right to say that when they are 16. I welcome the fact that the Government have said that raising the age limit is not a question of "if" but "when". Freed as I am from the limitations of Cabinet responsibilities, I can say that I believe that the limit should be increased from 16 to 21 now.

I wish the Minister success in his negotiations in the comprehensive spending review, and I emphasise to my former Cabinet colleagues that, for all practical purposes, the decision on the age limit must be made now or never. If the money to increase it from 18 to 21 cannot be found in the forthcoming comprehensive spending review, when do they seriously believe that it will be found?

I urge the Government to find the money now for three reasons. First, it is right and just to do that. Secondly, it will benefit enormously many of the most deprived young people. The third reason should appeal to the Treasury: it will be a good bargain because it will reduce the huge number of young care leavers who go to jail, where they contribute nothing to society and cost us a fortune; sums that are vastly in excess of the cost of providing proper care up to the age of 21.

The Bill is a good measure. It was improved in the House of Lords, where it was welcomed by all parties. The thoughtful contribution from the Conservative Front Bench suggests that it may be improved again in the House of Commons. The sooner it becomes law, the better. I commend the measure with a quotation, which I discovered recently, from someone who is not usually associated with child care. Queen Elizabeth I, who had a rather chequered childhood, said:

> We are more bound to them that bringeth us up well than to our parents.

We should bear that in mind.

5.54 pm

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): It is a privilege to follow the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson). I am glad that, with the help of some of my noble Friends and others, the Government have listened and accepted the right hon. Gentleman's original premise, which he presented so clearly to the Select Committee on Health and in his statement to the House two years ago.

We welcome the Bill, which is long overdue. It rightly places a duty of care on local authorities for those children who are in their charge and have no one else to look after them. I am worried that it also appears to grant local authorities powers that are beyond those of normal parents. I shall revert to that later.

It is right for the Bill to define eligible children, but I want to ensure that the definition is not too tightly drawn. Families break down most frequently not only when children and young people become more difficult, but when child abuse is at its most rife. Young people may have to leave home and go into care when they are 15 or 16. They would not have enough time in the care system to qualify under the new system. We should not forget that many young people have to leave home at 16 or 17 because they have no option. They would not be helped by the Bill, but would have to rely on an inadequate benefits system.

Earlier contributions about the local authorities' duty to keep in touch were interesting. On the one hand, we are told that a postcard at Christmas is inadequate; on the other hand, we are told that there should be a report every three months. I get on extremely well with my sons, but if I insisted on the postcard at Christmas, I would have been disappointed sometimes. Young people have a right to decide whether they want to participate in the process.

The job of the adviser to some young people will be difficult and require dedication. I do not want to appear to be my usual, optimistic, starry-eyed Liberal Democrat self: I know what the real world is like. It can be extremely miserable for parents, children, social workers and their charges. The personal adviser role is key to the proposals. It is insidious of the Government to suggest that they can simply amalgamate current budgets and find the expert, caring, flexible super-parents that the Bill requires to make it work properly. Much training and thought will have to be expended to make that aspect of the Bill work.

If trust is not established between the adviser and the young person, the measure will not work. It will become a control mechanism whereby young people can be told, "You turn up for your giro or your housing benefit or we won't look after you." I know that the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras did not intend that. Parents do not care conditionally; they have a duty of care whether they like the sods or not. It is important not to lose sight of that, and to bear in mind that young people are not always compliant.

I want to consider briefly benefit withdrawal. When things are working well—we hope that the measure will work extremely well—everyone will benefit from a young person's receipt of practical help in their day-to-day life. That help could be through a foster placement or in a young person's own home, or with going to school, to a job or to a college. When the measure is working well, normal access to the benefits system should be withdrawn.

That is absolutely right, but I can envisage circumstances in which children and young people feel so alienated from their parents that they would not accept help from them even if it were offered. The same picture could emerge—rarely, one hopes—with a young person and a local authority. I would not want that young person's relationship with the authority, which may be important at a later stage, to be influenced by an insistence that the only means of access to the ordinary benefits system is through becoming pregnant. That seems to be the only means in the Bill of preventing the withdrawal of benefits.

Young women sometimes become pregnant because they want to start a family and have dependants of their own as a way of demonstrating their independence from parental control. I do not believe that they have babies in order to jump the housing queue—that is a myth. To have babies to demonstrate one's independence is unhealthy, but our benefits system has encouraged it. That is probably one of the reasons why we have such a high rate

of teenage pregnancies and of teenagers who remain lone parents. I urge the Government to reconsider the automatic exclusion from the benefits system for those people who come within the remit of the Bill.

Most of the anxieties arising from the Bill were demonstrated in the thoughtful contribution of the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond). As anticipated, his slant on the command and control structure was slightly different from the Government's. We have a view that the Government have too much of a tendency to want to control the money passing down rather than to allow the recipient to make the decisions, whereas the hon. Gentleman seemed to think that care should be to some degree conditional—or certainly that the goodies should be conditional.

Stopping people's pocket money is okay if that money is on the fringes of what they need, but if we are talking about having enough to be housed and clothed and to get to school or a place of work, one cannot make that conditional on good behaviour and fitting in with what is required. I hope that the Bill will be amended in such a way that it will work and be a tremendous success, but it can work only if the young people themselves sign up to all the wonderful care pathways and pathway plans that are set out. I can tell hon. Members from my experience that if we try to impose a pathway plan, we will have lost before we have started.

We welcome the Bill, which is a first stage in looking after young people's needs. Parallel work must be done on the inheritance from the previous Government of the way in which young people are treated by the benefits system. It is ridiculous to expect young people to be dependent on their parents if the parents do not want to accept that dependency. We all see the misery arising from the differential way in which housing benefit is applied to young people. I hope that the Government will take that on board when considering a small but significant vulnerable group of children and extend it to the wider group of those who may be as much at risk as those who have gone through the care system.

It is right that the Government have accepted that we, collectively, have a parental responsibility for those children whose parents, for whatever reason, do not accept that responsibility, but it is not right for them to discharge their duty purely through local government. They retain a responsibility through the centrally administered benefits system, to ensure that there are no holes in the laudable measure that they are introducing to allow everyone to have an opportunity in life and to avoid failure setting in at such an early age that people have no way of improving themselves and making a positive contribution to society.

6.6 pm

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): We have had an excellent debate. The contributions so far have without exception been very constructive, and important points have been made. It is a pity that not one Conservative Back Bencher was present to hear what the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) had to say, as he made some very relevant points.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): I was here.

Mr. Hinchliffe: The hon. Gentleman is a Front Bencher.

I welcome the consensus that has developed around the measure. The most recent similar consensus that I recall was around the Children Act 1989. In a recent debate on the Care Standards Bill, my right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke) referred to the fact that several of us had served in Committee on the Bill that became that Act. We recognised that it was a landmark measure and we all tried to ensure that we put on the statute book the best possible solution to some of the problems that we faced.

One or two of us thought then that we needed to go further on the issue of leaving care. We tabled amendments on the subject, which were rejected. I recall my very good friend Joan Lestor speaking passionately and at length on the subject.

I thank the Government for finding time for this measure. I know that it is difficult to fit such measures into the timetable, and I pay tribute to the Secretary of State and his ministerial team—and a special tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson). I know how passionately he feels about these issues, and his contribution today evidenced the anger that he feels about the way in which we have maltreated so many youngsters over many years. As he says, we are all responsible. I join him in paying tribute to the Minister of State, Home Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), who made a detailed contribution to the development of the Bill.

I also want to mention one or two people whom I have known for a long time who have campaigned long and hard—indeed, in some instances, they have devoted their lives—to bring about a measure of this nature. Way back in the 1970s I met Professor Mike Stein of York university, who has specialised in this area. He argued long and hard 30 years ago for steps such as those that we are taking in the Bill. I pay a sincere tribute to his work.

I must not forget my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson). It says a lot when someone from Yorkshire pays tribute to someone from Lancaster. It shows how much I admire the work that he has done since entering Parliament. He has dedicated himself to fighting on this issue, and has brought together many children and young people behind his efforts.

I also pay tribute to the campaigning work that young people who have been through the care system have done over many years to get a better deal. In the Select Committee on Health I had the great privilege of listening to witnesses who we thought might not perform but who outperformed even former Secretaries of State in terms of their confidence and their ability to argue their corner. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) was present at that sitting, and I know that he would share my view.

I speak with some feeling, because I worked with children in care for many years. I can get quite emotional about what I saw of some of the youngsters with whom I had dealings who left the care system in circumstances that were far from desirable.

I have continued contact with some of those young people, some of whom have done very well in life. A couple of years ago, I was moved to be visited at my surgery by a lad whom I had thought was one of my failures. He came to tell me that he had got a job as a charge nurse or psychiatric nurse in the community,

[Mr. Hinchliffe]

and was doing extremely well. He had achieved something in life, which I never thought that he would do. We should never lose sight of the fact that very many youngsters from the care system do well. Despite the problems that are put in their way, often by us, many of them come through.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras said, however, the clear pattern for far too many males is to move from care into the prison system. I think that about 25 per cent. of all prisoners have been in care, and that—as my right hon. Friend said—about 38 per cent. of young prisoners come from the care system. I also agree with his point on costs. If we are arguing in the comprehensive spending review for more resources, for goodness' sake, let us make the point that giving youngsters a decent start in life helps to avoid the huge costs and other impacts created when they spend time in prison. It is a way of making long-term savings.

Too often, females go from care to prostitution. I have terrible experience of that fact. One of the Yorkshire Ripper's victims was a young lady whom I knew when she was in care. She left care in the usual way, went into prostitution and was murdered by Peter Sutcliffe. I will not forget that as long as I live.

Frequently, when travelling between Leeds and Wakefield, I pass the part of Leeds where prostitutes assemble at night. Sadly, far too often I see faces that I knew many years before, when I worked in the care system. I feel deeply that we need to do something about young people moving from care into prostitution.

Since the passage of the Children Act 1989, report after report has said that we have to take action about young people leaving care. The Utting report has already been mentioned in detail today. We have also had the Waterhouse report on the situation in Wales. I was proud to be able to take part in the Health Committee's inquiry into looking after children, which was the first major inquiry of this Parliament. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Audrey Wise)—who has not been well recently, although I am pleased to hear that she is doing better now—for her part in that. No one devoted more energy than she did to the inquiry and to addressing the issue, and I give her full credit for it.

In our inquiry, the Committee considered the priority given to children's issues by successive Governments. One fact that we established was that successive Governments—I blame not only the present Government but the previous one as well—have failed to fulfil a key requirement of the 1989 Act, which was to present to Parliament an annual report on the Act's operation. Perhaps that fact indicates that we should give a bit more thought to what we do for children and young people. It is worrying that requirements in legislation passed by the House can simply slip off the agenda.

I believe that we have to ensure that the Bill provides a vigorous independent voice, locally and nationally, for children in care. I welcome the concept of a personal adviser for children. In our report, the Health Committee picked up the concept of an advocate for children and young people in the care system.

Nevertheless, I suspect that I am speaking on behalf of many of my hon. Friends who are in the Chamber when I urge the Government to look again at the role of the children's rights commissioner. The commissioner's role will have to go wider than dealing only with children in the care system. So many agencies are involved in the issue that that proposal simply cannot deal with it. We have to listen to the arguments—which I accepted many years ago—for a children's rights commissioner. I have seen the concept work in many other countries, and I believe that a commissioner could do a huge job for vulnerable children and young people in the United Kingdom.

I have one or two other concerns. My hon. Friend the Minister raised the issue of resources. Although I understand the Government's position on the comprehensive spending review, the entire history of United Kingdom social legislation is one of good intentions backed by entirely inadequate resources. We have to learn the lessons of the many Bills that have been passed by the House and been widely welcomed, but for which there has been no money for implementation. I realise that colleagues from local government will hold up their hands in horror and say, "We agree with that, but where will the money come from?" The Government will have to address the resourcing issue.

I shall also nit-pick on one small matter—some of the terminology used in the Bill. I hope that in Committee, Ministers and their team will examine some of the archaic terminology, such as "eligible children", "relevant children" and "former relevant children"—that is, children over 18 who were previously relevant or eligible. Some of the terminology is Sir Humphrey-style gibberish at its best, and was probably dreamed up at Richmond house by the same Department of Health official who came up with the official distinction between "community care" and "care in the community", which continues to baffle me—and most of those who end up in community care.

I hope that that matter will be examined in Committee, because the point underpinning the legislation is that all children should be relevant. The words "relevant" and "irrelevant" are nonsense and should perhaps be replaced in Committee. I am sure that we will be able to do that.

I seek further assurances about the development of a national strategy to investigate the reasons why children come into care. I genuinely appreciate the action that the Government are taking with various measures to deal with poverty and unemployment. I have always been concerned, however, about the fact that such initiatives are not always knitted together, and are occasionally completely contradictory.

Specifically, what are we doing to deal with the perpetuation of physical and sexual abuse over the generations? So many of the sexually abused children with whom I have worked had parents who themselves were sexually abused. We have to examine how we can break that cycle, and we have not yet got a grip on the issue.

I want the Bill, and all legislation affecting children in care, to help to prepare children for life outside the care system as soon as they enter it. We should prepare children for leaving care from the word go. Of course I am not talking about preparing babies to leave, but we have to ensure that our system is geared to enabling young people to leave the care system prepared and competent to deal with life, just as we should hope that our own children are able to deal with life.

The education system has caused me great concern, and I echo the comments on schooling made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras. In our inquiry, the Health Committee picked up on concerns about the way in which the education system rejects kids who come from the care system. My right hon. Friend was bang on in his comments about league tables and choice, which lead us to reject youngsters.

It is often easiest for schools to leave out those children. In some respects it is helpful to schools if those children do not attend, because the schools do not believe that they will be achievers. Often, social services are not unduly worried about youngsters missing school, so long as they are not in trouble. We have to address that crucial issue and tie it in with broader thinking on the implications of league tables and competition between schools.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown), who is not in the Chamber, asked about age limits. That issue was also touched on by the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond). I not only listened carefully to his speech but intervened in it, because the issue of competence has to be well and truly addressed in Committee. The point that he and I were trying to make is that so many youngsters will never survive without help.

Through my wife, I am involved in an organisation based in Leeds, called Caring for Life. It takes children from across west Yorkshire who have been in the care system and takes care of them for life—just as its name says. Against the background of struggling to raise money, it looks after some very vulnerable young people and older people. We have to understand that some youngsters will never cope independently, but do not fit easily into the other care categories—such as those involving mental health—for which provision is made.

I mentioned the Conservative policy of placing children with religious organisations. I seriously hope that Conservative Members will seriously consider the United Kingdom's experience with such a policy, which was not particularly good. One or two of the Conservative Members who served on the Health Committee will give the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge the reasons, chapter and verse, why some of us have reservations about returning to the Christian Brothers as the basis for our care system.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will take note of the fact that the Bill talks about care leavers. Some of us have had dealings with care leavers who were victims and went through the child migration scheme that the United Kingdom operated until 1967. Some of those people are now my age, and others are in their 80s or 90s. Children were sent to Australia, New Zealand, Zimbabwe, Canada and elsewhere. Thousands are still alive, and still suffering.

In the context of the wider debate about people who have left care, I hope that the Government will look again at the funding arrangements for the Child Migrant Trust. That organisation is struggling to cope with the demands of people who are still trying to get into contact with their natural mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters.

The trust bid for £800,000 a year, but received only £130,000. That is more than it used to get, but it is nowhere near adequate to meet the demands placed on it. A trust representative told me today that cases remain unallocated, and that even when parents' whereabouts are known, those now elderly people are dying before they can be linked up with their children. That is unacceptable.

I hope that the Government will look at the travel fund for child migrants, which was worth £1 million over three years when it was established. That total has been eaten up rapidly by the demands placed on it. This is a matter of humanity, and the Government's response to the Health Committee report was constructive, so I feel able to ask for a bit more money to be given to the trust. It would make a huge difference.

Australia week takes place in early July, and the Australian Prime Minister and his entire Cabinet will be in this country. Might not that be an appropriate time to suggest that people in Australia could play a bigger part than hitherto in addressing a scandal that stemmed from the policies of both Governments?

I shall conclude my limited observations by congratulating the Government on the introduction of the Bill. One or two points need to be sorted out in Committee, but it addresses the needs of a group of people who have been left behind far too often. The Bill will offer youngsters a future, and I welcome it very warmly.

6.22 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): I, too, broadly welcome the Bill. The Utting report was published after there had been a catalogue of disasters over the past few years. The Select Committee on Health, on which I am privileged to serve, looked into the case of children looked after. It is fair to say that Governments of all political persuasions have done less than they should have done to safeguard the future of the children who became their responsibility.

About 5,000 people aged 16 or 17 leave care every year. The proportion leaving at 16 has risen from 33 per cent. to 43 per cent. More than 75 per cent. have no academic qualifications, and more than 50 per cent. are unemployed after they leave. Moreover, 17 per cent. of girls leaving care are pregnant. Among prisoners, 23 per cent. of adult inmates have left care, as have 38 per cent. of young prisoners. In addition, 30 per cent. of young single homeless people have left care.

In many ways, British Governments have been penny wise, pound foolish with regard to children leaving care. The cost to society—of prison, and of the catalogue of disasters and horrors that the statistics show befall people leaving care—is very great. It is clear that society as a whole would benefit if we could respond to the problems a little earlier. Moreover, it should be borne in mind that the statistics that I quoted apply to about 1 per cent. of the total in that age group. That is a horrific and frightening thought.

I welcome many of the measures in the Bill, which will at least start to improve matters. When the Health Committee inquired into this matter, we found that most youngsters leaving a home at 16 are not encouraged to go back. When they leave, the posters come down, the bed goes, and that is it. Yet most of us who leave our parents' homes know that we can always go back, and we often do so. When we have to make choices or decisions in our lives, we know that our parents will always provide a home, a bed and a square meal. In contrast, many children leave care and then get lost.

Broadly speaking, the approach adopted in the Bill is the right one. The Health Committee wanted 21 to be the key age. I agree with most of the comments made in the

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debate so far, and I hope that the Government will use 21 as the key age. That would make much more sense, given the current economic background and the comprehensive spending review.

Many of the Bill's proposals are sensible, such as the duty to keep in touch. Although people who do not want to be found will not be found, the proposal at least means that local authorities will have to pay attention to where people go when they leave care, and to what happens to them afterwards. If pathway plans are to be introduced, there will be a great need for more information about the welfare and progress of children who have left care.

My hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) made a good point about sanctions in connection with pathway plans. However, the most important thing is that the Bill provides some sort of measure by which to judge a person's progress. If that information is regularly reviewed, it will be possible to judge people's aims and prospects, and pathway plans will be useful.

Personal advisers are another important element in the Bill. The question of whether they should be trained has been raised, but the most important thing is that they should be trusted. All hon. Members know that people who work for local authorities, or social services professionals, would not necessarily be the best people to have as advisers, and that they would not always be able to inspire trust. That is a key issue. When the Health Committee investigated the question of children looked after, we found that having someone who can act as an advocate—just as a parent would—is of critical importance to children.

The Bill moves matters on by providing for vocational support, assistance with employment, and education and training support, all of which are important. People who leave their parental home expect their parents to pay attention to what they do, and to offer help and support. The Government cannot be a substitute for that, but it is better for them to intervene in this way than to leave children to their own devices. The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) recounted some of the horror stories about what young people have suffered because no one is especially concerned about them once the state's responsibilities for them are over.

Clause 6 deals with removal of benefit, and Save the Children has pointed that one of the most important lessons for people leaving care concerns the management of money. We must be careful about removing benefit from young people, as it is important to allow them to have responsibility for some money so that they can make choices about their lives.

As I said, I broadly welcome the Bill. Many of the details, such as the problem with definitions mentioned by the hon. Member for Wakefield, will have to be considered in Committee. Improvements can be made, but this is a good start. I pay tribute to the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), as much progress has been made in a matter to which hon. Members of all parties pay a lot of attention.

We must value our young, or the consequences of the statistics that I gave earlier will be pretty dramatic. I am pleased to have been able to participate in the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge described a difficulty with what might be called the Scottish problem. So long as that can be ironed out, the Bill will immeasurably improve the prospects of young people leaving care. If we can achieve that in the lifetime of this Parliament, we will have done a good job.

6.29 pm

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): I am grateful that the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) concluded on what he called the Scottish problem, which is a major issue in today's debate. The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) did the House a great service by raising it in the way that he did, and I shall return to what he said later in my speech.

I welcome the Bill. It is an excellent Bill and it follows logically on the unfinished business of the Children Act 1989 and the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), not only for the tremendous comradeship that he offered in 1989 when we both served on the Standing Committee considering the Children Act, but for saving me the trouble of rehearsing some of the major points that are relevant to tonight's debate. I welcome what he said about the late Joan Lestor, who would certainly have welcomed everything that we are saying and the progressive tone of our discussions. I also recall what my hon. Friend had to say in 1989, and his recollections tonight reminded me of the tremendous impact that was made on that Committee by the young people whose problems we were debating, even though at the time—and perhaps later—we still did not reach a firm conclusion.

I am not at all surprised that Barnardos and Barnardos Scotland have provided excellent briefings. Some of my thinking in this short speech tonight has been influenced by them, particularly in respect of the Scottish issue.

Those of us involved in the passage of the 1989 and 1995 Acts will remember the dreadful stories that we heard. Times have not changed very much. We heard harrowing stories about what actually happened to many young people leaving care. I remember being appalled when we heard that they were told, "You can't get a job unless you've got a house and you can't get a house unless you've got a job." We heard about the great poverty that affects older children leaving care.

I remember too—and I am sure that things have not changed very much since 1989 or 1995—young people telling us that every Monday morning they would queue outside Marks and Spencer and Tesco in order to obtain food that was past its sell-by date. That seemed an extraordinary way of addressing young people at that vital and vulnerable age.

I am glad that the Bill seeks to address many of those problems. It presents practical solutions which, when they are followed through, as I have no doubt they will be, will help to solve problems that have not been properly addressed until now. The pathway plans that are on offer are absolutely excellent, but there is a major change; and here I come to the speech by the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge, which I praised earlier. He dealt with an issue that was raised in another place in respect of devolution, and I agree that it still has not been resolved. However, I can offer some hope to the hon. Gentleman and to the House.

The hon. Gentleman addressed, in passing, the debate that is taking place in Scotland. The Bill clearly deals with the DSS aspects of the problem, whereas the Scottish Parliament deals with the local authority aspects, and the Westminster Parliament deals with both in respect of England. If the hon. Gentleman accepts that, as we have decided on devolution, the hybrid aspects of the Bill should be dealt with by the Scottish Parliament, I encourage him to believe, as I do, that at the end of the day the Scottish Parliament will reach the right decision. I am encouraged by the dialogue that I understand is taking place between Ministers in this Parliament and those in the Scottish Executive.

I realise what the problems are. The hon. Gentleman may not have known it, but he touched on an important constitutional issue—which is the reason why I and a majority of Scottish Members take the view that social security, among other matters, should remain a matter for the United Kingdom Parliament. If that were not so, the prospect of the abuses that the hon. Gentleman envisaged in his speech would be wide open. We cannot have young people who may not have access to social security in England going from Carlisle to Dumfries to get it there. I accept unreservedly, as the Bill does, that we should try to prevent that from happening.

Looking at the more positive aspects of the Bill and what is planned thereafter, one can see that the commitment to a pathway plan for young people leaving care is splendid. Although I do not want to dwell on Scotland, let me for a few moments confirm my optimistic outlook by quoting just a few brief comments from the document issued by the Scottish Executive. The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge will recall that I pointed out in an intervention that his concerns seemed to be about the views of the Scottish National party, which does not have a majority in the Scottish Parliament. It is arguing its case, but I do not believe that it will carry the day. I believe that the views of the Scottish Executive will carry the day, and those views are consistent with our arguments today.

Mr. Hammond: I accept the point that the right hon. Gentleman is making, which is that the Scottish National party does not have a majority in the Scottish Parliament; but does he accept that there is a flaw in the devolution settlement, if legislation like this being workable depends upon the same party being able to command control in both the Scottish Parliament and the Westminster Parliament?

Mr. Clarke: No. I am trying desperately hard to please the hon. Gentleman, but I do not agree that there is a flaw in what we have done in respect of devolution. To return to what he said about children leaving home or leaving care, there comes a point when one cannot instruct them to do as one would like them to do, but almost inevitably they end up taking the right decision anyway. I confidently believe that the Scottish Parliament will do the same, in terms of the powers that we have given it. Again, I seek to reassure the hon. Gentleman. Let me quote what the Scottish Executive said about the responsibilities that we have given them:

> The most efficient and effective method would appear to be a transfer of resources from DSS to local authorities, thus enhancing the resources already available to them to carry out their duties under the 1995 Act.

That was a firm statement. They also said:

> The Scottish Executive proposed that young people requiring throughcare and aftercare should receive support in a co-ordinated way from local authorities in line with the principles of the 1995 Act.

That reflected the 1989 Act in respect of the United Kingdom. They continued:

> This parallels proposals for England and Wales. Dependent on the results of consultation, the aim would be to introduce the relevant changes to primary UK legislation at the earliest opportunity.

They continued in bold type:

> Scottish Ministers are therefore seeking views on the proposal that the mixture of current spending on local authority aftercare, support services and DSS benefits should be drawn together in a single fund which would be used by local authorities to provide support and assistance to 16 to 18 year olds requiring throughcare and aftercare.

I am particularly confident on that point.

Let me return to the main thrust of the Bill in so far as it applies to the United Kingdom. I welcome the proposals that are being made, particularly on the pathway plans. A minority argue that we really ought to leave things as they are and let young people spend their benefits as they wish. Set against that, the experience that has been gained, not least the overwhelming reaction of the voluntary bodies that responded to the Government and the Scottish Executive by fully supporting the direction of the proposals, shows that there is a problem here. The hon. Member for Poole gave the figures: 75 per cent. of children leaving care have no qualifications; 50 per cent. of them are unemployed; and 38 per cent. of young prisoners have come from care. Given that situation, the pathway plans are long overdue and it is right that we should move in that direction.

I want to turn briefly to an important issue. Encouraging local authorities to appoint advisers and seeing that through is welcome, but I think that we should be more positive about their role. Let me give an example. I worry tremendously about children leaving care having access to higher education. Whereas I was able to obtain the statistics that I just gave fairly easily, and I imagine the hon. Member for Poole was too, I could find no figures, not even from our excellent Library, relating to young people leaving care and entering higher education. I assume, therefore, from the anecdotal evidence, that very few do. That is unacceptable. We must challenge such a state of affairs, and encourage the advisers to take the same view.

I should like to turn to the impact of the Bill on disabled children. Even now, many disabled children leave home. There are no advisers or advocates, and often there is no involvement in any decision that affects the future of disabled children. I hope that that will be put right, and I think that the Bill offers an opportunity to do it, particularly in the areas of education and employment.

The most acute area is probably that of children with learning difficulties. They, above all, are in need of the kind of advice, the kind of pathway plan, that the Bill seeks to achieve elsewhere. If the Minister is of a mind to embrace the priority that I seek to promote, I would greatly welcome her remarks.

The wider issue of financial support has already been touched on by other right hon. and hon. Members. I can imagine local authorities in each constituent part of the

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United Kingdom saying, "We like Parliament's proposals, but once again we are being given responsibilities without the necessary resources." I would not expect my hon. Friend the Minister to comment on that, but given that the comprehensive spending review is now being considered, I offer her the support that I think she and her Department want. I am sure that the House wants this measure to work, and I am sure that that is also true of another place, but to achieve that, resources are crucial. The Treasury must take that on board.

These provisions are inspiring as well as practical. When the legislation is in place, there should be proper training. The advisers should be properly trained and have the opportunity to bring themselves up to date from time to time with the demands and challenges of the society in which they work. After all, we will be asking a great deal of them.

The Bill seeks to help these young people achieve genuine fulfilment, given that in the past they have not exactly been up front in their achievements in employment, education, housing, leisure and recreation and higher education. Many of these young people have been in the House today and earlier this week, and they are right to tell Parliament that they are here and their problems are here. If they can be positive about their problems, the least we can do is be positive about their future, and I think that the Bill achieves that.

6.44 pm

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): I warmly welcome the principles behind the Bill. Plaid Cymru, the party of Wales, hopes that the Bill will reach the statute book and be operational in Wales in quickly as possible. With a few amendments that I hope will be made in Committee, the Bill will provide a huge advance in the way in which our society looks after young people.

The Bill places a duty on local authorities to assess and meet young people's needs. It is done in a jargonistic way, as the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) remarked. What is important is that young people are part of the planning process for their future, however. They will have advisers with whom they will be able to build relationships and trust. Although that is not the same as the family support that we would all wish every child to have, it is a significant improvement on the present haphazard services, where postcodes are a factor and services differ according to county.

I particularly welcome the amendments made to the Bill in the House of Lords. The extension of eligibility to 21, and to 24 for education and training, is an important amendment, and I hope that it will progress with full Government support.

Ensuring that children leaving care can participate fully in society goes a long way to tackling social exclusion. I support the Government's intentions in that respect. However, we have a huge task ahead of us. It is partly about funding, but also about how to deliver these services at the right level. I would like to illustrate the task ahead by briefly outlining the work done in my constituency by a voluntary organisation that works with children leaving care, and the difficulties that it encounters in the present regime. I shall outline some of the improvements in the Bill that I hope will help that voluntary organisation, as well as my local authority, in delivering better support services.

Hope for Young People Everywhere—HYPE—has been going for just two years. It deals with 80 young people a week in the small, rural town of Aberystwyth alone. Eighty young people a week come through HYPE's doors, looking for assistance. They are mostly local school children, students and unemployed care leavers. Many are either on their way into foster care or on their way out of foster care, as the volunteers put it. Many have extreme difficulties and have been excluded from school in the recent past.

The benefits system presents a great many problems. Many of the young people seen by HYPE do not know their rights, and are at a loss as to where to go. They have support from other young people in the town—there is an informal family arrangement among many young people who support themselves. They often have difficulty accessing the benefits that are available to them. In that regard, the provisions rejigging the benefits system for 16 and 17-year-olds could be a significant step forward. The onus will not be on young people to find out what benefits and support they are eligible for and to try to fight through the system. Instead, the Bill puts the onus on the local authority to ensure the right delivery of services and support to young people.

Care leavers are let down by the present system of crisis loans, which is discretionary, and the lack of support in the housing benefit system for young people, which leads in particular to many care leavers living in poor accommodation.

HYPE identifies the problem as authorities not taking full responsibility for children leaving care. Nor are the guidelines that are already in place being fully followed. With all the improvements in the Bill, it has to include a warning to local authorities and the other partners that they must follow correctly the procedures and guidelines laid down and fulfil their responsibilities.

Having said that I welcome the Bill, I should like to pose a few questions on parts of it that may need looking at again. The withdrawal of benefit support for young people aged 16 and 17 could prove a significant step forward. However, at present it is difficult to see how that will occur unless we establish the right national standards of support for those young people. I do not want an ad hoc system to evolve whereby local authorities use that method of support in different ways for their children and young people leaving care.

Incidentally, I think that we should use the term "young people"; it is confusing that the Bill refers to children and young people. We are talking about young people, although I accept that the Government may have included the word "children" so as to have regard to the Children Acts.

In Wales, where the National Assembly will have full discretion over the regulations that result from the Bill, I hope that we shall introduce national standards. I also hope that the Assembly will receive that package of ring-fenced money provided by the amalgamation of the various support arrangements—revenue support grants, housing benefit, income support and so on—so that we can deliver a national standard for Wales to ensure that young people are fully cared for at the relevant time. I assume that similar measures will be adopted in England.

A real problem in my rural constituency is the dumping there—I cannot use a less strong word—of care leavers from other areas. Local authorities wash their hands of

difficult children in care—especially those in foster care. They use private foster care arrangements to farm out children—literally so, in my rural area—so that the children are far enough away from their own local authority area to be no longer a problem or a concern.

The problem under the arrangements is that, when such children leave care, they cease to be the responsibility of the authority that put them, say, in Ceredigion and become the responsibility of Ceredigion. The Bill will produce an improvement, because the authority that was first responsible for the child will continue that support. However, I have a question about the pathway plans and the arrangements for personal advisers. How can we ensure the delivery of such services over long distances? We need to consider how that will be achieved.

Mr. Shaw: I agree with the point that the hon. Gentleman makes about young people and children being placed with private foster agencies outside their local authority area. Such agencies are not regulated at present. Does he agree that it will be crucial for the National Care Standards Commission to regulate them? It is most important that the practice to which he referred be stopped.

Mr. Thomas: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. In Wales, we hope to appoint a commissioner with overall responsibility for standards. I hope that the commissioner would be able to achieve even more—to ensure that the standards wanted both by the hon. Gentleman and by me are met. If that occurs, I am sure that people in England will want to learn from and follow our example.

I understand that the Government intend the pathway plans to be drawn up with full consultation and in partnership with the young person; they should be worked out jointly between the adviser and the young person. The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) raised the spectre of young people failing to follow, or disrupting, their plans. There may be a handful of such cases, but we do not need to consider such possibilities under the Bill; they are practical matters to be dealt with on the ground. If young people are properly involved in the pathway process, they will want to achieve the goals in their plan. They will own the plan. That is an essential aspect of the improvements.

It is important that the pathway plan can be changed according to circumstances. I feel strongly that the financial constraints on an authority should not be a guiding consideration in the contents of the plan. Advisers should be as independent of local authorities as possible. I agree with many of the comments about the need for voluntary organisations to be heavily involved in the process. Many young people might be reluctant to discuss their future directly with local authority staff. We must accept that reality, even if we do not think it right. The voluntary sector thus has a large part to play.

I hope that the Government will consider the problem of accommodation for care leavers. They might need to introduce further measures in future. In many areas, including mine, people leave foster care and go straight into bed-and-breakfast accommodation that has never been inspected by the individual nominally responsible for the young person. No doubt that will change.

There is a huge strain on the system at present. Will accommodation be considered under the standards for young people leaving care? In another place, at another time, and as the remit of another Minister, will the Government deal with the poor standard of HMOs—houses in multiple occupation? There is little regulation of such dwellings, where so many foster care leavers end up.

Mr. Dawson: The hon. Gentleman draws attention to a serious problem. Local authorities have substantial resources and access to housing resources. Does he agree that a crucial part of the corporate parenting role of local authorities is to ensure that, when young people leave care, they can have local authority accommodation, or can be given priority by the local authority in securing housing association accommodation?

Mr. Thomas: I do not want to follow that point too far, as I may be out of order. I certainly agree with the main points made by the hon. Gentleman. There is a lack of accommodation specifically for young people leaving care. There is certainly a shortage in my area, although I am pleased that the county council put supported accommodation for such young people at the top of its strategy for this year. That policy is being pursued with the help of a local housing association. Despite such examples of good practice, we need legislation—especially on HMOs.

I want to touch on some of the aspects of the delivery of the provisions in rural localities. The adviser must have the right skills, training and knowledge to deliver the service in a particular area. Advisers need the right cultural, linguistic or gender background. In a rural area, they need to be able to travel so that they can be close at hand. Although we may choose to move away from our own parents, we would probably all agree that the personal adviser needs to be nearby. In the Welsh context, the advisers should be able to speak Welsh and English. I am sure that other languages would be needed in areas throughout England so as to provide the best services to young people.

We need to consider the possibilities for the use of the leaving care grant in rural areas. The grant will be governed by national standards, but I should like to it to be used for driving lessons for young people leaving care. The driving licence should also be paid for. For example, under the new deal, there are payments for driving lessons but not for the provisional licence. That would be nonsense for many young people. We need to ensure that they receive the necessary support in order to find a job.

There are difficulties with rent bonds. My local authority set up a rent bond project last month. It is most welcome. Only 20 rent bonds are available for the year. I understand that social services have bought several of them for young people leaving care, but given that about 80 people a week use a drop-in service, 20 bonds for the whole county is quite low. We should consider how the leaving care grant and other resources might provide assistance.

The Bill could be improved. Under clause 4, local authorities will be allowed to give educational assistance to young people aged up to 24. The point has been made by Voices from Care and Children in Wales that the provision needs to be re-examined to determine whether local authorities should be under an obligation to provide assistance. If we follow the good parent principle, we expect any parent who can afford it to provide educational assistance to their children, even though that

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may be of a tapering nature. There is no doubt that local education authorities need to have that responsibility placed on them, and I hope that we shall explore that issue in Committee.

I want to conclude by saying a few words on resources, and particularly on resources as they affect Wales. I have the official civil service briefing to the Health and Social Services Committee of the Welsh Assembly; it was produced on 8 December last year, when the Bill was discussed during the consultation process, and it clearly states:

> It is therefore the responsibility of the Department of Health to ensure that resources are made available to cover any additional costs that result from the requirement to introduce Young Person's Advisers in Wales.

Whatever the other benefits of the devolution settlement in Wales, the Barnett formula does not deliver sufficient funds to accommodate extra expenditure if they are not forthcoming from the Department.

If many young people are able to realise their potential, to have successful careers, to leave care, to participate fully in society and to go to college or university to gain skills, they will be less likely to be socially excluded, less likely to need state support and less likely to end up in prison. Young people want to lead independent and successful lives. The Bill, if amended, will save the Government considerable sums compared with the long-term resources that would be needed to pick up the pieces of a failed system.

7.2 pm

Ms Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate. The provisions in the Bill should ensure that we never again hear the shameful statistics that we have heard from many Members today. However, it is worth repeating them because it is important to realise how children and young people in care have suffered. Many of them end up homeless, and the vast majority do not obtain any educational qualifications. Many of them have to cope in the wider world long before they are ready to do so.

Like many other Members, I have worked with young people and I remember with shame the way in which many of them were left to cope with circumstances that were far from ideal. I welcome the Bill as a tremendous step forward in addressing their needs. The Bill gives us the opportunity to protect care leavers and to help them fulfil their potential, which far too often they were not able to do in the past.

I was very pleased that, at an early stage in the Bill's development, I was able to arrange for a group of young people from Wales to come to this place to discuss their concerns directly with Welsh Members of Parliament and with others. I pay tribute to those young people and to the Voices from Care group for the tremendous work that they have done on the Bill and other legislation. The Bill will be successful only if it takes on board and reflects the views of the young people who have been involved in the process. I also pay tribute to Children in Wales, which has worked hard to influence the process and to join the groups that have been organised by my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson).

I also want to convey some of the views that people from Wales have expressed to me so that they can inform the Bill as it proceeds through the House. They greatly welcome the Bill as a huge step forward, but there are ways they would like to see it improved. I shall go through some of those points later.

I warmly welcome the Government's promise to extend aftercare services for care leavers up to the age of 21, and to 24 for those in full-time education. There is clear evidence of the need for that. I am thinking of a young man who came to see me recently in my surgery in Cardiff. He had no family contacts and left care at the age of 16. He left school with no qualifications and had difficulties with literacy after a disrupted education, having been moved from place to place. He experienced problems in retaining work, and was moved to a bed-sitting room in another town out of his home area.

The young man was advised how to claim benefits, but he has faced endless difficulties since that time. There was no plan to prepare him for independence, no funding to help him catch up on his education and no on-going contact with a social worker to help him establish himself. Four years later, he still faces tremendous difficulties and, to our shame, we could tell a similar tale about many young people who have left care. I welcome the Government's promises to raise the age limit, and support my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) when he says that that should be done immediately.

I also wish to comment on the pathway plans. The Bill rightly includes the requirement for all care leavers to have a personal education plan. That will help young people to move towards independence. However, young people in Wales have expressed concerns to me that there is no explicit duty to fund the pathway plans. I welcome the reassurance that my hon. Friend the Minister gave earlier, but I would like to hear more about that.

Young people fear that a way forward could be agreed on how to provide them with basic literacy services but that there would be no funding for it. I want to ensure that all the aspirations that are set out in the personal education plans, which are an excellent idea, are achievable by young people and that they will not be an empty concept with nothing to back them up. There should be a duty on local authorities to fund the pathway plans and they should have the money to ensure that that is done.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), I shall refer to the terminology used. One of the issues that has been drawn to my attention is that clause 1 states that the

> local authority shall . . . prepare a pathway plan for him.

We are talking about teenagers, and I suggest that all parents would acknowledge that teenagers prefer to have something planned with them rather than for them. Could not the terminology be changed to make it more attractive to young people so that they feel that the plans are made jointly by them and the adviser working with them? Language is important, so it would be useful if that particular provision could be changed.

There should be a duty to support education and training for care leavers for courses commenced before the age of 24 years, and it would be ideal if the provision covered those aged 24 as well. Earlier, we heard an exchange on whether we should introduce any age limits at all. It was suggested that such limits did not apply to children who live at home with their parents, but I understand that, practically, we must have them. Therefore, would it not be possible to extend the provision to those aged 24?

Evidence from young people and Voices from Care has shown—this is commonly accepted—that many care leavers take time to resolve the other priorities in their lives and to catch up on their education before they are able to plan for a higher education course. A small-scale study in Wales found that children in care are more likely than their contemporaries to be at least one academic year behind at school. As has already been said this afternoon, 75 per cent. of care leavers finish school without educational qualifications and need time to progress their basic qualifications before being able to go on to higher education.

Mr. Simon Thomas: Does the hon. Lady recall the briefing that she organised in this House at which Voices from Care suggested that the obligation should continue until the age of 30 because of the need to sort out young people's priorities before starting education? The Minister may blanch at that figure, but a statutory duty until the age of 24 would be a reasonable compromise.

Ms Morgan: I accept that. At the briefing, young people were asking for the age to be set much higher than it is in the Bill. We should make the duty continue until the care leaver reaches the age of 24 as a small step towards meeting those wishes.

It is clear that care leavers are not moving through the education system in step with their contemporaries. I am sure that we all accept that that is not a matter of ability but a result of the system that they have been in. We must go out of our way to enable them to develop their skills later than young people who have not been through the care system.

There are clear reasons why we should ensure that local authorities have a duty to support care leavers up to and including the age of 24. That is important, as experience shows that local authorities do not have a good track record in this field. For 50 years, local authorities have had discretionary powers to give aftercare and support for care leavers' education, as provided for in the Children Acts 1948 and 1989. They have not used that power, so I have doubts about discretionary powers in this field. One local authority in Wales, for example, currently has 200 care leavers, but has no budget to finance education and training for them.

Care leavers and representatives from Voices from Care say that they have not even been told by local authorities that they may be able to receive assistance to pursue their education. They had no idea that they could receive discretionary assistance—that seems to be a common problem among local authorities in Wales. It is therefore not surprising that so few young people leaving care go on to higher education. That is a disgraceful situation which must change, and the Bill gives us an opportunity to change it.

Not getting any training and education has severe consequences for young people, but there is clear evidence that we can do something about that. In research done in Wales, Professor Sonia Jackson studied care leavers with good academic qualifications and found that those who had qualifications ranging from a minimum of 5 GCSEs to degrees all ended up with secure careers and housing. The education system offered them opportunities to achieve and take part in the mainstream of society. However, only one member of the control group of approximately 100 care leavers without any educational qualifications had secure work and housing. That is a gloomy statistic. Education and assistance with education seem to be the key to helping those young people move ahead. We should help people not only in the short term but in the long term.

I said earlier that young people in Wales were sending a strong message that they did not wish benefits to be transferred to local authorities. They assure me that their consultations show that that feeling is shared by all young people in Wales. I accept the intention behind the proposal to transfer benefits from the Department of Social Security to local authorities. However, young people have told me forcefully that they feel that they are being treated differently from other young people who are not able to live at home. I accept that it can be argued that we are trying to make local authority provision more like a real home for care leavers, but I want to put it on the record that young people fear that a transfer may result in their losing out on additional benefits from the DSS, even though, as has been said, such benefits are a maze and difficult to get.

Many young people in care do not have a good relationship with the local authority and feel that they have often been let down by social workers. Lots of them do not have social workers who have worked with them for a long time. I am not attacking social workers, as that is not their fault, but perhaps the system is not properly resourced. Young people are sceptical of the local authority and are anxious about the transfer of benefits from the DSS to local government. Is it possible to have further consultation with young people on the issue, as we need to reassure them that they will not lose out and that there will be a better and easier system?

The National Assembly for Wales will be responsible for the distribution of benefits to local authorities in Wales. The Bill specifies that money going to the local authorities will be ring-fenced, and we want that for Wales, although how it is done will be up to the National Assembly. If the money is not ring-fenced, I would have a grave fear that some of it would be lost in local authority budgets.

Finally, I want to take the opportunity to publicise the need for all further and higher education colleges and institutions to recognise positively the particular needs of care leavers. Ground-breaking work done in this field by Howard Firth at Hampshire county council in partnership with local universities and colleges has led to passports to education, which are positive routes for care leavers to help them into further and higher education. That involves work before the young person goes to college, exploratory visits, support and other assistance which helps to make higher education more accessible. It is leading to real results and achievements, which can be an inspiration to others.

All the research evidence shows that care leavers are under-represented in further and higher education. Their parents have in effect been local authorities, and more must be done by colleges and universities to ensure that an appropriate number of young people from care enter further and higher education.

In summary, I am aware that some of my proposals would add to the resources needed for the Bill. However, it is important to recognise that if we provide the money now, we shall not have to provide it later. Whatever we

[Ms Morgan]

do, we must change the situation whereby young people end up in an expensive prison system or homeless on the streets, which involves a great cost to the individuals concerned.

7.19 pm

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West): For the first time in this Parliament, I truly welcome a Government Bill, although I hope that I do not come to regret that. I am not going soft, but I feel that I should give credit where it is due. I congratulate the Government on a Bill which, in every sense, is a measure of common sense. As with all such debates, it seems that there is little to say because all hon. Members have said that they agree with the measure. The few points that we want to make will be best made in Committee. Having said that, I should still like to put on record a few thoughts.

The Action on Aftercare Consortium comprises of Barnardos, Centrepoint, Childline, the National Children's Bureau, Action for Children, the National Foster Care Association, First Key, Save the Children, the Children's Society and Voice for the Child in Care, all of which support the Bill. Many of us have great contact with them in our constituencies. Perhaps the Government needed no encouragement because they have acted on the Utting report, but those organisations must take some of the credit, and I pay tribute to them.

The statistics for children in care are absolutely horrendous. The circumstances under which many children go into care are too awful to describe. Many hon. Members have come from a loving, caring, family environment, and it is difficult to imagine the awful circumstances of some children, who eventually drift into crime and take drugs. They may become pregnant when they do not wish to do so, and they then have children, and one cycle follows another. I welcome the fact that the Bill will address some of those problems.

We heard from the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), the Chairman of the Select Committee on Health, of which I am a member. I was not serving on the Committee when the report to which he referred was produced, but I pay tribute to it for that report, especially three of its proposals. It said:

> It is clear that in many cases undue pressure is put on young people to leave care as soon as they are 16, irrespective of how well or badly prepared they may be for independent living so early in their lives.

I am glad that the Government have taken that proposal on board.

The Committee's second proposal states:

> The social services must not turn their backs on young people when they have left care . . . We support the proposal by Sir William Utting and others that the Children Act 1989 should be amended to convert the discretionary powers contained in section 24 into duties imposed on local authorities to offer appropriate support to care leavers in the form of services, in-kind assistance and cash. We recommend that this duty should extend to young people up to and including the age of 21, and should exist as a discretionary power up to and including the age of 25, or beyond in exceptional circumstances. The Government should ensure that the resources necessary to achieve this end are provided.

Several hon. Members have already mentioned that.

The final point—I do not think that the Minister mentioned it in opening the debate—is that the Select Committee said:

> We recommend that the Government should take the necessary steps to improve the quality of statistical information available on service provision for and outcomes of care leavers.

I hope that the Minister—

Mr. Hutton: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way because he will probably not receive a response to that point if I do not respond now. He will be aware that the work that is being done on the quality protects programme has hugely increased the resources and data available on such issues. We hope to publish the second national overview report of the management action plans shortly. I hope that he and his fellow members of the Select Committee will pleased about the progress that we are making on data collection.

Mr. Amess: Excellent. I thank the Minister for that instant response. There are beacons of good practice around the country. I am trying to be politically neutral, but I have struggled to find a reference to a Liberal council.

Dr. Brand: The Isle of Wight.

Mr. Amess: The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) wants me to mention his local authority, but the Local Government Association's briefing particularly praises Westminster city council for linking care and aftercare services, Wakefield metropolitan district council for the signpost project, the royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea for the good parent model, and Suffolk county council for working in partnership. I do not know why the LGA did not include a Liberal council, but the hon. Gentleman has certainly put that right.

There are wonderful examples of good practice throughout the country, in which appropriate resources are set aside, but there are some examples of very poor practice. Some local authorities seem to take the first opportunity to cast out youngsters from the system and make them fend for themselves. There have been perverse incentives for local authorities to shove the cost on to the social security budget. I am so pleased that this little Bill of just eight clauses will address that point, and I congratulate the Government on that.

My noble Friend Earl Howe, among others, successfully argued in the other place that the age should be 21, as Utting suggested. I am pleased that the Government have accepted that. I understand that an undertaking was given in the other place on assistance for care leavers in connection with job training, educational qualifications and employment up to the age of 24. Perhaps the Minister in the other place was simply trying to placate and shut up my noble Friend, but we might be able to test that in Committee.

I was sent a briefing by the British Association of Social Workers, which the Minister may or may not have had an opportunity to read. It seems to make one or two critical points on legislative changes. For example, it states that the proposals for helping the youngsters are

> inadequate. The aim of preventing destitution . . . is too modest. The proper course in these circumstances is to give the area authority a duty to provide services and a power to re-charge the care authority until such time as the care authority is able to assume responsibility

for service provision. The care authority's desire to regain control of their own expenditure should prove a sufficient incentive to prevent drift in this situation.

The Minister may be able to respond to that in Committee.

As the Minister knows, the LGA supports the Bill, but, with others, it is concerned about resources, which will be no surprise to the Minister. It believes:

The proposals cover new and extended duties, new staff and the administration of benefits. The association is keen to ensure adequate levels of funding so that young people are not let down. Access to related benefits and to employment and careers support should continue. There needs to be additional funding to cover the administrative costs of implementing the proposals.

The simple transfer of current benefits to the ringfenced "account" to support young people will not be adequate to meet needs such as accommodation, as under 25's receive reduced benefits and underclaim. There will need to be higher levels of support.

I am privileged to do some organised voluntary work with Barnardos, which also supports the Bill, but it is concerned that the Bill does not cover the full 47,000 disabled children who live away from home. The right hon. Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke) touched on that fact. Barnardos believes that disabled children and young people who are placed in residential schools on full-time placements, or those who receive care during school holidays, are not officially looked after, and it is concerned about their position. It believes that those young people will spend most of their childhood living away from their families and are unlikely to return to them when they finish their education.

The transition planning requirements address the transfer from education and children's services to adult services, but I am advised that there is no requirement for those young people to have an adviser or advocate and that decisions about their future are often made without reference to their wishes and feelings. Frequently, assumptions are made about their abilities, and they are not given the opportunity to consider independent living or access to mainstream education and employment services. That group of marginalised and excluded young people are denied rights available to others, and I hope that the Minister will be able to give us a steer on that in Committee.

The issue of the advisers was raised in the other place, and it is important that they are given proper training. Their job will be an enormous responsibility and they should be tutored in child welfare, so that they are not just a cheap version of what is on offer at the moment. I hope that the advisers, with all the responsibility they will face, will receive first-class training.

My five children are still dependants, and I am told that the idea that when they grow older I will be able to really enjoy life and they will never come back, with all their hopes and anxieties, is complete nonsense. Above all else, the children leaving care, who are the victims of such terrible circumstances, deserve the best possible support. I hope that the Bill will ensure that they get it.

7.31 pm

Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): I apologise for being absent for part of the debate, but I had an urgent meeting. We all arrive here through a variety of circumstances, and that brings a rich mixture of knowledge and varying degrees of expertise. We all have great hopes of seeing changes in areas of policy that we might have a particular interest in or experience of. I have spoken in many debates and I have welcomed legislation in the belief that it will change and improve the lives of the constituents whom I represent, but the Bill fills me with an immense sense of pride. I am proud because I know, from my work with young people leaving care, that the measures it contains will improve their lives—they are among the most vulnerable members of our community. I am also proud that it is my party in Government who have listened to and—importantly—understood the concerns of young people in care.

The Bill is also great testimony to the campaigners, who have been mentioned by hon. Members on both sides of the House, who have worked tirelessly to get the measures in the Bill accepted by Parliament. As other hon. Members have said, we want the Bill implemented as soon as possible.

It is important to discuss why we need the Bill. We have heard that 75 per cent. of young people leaving care do so without any educational qualifications, and 50 per cent. of them are unemployed. That is hardly surprising when the majority have to leave their homes at 16 or 17, and that figure has been rising steadily. They leave home and have to run their own home. Then they have to start their college course, and they might need to supplement that college course by working at the local supermarket. They have no family to back them up. They might have been sexually or physically abused. They might have experienced the turmoil of adoption breakdown. All that at 16. We, the policy makers, decide that they can cope with all that at 16. It is a disgrace. Was there ever a better entitled consultation document than "Me, Survive Out There?" What do we expect? It is not rocket science to work out that the odds are stacked heavily against those young people.

Despite all the adverse circumstances, it is important to acknowledge that many young people who leave care are great survivors and do remarkably well. However, when we congratulate them, we should feel a sense of shame, because it is despite the policy makers and the laws that are in place that the young people do so well. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, North (Ms Morgan), I was privileged to meet a group of young people from Kent, who came to the House with their social workers to discuss aspects of the Bill, including issues such as housing, training, foster carers, supportive lodgings and money—the sort of issues that one would expect young people in care to want to discuss.

Those young people gave a positive welcome to the Bill, but in their eyes—and to some extent, in mine—it will succeed or fail depending on whether we grasp the nettle and raise the statutory leaving age to 21. That is crucial for the success of the Bill. We should pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Minister, who is no longer in his place, because I know from conversations that I have had with him and from speaking to others that he has worked hard to see that the amendment tabled in the other place made it into the Bill. I thank him for that, and all the young people in care and everyone involved in their welfare should pay tribute to him. We should send a loud and clear message to young people in care that we want to see the change to 21 made as soon as possible, so that they can stay in care until the age of 21 and, if they are in education, until the age of 24.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) said, we should ask whether what we provide would be good enough for our children.

[Mr. Jonathan Shaw]

A background of abuse followed by the requirement to leave home at 16 and live in a bedsit is not good enough. We must give young people the opportunity to stay in a family home until they are 21. Nothing less will do.

One of the young people whom I met told me about the time he was preparing for his A-levels. He is an exception, because few young people in care get to that point. Three months before sitting his exams, he celebrated his 18th birthday. We all remember doing that, but for him it meant that he had to leave his foster home and move into a bedsit. That was not what his foster carers wanted or, obviously, what he wanted. Not surprisingly, given the distress that the move caused him, he went on to fail his A-levels. He did so because the system had let him down. I am glad to say that, through his own efforts, the wrong was righted. He has a place in a supportive lodging scheme and is progressing well. Sadly, in my experience, his story is not uncommon.

I have seen too many young people leave home before they were ready. Is that the fault of the social workers, the foster carers or the local authority? There are cases in which all could have done a lot better. I know that I could and should have done a lot better in certain cases. However, as my noble Friend Lord Hunt of Kings Heath said in the other place, much comes down to money. It simply has not been there.

There are examples of good practice, as the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) pointed out. Many local authorities are held up as beacons of excellence in the services that they provide for young people. In Kent, I am pleased to say that they have developed a model, recommended in the Utting report, of dedicated services for 16-year-olds and older. With the assistance of some £3 million over the next three years, an excellent team has been set up that is doing some good work with young people throughout the county. The Government are putting their money where their mouth is, and the quality protects programme has been welcomed on both sides of the House.

The Bill will have cost implications. It is proposed that young people should stay in care until they reach 21, but the recruitment and retention of foster carers is a problem now. The Government are doing their level best to recruit extra foster carers for the children in care now, but we will have a new group of 18 to 24-year-olds, some of whom will be in foster care, which adds a whole new dimension for foster carers. That will require some specialist training, which will mean extra resources. Foster care is a demanding job, particularly with 16 and 17-year-olds, but I know that all foster carers with whom I have worked do not want young people to leave care at such a tender age.

The Bill rightly places great emphasis on preparation and pathway plans. It is vital that we get that right. Many young people from as early an age as 15 have a cloud hanging over their heads; they are told that they should prepare for independence. Let us imagine what that might feel like. One can imagine the insecurity that that creates among 15-year-olds who have been abused or have entered care for other reasons—there are all sorts of reasons, as the hon. Member for Southend, West said.

Being 15 years old is not that easy anyway—nor is it easy for parents or any of us to cope with them. I remember running away from home for a couple of days when I was 15, causing my parents problems. The reason was that I did not want to have my hair cut. Sadly, I am reminded of my folly every time that I look in the bathroom mirror in the morning.

Introducing independence preparation too early can be very damaging. It is important that we get the matter right and focus on the important issues. The experience of leaving care can jeopardise a young person's future. When they should be thinking about their examinations, enjoying themselves, worrying about their haircuts and doing all the things that 15-year-olds do, they should not have to cope with the constant thought of leaving care in two years' time.

That is particularly so given that the preparation is heavily focused on practical life skills. Young people aged 15 and 16 are expected to know about bank accounts, how to cook and where the jobcentre is. I did not know all that when I was 15. Young people in care are great survivors, but emotional support and educational achievement need to come first. If we get those right and provide for young people to stay in care for as long as they need, we will have provided the best pathway plan. That is the best way in which we can assist young people to survive out there.

If young people are to succeed when they leave care, there must be a sea change in culture. A youngster leaving care at the age of 17 or 18 must be the exception, not the norm as at the moment. We must allow young people on leaving care to get it wrong. They may choose at 18 to move into a bedsit, but if that does not work out and they have difficultly paying bills, they should be able to return to care. Any other young person in such circumstances would go home, saying, "I am sorry; I got it wrong," and their parents would take them back. That is exactly what should happen to young people who have been in care. They should have such back-up, which will give them confidence and enable them to get the most out of their lives. That means no half measures: 21—nothing less.

I should like to make a few comments on other aspects of the Bill. First, the proposals to move benefits are entirely right, but I wonder whether some flexibility should be built into the system. If it can be demonstrated, through due process, that a young person's relationship with a local authority has broken down or that they have moved on, it might be appropriate for them to receive benefits in the normal way.

Secondly, setting up home is crucial for youngsters leaving care. The Green Paper on housing widened the category of priority groups to include care leavers, which is welcome. I hope that there is a Bill to that effect in the next Session. Parental responsibility should involve housing authorities. Kent operates a two-tier system of local government. Several district councils operating in an area means that resources vary greatly from one housing authority to another. Unfortunately, so does willingness to participate in assisting young people, which does not cost a great deal but is very important. There should be a clear requirement on housing authorities to be so involved.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) mentioned houses in multiple occupation. In the interests of joined-up government, I hope that a Bill in the next Session licenses HMOs. Local authorities and their representative bodies have been calling for that for many years. Although HMOs are a necessary part of housing provision, a landlord should have a licence and a clean

bill of health for the premises before he opens his doors to any young persons and receives benefit payments. That would raise the standard of such housing stock.

Thirdly, the provision of young persons' advisers is welcome. Let us hope that such advisers will be an additional advocate and a positive force for rights and quality. It is crucial that young people trust, and have confidence in, those individuals. I would be interested to hear from my hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health how their performance will be monitored and whether there will be a mechanism in clause 5, concerning complaints procedures, for which there will be regulations, for a young person to be able to change their personal adviser if they see fit.

I was completing my social work training just as the Children Act 1989 was completing its passage through the House. The legislation was heralded as a bringing together of all the various Acts and there was great support for it in the House, but a number of commentators were saying—I said so in my law paper—that it was a missed opportunity. Its one glaring failure was that, rather than stipulating duties, it simply gave powers to assist care leavers. As a consequence, over the decade since that Act came into force, young people have missed opportunities to fulfil their potential—because they have left home at 16. As hon. Members have mentioned, the cost to those leaving care, and to society, has been enormous as a result.

As long ago as 1948, local authorities were given powers to assist young people leaving care. More than half a century later, most authorities do not use those powers. We need to stipulate the age of 21 and we need young people to stay in care until such an age—and as soon as possible. I wish my hon. Friends all the very best in negotiations on the comprehensive spending review.

I want to make one final point, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) referred. Child migrants are a forgotten section of the community of children who leave care. The Child Migrants Trust experiences difficulties in funding all the work that lands on its desk. It has 130 families on its books waiting for social workers. Just recently, a mother aged 86, who had been looking for her child in Australia, died before any reconciliation. There are not enough social workers to do the work. That man in Melbourne will shortly be told that his mother has died and that the opportunity for reconciliation has passed.

Finally, I wish my hon. Friend the Minister good luck with the comprehensive spending review. I know that there is enormous competition, but it is right that we assist children who are the responsibility of the state. We have let them down too often in the past and, by helping child migrants, the Bill will go a long way to righting many wrongs.

7.50 pm

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): It is fair to say that this is a brilliant Bill, packed full of excellent measures. I welcome it as representing the coming of age of public policy on children and young people looked after by local authorities. The way in which we have let down vulnerable young people, time after time, has been catastrophic for them because it has damaged their ties to family and the wider community, and it reflects badly on our society as a whole.

I am pleased to tell hon. Members that I do not intend to take them on another tour of the Bill's contents as other speakers have done; instead, I shall set the Bill in two of its immediate contexts and raise two specific points that have already been raised but which, even in a debate of such high quality, have not been focused upon. The two contexts are quality protects and the Care Standards Bill, both of which have been mentioned many times in the debate.

Quality protects was launched in September 1998. It is important to remember that the Bill relates to children and young people in care and leaving care, whereas quality protects has a far broader application, covering all local authority services for children, including those for young people looked after by local authorities. Let me illustrate the sea change that is already taking place as a result of quality protects, by referring to Staffordshire social services.

Even before quality protects began, a leaving care team was in place in Staffordshire, and the social services department was already moving in the direction in which that programme later pushed everyone. In May 1998, before the launch of quality protects, I organised a conference in Stafford to discuss how better to support children leaving care, and the local social services department was a strong supporter of the conference. The department picked up and ran with several recommendations on best practice that emerged from the day, which put it in a good position later, when quality protects was launched.

Staffordshire social services department's most recent publication sets out its response to quality protects. It says:

> A lot has started to happen for children and young people we look after.

Some examples of changes on the ground include the appointment of a children's voice officer and complaints officers, and the institution of formal and informal methods of consultation. There are now mentors for children leaving care, trained and supported by a joint co-operative venture between the department and the Prince's Trust. I was pleased to award the first volunteers their certificates of competence at the end of their training and to meet the people who want to help and support youngsters leaving care.

A project called Sustain provides immediate help to youngsters in placements that are in danger of breaking down; it tries to save the placement and keep the children safe. Planning is carried out to avert the need to receive children and young people into care, to keep them with their families and to support them in the community. Finally, there are effective links with education and health services in Staffordshire. Those examples of local action remind us that while the Bill is being implemented, quality protects will be running alongside, developing and pushing local authority social services in the same direction.

That brings me to the Care Standards Bill, which deals with much more than children. Where it does deal with children, it relates specifically to those living in residential care homes and to fostering agencies and voluntary adoption agencies. The intention is to protect vulnerable people from abuse and neglect and to promote a consistently high standard of care in all care homes. All children's care homes will come within the remit of the new National Care Standards Commission and its inspection regime.

[Mr. David Kidney]

When the Government were under pressure to establish a children's rights commissioner, the concession they offered to those pressing for such a post was to promise that the new commission would appoint a children's rights director. That brings me to the first of the two issues that I want to highlight, which are, first, the arguments surrounding the children's rights commissioner, and secondly, advocacy for children and young people. I am but one of many voices calling for a commissioner to be appointed.

Dr. Brand: Does the hon. Gentleman share my surprise that although 13 speeches made on Second Reading of the Care Standards Bill focused on the need for a children's rights commissioner, amendments based on the Children's Rights Commissioner Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) were not accepted by the powers that be?

Mr. Kidney: I was not so much surprised as disappointed. I intend to urge Ministers to think again.

In discussions with Department of Health officials about the reasons behind the objection to a commissioner, the official response to my arguments in favour of the post being established was that with all the other developments already in train, nothing additional would be gained by such an appointment. I do not agree. First, the post of commissioner would secure the advances now being made against future watering down or neglect. Secondly, it would provide a focus for children and those who are concerned for children and want to help them. Thirdly, a commissioner would be an authoritative figure to provide guides to best practice, to pull up those who fail to do what they should do, and to be either the whistleblower or the person to whom a whistleblower turns to draw attention to something wrong.

Earlier this year, in a debate in Westminster Hall, the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), said of the proposed children's rights director:

> In recognition of its role in safeguarding children, the national care standards commission will appoint a children's rights director, whose job it will be to ensure that children's rights and welfare are at the heart of all its responsibilities for regulating children's services.—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 3 February 2000; Vol. 343, c. 253WH.]

I believe that his statement could—and should—properly be adapted to read as follows: "In recognition of his role in safeguarding children, the Secretary of State will appoint a children's rights commissioner whose job it will be to ensure that children's rights and welfare are at the heart of all public policies that govern children's services."

Have the Government given any further consideration to the creation of the post of a children's rights commissioner? Am I right in thinking that the Bill's long title precludes an amendment being made in Committee that would create such a post? If I am right, what is the role—if any—of the new children's rights director established under the Care Standards Bill in ensuring that children and young people can gain access to the new rights granted under this Bill?

The Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), told me earlier that the director would be able to help children who are in residential care, who are fostered through a fostering agency or who are adopted through a voluntary adoption agency. However, I am sure that a moment's reflection would enable her to think of many children covered by this Bill who do not fall into any of those categories. Those who come to mind immediately are children in care who are placed with their own parents or relatives from their wider family, and also those mentioned in the Bill—eligible, relevant and former relevant children who were in care.

Many young people must be out of their foster placement or children's home by their 18th birthday, despite the assurance that the Minister gave my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson), and I suspect that under the proposed set-up none of them would have access to the children's rights director. That would be a loophole, and would lead to a terribly uneven application of the brilliant suggestion that there should be someone for children to turn to. That is why I think that there must be a children's rights commissioner.

Finally, on advocacy for children, many years ago Staffordshire contributed the expression "pindown" to the lexicon of child abuse. Young people were restrained in residential homes by having their outdoor clothes taken away and being locked in their rooms. No advocacy services were available for those young people—apart from access to the traditional lawyer. Eventually the practice came to light because of a solicitor's legal action on behalf of some young residents. How much better it will be when children and young people have ready access to trained advocates, be they paid professionals or well trained volunteers. They would be non-lawyers who were ready and able to stand by children and young people and articulate their points of view for them.

Advocates are not needed in every situation, nor for every young person, but the greater the vulnerability and the more difficult the task of speaking up for themselves, the more compelling is the case for providing that service. A number of organisations concerned with the welfare of children and young people have put to the Government the case for an advocacy service. They are a powerful coalition of some of our more respected organisations, and I support their call for the Bill to include a provision for advocacy services. Will the Minister tell us whether the Department is now persuaded by the force of those arguments and is willing to incorporate the provision in the Bill?

A great story is waiting to be told about the Government's tremendous effort to improve public policy towards children, from the attack on child poverty to the drive to raise educational standards. High up in the list of achievements will be the civilised, decent measures taken to care for the most vulnerable children, which include some of those looked after by local authorities. For quality protects, for the Care Standards Bill and for this Bill, I say a hearty, "Well done" to the Government.

8.3 pm

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): It is an absolute privilege to take part in this debate and, in particular, to follow some of the other contributions. The Government inherited a care system that hon. Members on both sides would acknowledge was a shameful disgrace—a system in which a lack of investment,

of coherent policy, and, frankly, of interest for many years resulted in the shocking abuse of children in care, as is well documented.

The situation got worse in the 1990s, when young people were turned out of care at 16, or even younger, in increasing numbers. Basic rights were denied to those children in care—the right to education and to the ordinary experiences of growing up in modern society, and to being listened to and cared for properly. It is remarkable that in only three years under this Government we now have a national voice for such children, the new National Organisation for Young People in Care. We now have quality protects, the £375 million investment in improved standards and management accountability.

Soon we will have the National Care Standards Commission, the children's rights director and the General Social Care Council. In this Bill, we have the biggest prize of all: the extension of the statutory duty on local authorities to assist looked-after young people up to the age of 21 and, while they are in education, to 24.

Those policies, coupled with the new education policies, which will require local authorities properly to attend to the education of young people—to set proper individual plans for their education—and to appoint staff to manage the policies, and with full implementation of the Protection of Children Act 1999, will transform the care system. That is a triumph for the Government. It is a triumph for the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), who has picked up the baton in exemplary fashion and run with it tremendously well, and for his direct predecessor, now the Minister of State, Home Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), and, above all, for my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), whose justified anger, passion and determination to change the care system have carried these measures through—*[Interruption.]* Excellent, my right hon. Friend comes in on cue. I was just saying what a good chap he is.

The measure is a triumph for campaigning organisations, such as the Who Cares? Trust, First Key, the National Care Leavers Association, Children in Wales and Voices from Care. It is also a triumph for the Select Committee on Health and its estimable Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), who can rest assured that I was born in Northumberland even though I represent the glorious city of Lancaster. Above all, however, it is a triumph for the brave, resilient and amazing young people in care, whom many of us have the privilege to know. We can dwell for ever on the sad facts of life in care in previous decades, but it is incredibly important to understand that children in care—anyone who has listened to them could understand it—know more about the care system than we ever will. Frankly, they are more intelligent and articulate than most of us. They have endured situations and survived distress that would have finished many of us, more fortunate, Members here. It is great that the Bill will allow them educational chances and give them the support that they need.

The Bill must succeed. It must receive the required resources from the comprehensive spending review. Quality protects should be replenished with further resources, too. The Bill must be fully implemented by local authorities. Their supreme failure for years has brought us to this pass. On paper, we have had good legislation in the past, but statutory duties have not been properly fulfilled and powers have been totally neglected. The one most crucial message of all is that we should forget about giving local authorities powers over young people who are looked after. If we want the job done, we must give them duties, and then make them carry them out and keep them to the letter of the law.

The operation of quality protects, the National Care Standards Commission and the children's rights director, and the Government's passion for, commitment to and anger about the care system will ensure that, across the country, the care system is transformed.

The Bill represents the culmination of a series of events, and constitutes great social policy from a great reforming Government. All the implications of that policy and the Bill must be implemented. However, the Bill needs to go further. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) that young people should have a statutory right to advocacy. Young people leaving care should have a statutory right to be housed by the local authority.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras never said a truer word than when he challenged local authorities to be corporate parents, and urged them to take on the simple requirement of social work and measure their achievements against what a good, responsible, ordinary parent would do. A good, responsible local authority would not send children into bed-and-breakfast accommodation, for goodness' sake, or into temporary accommodation. It would ensure that children in whom it had for many years invested time, money, work, care and support left care for decent accommodation and were decently supported through their early adult years.

I do not believe that that is an over-ambitious proposal for all young people in care in this country. We did it in Lancaster when I worked there, and in Wyre when I worked there. Every young person who remained in care until the age of 18 was guaranteed the opportunity of a local authority tenancy. That should obtain for all young people in care and should be written into the Bill.

We should acknowledge that legislation is not enough. Procedures are important and policy development is vital. We must engage all elements of the system—local authorities, voluntary societies and, above all, young people—in developing practice.

The Bill represents an historic moment for social policy. It is clear evidence that the Government are listening, learning and working with all concerned to achieve change, and are producing great reforming legislation. We should all recognise the significance of this day and celebrate a victory for care, compassion, decency—and especially for the hundreds of thousands of children who will pass through our care system and benefit from the Bill in the future.

8.13 pm

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): The debate has the air of a Friday debate on a private Member's Bill on which there has been consensus in all parts of the House. I have good news for the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), who said that he remembered such consensus last breaking out in relation to the Children Act 1989. I am pleased to tell him that, from my short time in the House, I recall a similar consensus on the Carers and

[Mrs. Caroline Spelman]

Disabled Children Bill, and I am reminded by my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) that that was the case also when we debated the Protection of Children Act 1999.

When we discuss children's services, consensus breaks out in all parts of the House. We are working together to make sure that those services are improved. That is why the Bill has received support from the Opposition.

Mr. Dawson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Spelman: I should like to make progress. The hon. Gentleman has just spoken. As he has just had his turn, perhaps he will allow me to get going, but I shall give way later when we get on to the substance.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about parenting. We must be realistic about the role of the corporate parent. It can never be quite as good as a relationship with a mum or dad who sees the child through the truculent transition from childhood to adulthood, with all the powers, good will and love for the child that a parent has.

The bare statistics cited by hon. Members in all parts of the House during the debate reveal that the state has made a poor fist of trying to be a corporate parent. I shall not rehearse all the statistics, but there is one that I find particularly sad: one in seven young women leaving care is pregnant or a mother already—in other words, those young women fell pregnant before they reached the age of 16. Clearly, as corporate parents we have not done well. That is why we support the Government in their efforts to improve that appalling situation, and why we have given our support to the quality protects programme.

Our purpose today is to help the Government improve the Bill. If we think ourselves into the role of parenting a troubled teenager, we know that teenagers resent being dictated to or bound by rules and sanctions that they regard as petty and offensive, so we must strike a balance, as any successful parent does. There must be give and take during the teenage years, and young people need to know that if all goes wrong, we are still there for them. That is what we must convey and transform into practical reality through the Bill. Many of the youngsters with whom it deals have only a broken experience of such unconditional love.

Ms Shipley: Does the hon. Lady agree with what I said in my intervention on the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), when I suggested that if the teenager refuses to participate in the programme that we suggest or in some other way does not comply with our wishes, we cannot withdraw, as a sanction, the structure proposed by my hon. Friend the Minister of State? We must keep going and keep offering love, support and care.

Mrs. Spelman: I heard the hon. Lady's earlier intervention. Common sense is needed in working out the pathway plan. Adults at their wits' end must try to use common sense as young people make the transition, and advisers will have to use common sense when dealing with youngsters unwilling to follow the route that we suggest for them. It is against the ideal of being a really good corporate parent, which is hard to achieve, that we are trying to assess the Bill.

It is important that we try to ensure that young people have a choice when it comes to personal advisers. The independence of personal advisers may be the key to trust. A phrase that came home to me when I was talking to some of the voluntary organisations was that children in care sometimes see those who are there to help them as part of a "hated establishment". If the advisers are seen as insufficiently independent of that establishment, they are unlikely to be trusted. Surely the young individual should have the right to reject any advice thrust upon him if, after a trial period with an individual adviser, the process is not working.

I support the argument of my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge that, at 18, a young adult must have the right to say, "Thanks, but no thanks." However, that must be balanced in the Bill with the right for that young adult to come back if he changes his mind. Striking that balance will be part of our skill in getting the proposed legislation right.

Where the Bill will succeed or fail lies in the future ability of local authorities to overcome the natural antipathy and mistrust of young people in their care towards them. We have been told so often by those working in this area that that is the nub of the argument. That is one of the reasons why we strongly advocated the greater use of voluntary organisations. In the example given by my hon. Friend, they can often do better.

Communication between local authorities will be vital if the Bill is to work. Young people are naturally mobile, and they may move from the authority area in which they are in care to another. The Bill holds the original authority responsible for the financial and social support of that individual. There will have to be a new spirit of interdependence between local authorities.

As in one case study that I saw, if the local authority in Hull is asked to pick up the tab for a care leaver who lives, studies and needs help in, for example, London, good communication between the two authorities will be required.

The Government may have to use their powers under the Local Government Act 1999, as the Minister made clear. It contains powers to direct a local authority which fails in its obligations under the Bill. These powers have not yet been implemented, despite having been law since April. If the Bill is to have effect, these powers will have to be seen to work. It is only when local authorities are brought to book if they fail, that confidence in the system will be restored.

There is the question of the looming Scottish anomaly. We do not want a repetition of the student fee situation. However, it could arise where care leavers can continue to get hold of existing benefits from social security in Scotland whereas, under the Bill, that will be stopped in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. I am sorry that the right hon. Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke) is not present because I have to say that that involves two-way traffic.

Scottish care leavers coming to England will still be entitled to benefits unless parallel legislation is achieved pretty quickly in the Scottish Parliament. It is not impossible to imagine a situation, unless the anomaly is rectified, where somewhere such as Glasgow becomes the care leavers' capital of Britain. I am sure that the local authority in Glasgow would not wish that to happen.

Voluntary organisations such as the Action on Aftercare Consortium have considerable evidence of young people having trouble accessing the existing complaints procedure. The Bill lacks a new model with sufficient independence to inspire confidence in a complaints procedure. I support the view of the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) that it would be helped by greater use of advocacy. The voluntary organisation First Key and a host of other organisations believe passionately that every child should have access to an independent advocate. I hope that is something that we shall be able to explore in Committee.

Mr. Hutton: I am not sure whether the hon. Lady is aware that yesterday we published a consultation document about possible reform of social services complaints procedures. We have asked specific questions about the role of advocacy. We have always made it clear in relation to the Bill that we shall ensure that looked-after children have access to proper advocacy arrangements.

Mrs. Spelman: I thank the Minister for that helpful intervention. I was unaware that the document had been published. That helps me.

A host of other practical issues will be brought forward in the form of appropriate amendments in Committee. To allow the Government time to think about some of them, it is worth flagging up a few. For example, why restrict the provision of vacation accommodation to those on higher education courses only?

The hon. Member for Cardiff, North (Ms Morgan) made an important point about the value of further education. Only a few care leavers aspire to university qualifications. However, many aspire to more practical qualifications that are obtainable through further education. Of course, FE colleges also have vacations, and that is something that we need to consider if we are to commend this part of the Bill.

An important point was made in the other place about the means-testing of financial support. As far as I am aware, that point has not been taken up today. I would like to know the Minister's thinking on protecting care leavers who have been granted compensation for criminal injuries. That could arise particularly in cases of child abuse. In that instance, that compensation should definitely be excluded from any means-testing of the financial support that the individual receives. We want to ensure that that point is not lost.

Hon. Members raised a number of other technical points, and at times the debate almost resembled a Committee stage. Therefore, I simply re-emphasise the Opposition's support for the Bill. In Committee, our opposition will consist of constructive suggestions on how to improve the Bill. There needs to be a touch of gritty reality about dealing with the needs and aspirations of troubled youngsters who have had some of their life chances seriously dented, and we must be careful not to make matters worse. Sadly, there is too much evidence of the state doing just that.

We recognise that the Bill will place a considerable additional burden on social workers, and they will need plenty of support. We must be particularly aware of the fact that, as the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) said, social workers are already in short supply in certain areas.

Several hon. Members made important points about resources. For the Bill to work, it needs to be properly resourced. At least one practical problem that will need to be addressed is that savings in the administrative costs of benefits will remain with the Department of Social Security unless they can be transferred to support the new financial support arrangements for care leavers under the Bill. We are anxious to ensure that resources that were once available for care leavers from one Department will now be available from another, so that there are sufficient resources to ensure that the Bill can be put into effect.

Mr. Dawson: I am not a chap for spurious consensus, and some of the hon. Lady's remarks cause me to shudder a little. I am committed to the role of the voluntary sector and the private sector, but when we hear from the spokesperson of a party which comprehensively failed for so long to deal with these issues that it is sceptical about the role of the state, it makes me wonder. The role of the state will be crucial in ensuring that standards are raised. If we rely on the Churches, the voluntary sector, other private sector organisations or odd little organisations coming together, however worthy they are, we will not tackle the fundamental issues that the Conservative party so signally failed to deal with for so many years.

Mrs. Spelman: I regret giving way to the hon. Gentleman. He provokes me into referring to the tone of his speech, which stuck out like a sore thumb as it was the only one that did not represent the cross-party consensus. I would have glossed over it but for that last intervention, which was particularly provocative. I do not think that he was present at the beginning of my speech when I said that we are seeing a continuum in terms of the improvement of children's services, which started with the Children Act and was greatly informed by the inquiry, set up by the Conservative Government, into what had gone wrong in children's services. We have learned a great deal and now we are working together to try to improve what is available. There was no necessity for that intervention.

Mr. Dawson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Spelman: No, I shall certainly not give way again. The hon. Gentleman has burned his boats. He will have to content himself with the one intervention.

In Committee, we must seek to infuse the debate with the practical experience of those who work with children leaving care, which I am sure several members of the Committee will be able to do. We should also include the independent views of voluntary organisations, which have a great deal of experience of best practice to offer. We may find ourselves the corporate parents of young people in our care system, but they will not thank us if we impose unworkable solutions, cut off their money and let them down.

8.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): The debate has been extremely positive and I welcome the support of many hon. Members for the Bill. To his horror, even the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) expressed support for a Government Bill for the first time; I trust that it will be the last. The measure is morally right as well as common sense.

[Yvette Cooper]

Many detailed points and constructive comments have been made. I shall try to deal with as many as I can. However, I do not apologise for leaving some for the Committee stage. For example, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) made suggestions about the language in the Bill. That is clearly a subject for the Committee.

Many hon. Members eloquently described why the Bill is essential. I join others in paying tribute to those who have campaigned for so long, including hon. Members—not least members of the Select Committee on Health, who have raised the issue many times. I pay special tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), who has done so much to ensure the Bill's existence, for his great personal commitment to ensuring that the Bill secured parliamentary time, and for being the driving force behind its genesis and the consultation paper, "Me, Survive Out There?", which was published almost a year ago.

There is no argument about the duty that we owe vulnerable young people who have been looked after by local authorities and have no other family to turn to for support. To face making one's way in the world at just 16 is daunting for any teenager. How much more difficult is it for someone whose childhood has been disrupted, troubled and complicated by family circumstance, tragedy or abuse?

Children in care arrive as victims of circumstance, and seldom through any fault of their own. They are often seriously damaged by experiences before they arrive in care, and they have often grown up without the security of a family network to support them and sustain them emotionally as well as materially when they try to strike out on their own. As most parents and teenagers know, no matter how independent a 16-year-old feels, family support makes a huge difference for many more years in tangible ways—for example, through education, a home, encouragement for exams or job interviews, advice on bank accounts and career choices, help with driving lessons, the chance to borrow a car and the unquantifiable benefit of unconditional support from someone who cares.

Teenagers leaving care rarely have any of that support to fall back on, yet they need more help than other young people and children if they are to make the most of the opportunities of adult life. We are considering a matter of social justice and opportunities that other young people take for granted. It is not right that they are not provided to all young people as they begin their adult life.

The Bill is morally justified as well as pragmatic and sensible. Plenty of evidence supports it; hon. Members have mentioned much of it in their speeches. I shall not repeat many of the points that were made. However, I shall try to respond to some of them. I will begin with those about 16 to 18-year-olds. The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) suggested introducing sanctions. I emphasise that we are talking not about adults or over-18s, but about teenagers, many of whom have extremely troubled backgrounds and may struggle with chaotic lives. We are considering teenagers for whom things will go wrong.

A 17-year-old who tries to get a job, changes her mind, tries to start a course, finds that that goes wrong and tries something else, but has no back-up at home, is in a difficult position. She may keep changing her pathway plan, but she still has a right to support from the local authority, including help with housing and maintenance. We are not proposing to make that support conditional on the pursuit of the pathway plan.

Mr. Hammond: I appreciate that the Minister was not here during the relevant part of my speech, but—[HON. MEMBERS: "She was."] I did not think that she was; if she was, I apologise.

What support is to be put in place for the people at the sharp end who have to deal with these very difficult situations, if there are no sanctions and nothing whatever that they can use as a lever to try to ensure compliance with the agreed pathway plan?

Yvette Cooper: For the record, I was in the Chamber and heard every detail of the hon. Gentleman's speech. His language is perhaps revealing when he talks about seeking levers for compliance. The idea of the pathway plan is that it is to be agreed with the young person and is meant to provide support. We must accept that the plan may change many times and that these are young people who may need a lot of support. Clearly, the young persons' advisers and the local authority support network will need to be able to respond to changing needs. We are not talking about sanctions or compulsion; this is about an agreed pathway plan to provide young people with the support and opportunities to which they have a right.

Several hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand), spoke of the need to support other vulnerable teenagers, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke) referred to the possibility of having young persons' advisers for disabled teenagers.

We are keen to extend to other groups the principle of support through young persons' advisers, and that is why the Department for Education and Employment is piloting the connexions scheme, which aims to provide a personal adviser for all young people aged 13 to 19 to help them to move into a career, and to provide more intensive support for those who need it most. We will need to build on that.

The transfer of benefits to the local authority, with financial support for the authority, gained a lot of support during the consultation, not least from the Foyer Federation, which pointed out how completely baffling the benefits system, designed for adults, can be for 16 to 18-year-olds.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, North (Ms Morgan) had some concerns about transferring support to local authorities. I can reassure her that care leavers will not be worse off and that we will set minimum standards. The aim is to improve the support for young people and to get around the perverse incentive for local authorities to shift people out of care and on to benefits because that does not block up their balance sheet.

Dr. Brand: The Minister rightly castigated hon. Members for wanting inappropriately to use levers, but if young people are not to have a choice about whether to accept a package from the local authority or through the

benefits system, is not she establishing an even more powerful lever that can be used against the wishes of the young person?

Yvette Cooper: We are talking purely about the arrangements up to 18. After 18, the benefits system will continue to work as normal. People have the right to maintenance, accommodation and support. Arrangements must be made in discussion between the young person and the adviser. This is not about compulsion; it is about providing support. Frankly, most of the young people to whom this will apply require more than simply a cheque at the end of the week. They need proper support, help and advice.

Several hon. Members expressed strong support for the changes introduced in the Lords to strengthen support for 18 to 21-year-olds—and upwards—in education. I welcome that strong support, because it must be the right thing to do. With the age of majority at 18, there is clearly a difference in the support that we provide for under-18s and for over-18s. However, it is also clear that needs stretch far beyond 18 when it comes to providing support, advice and guidance for care leavers in the way that a family would.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge expressed concerns that that support might constitute monitoring and be intrusive. I strongly disagree with him on that, and think that his concerns may rest on a complete misunderstanding of the approach for over-18s. The obligation is on local authorities to keep in touch and on the young person's adviser to contact the teenager, and the duty is to provide assistance as agreed in the pathway plan. If a young person does not want help or to discuss a pathway plan, nothing in the Bill would compel her to do otherwise. There is nothing in the Bill about compulsion, monitoring or tracking. The Bill is about keeping in touch, providing support and ensuring that young people do not simply disappear, with no one knowing or caring where they are.

Mr. Hammond: Does the hon. Lady agree that there is something in the Bill requiring a local authority to make reasonable efforts to get back in touch with a care leaver with whom it has lost touch?

Yvette Cooper: Exactly so; it is absolutely right that local authorities should take reasonable action to get back in touch, and the young person's adviser has an obligation to do exactly that. The hon. Gentleman seems to be talking about tracking down young people in London, with visions of police using dogs to search for leavers. That imagery is entirely out of touch with the ideas expressed in the Bill.

Mr. Dawson: Does my hon. Friend agree that the cracks in the consensus are clearly showing, and that, if the United Kingdom had had the grievous misfortune, on 1 May 1997, of seeing Conservative Members winning the general election, we would have none of the policies on young people in care that the Government have introduced?

Yvette Cooper: It is certainly true that the Bill's provisions are long overdue, and that young people leaving care have been left in a very vulnerable situation, with no support, for far too long. As has been said, the Bill is not rocket science and could have been introduced long ago. It is well overdue.

Mr. Hammond: In view of the hon. Lady's provocative remarks, would she just remind the House of when Sir William Utting reported?

Mr. Dobson: Remind the House about when he was chief inspector of social services.

Yvette Cooper *rose—*

Mr. Graham Allen (Vice-Chamberlain of Her Majesty's Household): Give way to our right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson).

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I think that the Minister should respond to the initial intervention.

Yvette Cooper: The concerns expressed by Sir William Utting, at the end of 1997, were clearly important in informing the Bill. However, it should not have required Sir William Utting to point out that care leavers were in a vulnerable situation. It should not have required Sir William Utting to point out that care leavers were far more likely to be unemployed, to become teenage parents, to leave school with no qualifications and to be in grave need of support. Young people leaving care have been denied the opportunities that they have a right to and which other young people have been given. This is about social justice. It does not require magic to work out that it is a serious problem that should be dealt with.

Mr. Dawson: Does my hon. Friend accept that the issues of leaving care that we have discussed today—such as the inadequacy of preparation for young people before they leave care and the lack of support available to them after they leave care—were raised with me by young people in 1988?

Yvette Cooper: I am sure that those issues were raised with my hon. Friend in 1988, and that they have long been raised with hon. Members. It is about time that we addressed them.

Hon. Members have discussed the need to introduce provisions for 18 to 21-year-olds as soon as possible. I assure the House that that is our intention. However, we shall not place duties on local authorities that we cannot resource. That is why we have indicated our commitment to provide extra resources through quality protects. For future years, we will depend on decisions made in the spending review, as hon. Members mentioned earlier.

Several questions were raised about the possibility that Scotland could become a magnet or a honeypot if it retained its benefits system provision.

Mr. Shaw: Does my hon. Friend agree that most young people leaving care lack the confidence to travel much? People who travel the world have a firm background and a lot of confidence and support. The idea that young people will travel from Meriden to Musselbrugh to seek extra benefits is for the birds.

Yvette Cooper: It is true that claiming that young people will travel some distance in pursuit of benefits

[Yvette Cooper]

assumes that they have the confidence to travel and a sophisticated knowledge of the benefits system. In practice, many of them find it complicated and baffling.

I shall clarify the situation in Scotland. Until clause 6 is implemented there, Scottish looked-after children who come to England will be supported through the benefits system. England will not be a magnet for Scottish young people, but neither is Scotland likely to be regarded as a magnet for English looked-after children. To state otherwise assumes that the present benefits system in some sense gives beneficial and preferential treatment to looked-after children. I do not believe that.

The new arrangements will provide better and more easily accessible support, including financial support and cash, than the present benefits system provides. That is why the proposals were so warmly endorsed throughout the consultation period.

My hon. Friends the Members for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) and for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) referred to advocacy. My hon. Friend the Minister of State has already mentioned that we issued a consultation paper recently on the complaints procedure stemming from the Children Act 1989, which covers advocacy issues. We will certainly use the powers in this Bill to ensure that care leavers have advocates to speak on their behalf.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, North referred to the need for real educational support going beyond a pathway plan and providing real opportunities. I agree: that is why the Bill introduces duties to provide general assistance and to assist with education and training that goes beyond the age of 21.

That is what proposed new section 23C of the Children Act 1989, in clause 2, is all about, and it deals with one of the most important matters of all. We know that children who are looked after tend to have very poor educational records. It is especially important that pathway plans are not confined to immediate material and emotional needs, but that they also look to the longer-term opportunities that teenagers leaving care have been denied for far too long.

The Bill is about giving care leavers a second or even a third chance to return to education and to the activities denied to them in childhood, but not denied to other children and teenagers. It is about providing a strong framework to encourage young people to go back into education and catch up on qualifications so that they have the educational foundation that will serve them throughout their lives.

Examples of best practice exist around the country already. The hon. Member for Southend, West referred to some. I can tell him that I have visited the signpost project in Wakefield, which supports teenagers and care leavers from my constituency. The work done there, by the local council and Barnardos in partnership, is very impressive, not least because young people there say that the support that they receive, and the advice on housing, jobs and training, is essential.

More importantly, however, they have somewhere to go back to, where there is someone they can talk to, and keep talking to. The most impressive thing of all is the way that the signpost project helps young people to develop ways to support each other. As a result, they are providing mentoring and friendship to other care leavers, teenage parents or other young people in need.

Similar examples exist throughout the country, but we must build on them. The Bill gives us the framework to do exactly that. It meshes with a range of initiatives across the board to tackle social exclusion, and to ensure that all our young people get the best chance in life, and the best help to take those chances.

The Bill is about providing opportunity for every young person, regardless of background or start in life. All young people deserve those opportunities—not just the few.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

CHILDREN (LEAVING CARE) BILL [*LORDS*] [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52 (1) (a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Children (Leaving Care) Bill *[Lords]*, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums which are payable out of money so provided by virtue of any other Act.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft Scotland Act 1998 (Modifications of Schedule 4) Order 2000, which was laid before this House on 25th May, be approved.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

Question agreed to.

Regional Policy

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

8.50 pm

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): I am delighted to have secured tonight's Adjournment debate on the Government's policy towards the regions and I am pleased to open the debate earlier than many of us had anticipated. When I was preparing for this debate, a number of hon. Members asked me to mention Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. In view of their requests and by popular demand, I shall not disappoint hon. Members who may read the debate tomorrow, or may indeed be following it elsewhere.

My purpose tonight is to probe the Government's plans for the devolution of power to the regions, particularly in relation to Labour's manifesto commitments. There will be no surprises for the Minister because, in the spirit of constructive dialogue, I have done my best to ensure that she is aware of the issues that I intend to raise. Do the Government plan to establish regional assemblies and if so, what timetable will apply to them? How do any such proposals relate to discussions here and elsewhere about the appointment of city mayors? What plans do the Government have, if it is perceived that the establishment of regional assemblies would result in too many layers of Government, and which layers, if any, should be removed?

Will there be an opportunity to debate the Government's definition of the regions? I raised the issue in an Adjournment debate in April 1998 and I should like to pursue some of the questions that I raised then. What factors will be considered in such a debate? I intend to probe the Government's intentions, raise a few technical questions about objective 1 regions and encourage the Government to engage in an agenda that is all about the celebration of distinctiveness, and to welcome difference across this diverse land which is the United Kingdom.

A brief trip to Iceland last year with the Select Committee on Agriculture brought into sharp focus my growing concern about Cornwall's slide over the precipice into extinction. Icelandic people are proud and distinctive. Their pride and distinctiveness is the bedrock from which they can concentrate on their priorities and on success. Since achieving independence from Denmark in 1944, this relatively poor island has become one of the wealthiest nations on earth. It has a higher gross domestic product per person than not only the United Kingdom, but France, Germany and Japan. It has achieved low inflation and a high standard of living. It has one of the highest life expectancy levels in the world and enviable economic prospects for the future. Yet the population of Iceland is only 270,000—little more than half the population of Cornwall, which is about 500,000. Places such as Cornwall should learn lessons from this, but Cornwall seems to be drifting in the other direction.

I am not suggesting that Cornwall should declare independence—that would be absurd, unrealistic and patently unobtainable. However, Cornwall and Scilly might learn that, through being clear about our strengths, knowing what we want to achieve, standing up for ourselves and going out there determined to succeed, we might be taking destiny by the scruff of the neck instead of sleepwalking into oblivion with our cap in our hand.

As a Cornishman, I have always respected the noble art of self-deprecation. Some say that it is a chronic and untreatable condition, brought on by centuries of deference to the Saxons, since King Athelstan drew a line at the River Tamar between England and Cornwall in 936.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): Shame.

Mr. George: The hon. Gentleman says "Shame", but it is a historical fact. Perhaps the king concluded at that point that the Cornish were not worth the effort of inevitable annihilation.

But perhaps it is time to turn self-doubt into self-belief. Once honourably distinctive, Cornwall now runs the risk of becoming indistinguishable. It faces the paradox of being one of the most distinctive regions in the United Kingdom while its services are more merged with others than anywhere else.

The record of recent years shows that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food office has moved to Exeter, the Camborne police operations room is to move to Plymouth, and the Cornwall careers service, magistrates court and learning and skills council have all merged with services in Devon. The Government have plans to merge Cornwall's probation service, and there are fears that the fire service will go the same way. A number of Labour party spokespeople who came to Cornwall during the election campaign supported the call for a Cornish development agency, but in fact, when the agency came, it was for a standardised region of the south-west.

The worry is what will happen next. Will education, social and health services be merged and amalgamated as well? If so, that would leave Cornwall as little more than a souped-up parish council. The contrast with Iceland could hardly be more stark. While a country with a population half that of Cornwall forges on relentlessly to greater and greater success, Cornwall cannot even plan its own training for post-16s, manage its magistrates court, advise its young people on their future career, manage its police service, plan the development of its economy, organise support for its farming and fishing industries or manage a whole range of other subordinate services.

The conventional arguments against a place such as Cornwall thinking, planning and acting for itself, even on these relatively insignificant matters, are that it is too small, it does not have the clout in the corridors of power, and it cannot achieve the economies of scale. As time goes on, such justifications ring more hollow. It is the modern equivalent of the emperor's new clothes—justifications are repeated, mantra-fashion, as the unquestioned and accepted wisdom of the day.

I need to make it clear that the people of Cornwall absolutely love the people of Devon and the wider south-west. They are wonderful people, and Devon is the most beautiful county in England. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) will be pleased to hear me say that. It is unquestionably true that there is love and strong regard there, one for the other.

I am not saying that Cornwall should not co-operate with other areas on a project-by-project basis. If I may continue with the metaphor of human relationships, the occasional liaison with other areas, Devon or elsewhere, can bring renewed vitality, but an enforced marriage can kill off any lust to succeed, and usually ends in tears.

[Mr. George]

Whether it is the Government's intention gradually to merge Cornwall into extinction, or whether it is not intentional, it is only right that we have an opportunity to debate it rather than having things slip away over time. It is not that I believe that we in Cornwall should join the tiny handful of certifiable people who want Cornwall to be cut off from the rest of the world—quite the opposite. It is time for Cornwall to cut itself in on the action happening around the United Kingdom, Europe and elsewhere. Cornwall has much to contribute to the celebration of diversity in Britain, in Europe and in the wider world.

Naturally, I welcome and applaud the Government's devolution achievements in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and Greater London. I also welcome the recent establishment of the campaign for the English regions. I hope that exciting development will prosper. I am pleased that the north-east constitutional convention and the campaign for the north-east seem to represent the settled will in that area. The campaign for Yorkshire and the Humber and the west midlands and north-west constitutional conventions are unquestionably exciting developments and should be encouraged. I hope that the Government will do what they can to promote them.

I am concerned, however, that uncritical acceptance of the Government's standardised regions could ultimately undermine those initiatives. I have just received a letter from the campaign for the English regions in Newcastle, inviting me to the inaugural meeting of the south-west constitutional convention steering group. In Cornwall, the routine and resounding uninterest and apathy with which the general populace of that standardised region respond may serve only to encourage such initiatives.

If we explain to people the prospects of devolving power—which the majority of people in the House and in the country would support—in the existing regions rather than in standardised regions, we stand a rather greater chance of success. In Cornwall, most normal folk demonstrate a degree of enthusiasm and patriotism for the standardised Government region of the south-west that extends to being able barely to stifle a yawn at the merest hint of the subject.

It is interesting that, as an enthusiastic decentralist, I attended the recent House of Commons launch of the campaign for the English regions in order gently to point out what was unfortunate in an otherwise good cause. At that launch, we were presented with some magnificent achievements, mainly in the north of England, which we all welcome. However, the pressing questions were about when the assemblies could be set up, what powers they would have and how they would relate to local government, quangos and so on. It was exciting stuff.

I was concerned that we were getting carried away. I felt like the boy who pointed out that the emperor had no clothes. I did not want to be churlish, but I had to ask:

What do we do if the region doesn't actually exist?

The question was met with stunned incomprehension. To many people, it was tantamount to asking whether we could redefine the boundaries of God—a question that one does not ask.

I felt that the question needed to be asked. I have to acknowledge that the good people of Yorkshire are lucky. The Government region defined for bureaucratic convenience happened to coincide, more or less, with a region that had its own recognisable identity. It was the same in other areas to a greater or lesser extent. For Cornwall and Scilly, however, the so-called south-west is a Soviet-style construction for people who are happy to be dragooned into a soulless bureaucracy without a shred of identity.

The campaign enthusiasts thought that I should be asking how soon a south-west campaign could be started. However, it would not make sense. Why destroy a region that has a unifying identity—Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly—only to create a synthetic region without an identity? It simply does not make sense.

Those of us who are concerned about the increasing apathy and low turnouts at elections have a double reason to give the creation of standardised regions not a single crumb of comfort or encouragement. The pathetically low turnouts at the latest local elections and the poor turnout at the European elections will surely be eclipsed by new heights of lethargy among an unimpressed electorate faced with bland, uniform and characterless regions. Electors would stay at home in droves if we went ahead with the standardisation of devolution in that way. I am not against decentralisation, but it must be done correctly.

If we were to decentralise powers from an over-centralised state, we should give them to places and regions that actually exist—to territories that people give a damn about. We should ensure that in the enthusiasm to decentralise, we do not simply replace a uniform state with bland and uniform regions purely for bureaucratic convenience.

For Cornwall, the only region is Cornwall—and Scilly, if it were to choose to come on board and have its distinctiveness respected. However, that idea faces such established misunderstandings that it is difficult to take so-called conventional wisdom much beyond a mindless "base camp". The first criticism is always one that dismisses and diminishes the concept. The argument goes, "Don't be silly. You can't be serious," but if one considers the alternatives, the idea is the only serious option available.

Secondly, we are told that such a notion is inconvenient; it is too late, and would cause too many problems—and where would it leave everyone else? However, that argument fails to recognise that decentralisation in its proper form can be untidy. A settlement that reflects community identity and idiosyncrasy does not fall neatly into uniform bureaucratic patterns.

The third criticism—and the one most often made—is that Cornwall is too small. It has a population of about 500,000 when, according to the Government, standardised regions are supposed to have populations 10 times that size. Our problem is that we in the UK have become too insular in our outlook. If we lift our sights above the narrow horizons of the UK, we need only look at regions in Europe and elsewhere to see that regions and provinces vary in size.

A recent brief visit to Canada demonstrated that point to me. Provinces such as Prince Edward Island with a population of 138,000, New Brunswick with one of 755,000, Newfoundland with a population similar to that of Cornwall, and Nova Scotia with a population of 939,000, all have the same powers as Quebec and Ontario, which have populations of 7.3 million and 11.5 million respectively. When service delivery, such as specialist

medical services, requires economies of scale or a large critical mass, that presents no problem. Administrators in Canada say that the problem is easily overcome by co-operation between the provinces.

Even the criticism that a Cornish region would be too insular does not stand up to analysis. Any such initiative would open up opportunities for Cornwall in a wider world. Instead of cutting it off, it would enable it to cut itself in—to the celebration of diversity that I mentioned earlier.

The primary downside is that such an initiative might give succour to a handful of people with dubious and certifiable views about Cornwall and the Cornish as a race. Such people are few in number and there would be no tolerance of such views. The prospect of compulsory kilt wearing and constant reference to genealogy would soon become tiresome.

The Liberal Democrat spokesman, my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), agrees with the proposal. Our party policy is that we should not have a set size for regions and that it is acceptable to have variable speed, variable powers, variable geography and variable size. That would help to create a distinctive relationship with the centre—the relationship between a place and central Government. We do not always need to use the same format and the same uniform approach. There is significant support for that view in Cornwall.

In recent weeks, 1,600 people in my constituency alone have signed documents, written letters and lobbied on this matter. Since I was elected, not one person in Cornwall, or in the Isles of Scilly, which are in my constituency, has lobbied me or written to me demanding that a standardised south-west regional assembly be set up.

Cornwall has opportunities. It has achieved European objective 1 status, and all those involved in securing that, especially the Government, must be congratulated. That result was also due to a popular campaign in Cornwall, and those who were in the area when it was at its height would have seen thousands of people supporting it. That required a statistical, but amicable, divorce from Devon, which allowed the distinctiveness of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly to win through. The Government must be congratulated on that.

We now have an opportunity to build on our geographical strengths and our distinctiveness so that we can establish our own brand identity, culture and community, which are necessary to sell Cornish produce. However, we can do that only if our distinctiveness is properly recognised.

As the Minister knows, I want assurances from her. I accept that the Government genuinely intend to simplify the processes involved, but objective 1 regions are finding it difficult to achieve a simplified approach. Ideally, there should be a single point of entry and a single application form for the objective 1 programme, which has been achieved in Ireland and Brittany.

The separate budget heads mean problems of accountability, both in the UK and in Europe. Objective 1 partners are meant to implement joined-up government policies on the ground, but there are four structural funds in Europe, for which four commissioners are responsible. That is not the Government's fault, but within the UK, six Government Departments have an interest in the objective 1 regions. The Department of Trade and Industry even has separate silos of funding in its own department. What is the Government's thinking about the move towards simplification and the empowerment of partners in objective 1 regions?

Since they secured objective 1 status, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly have realised that their own distinctiveness must be grasped and enhanced, and their agenda must be taken forward in a positive celebratory way that uplifts and inspires the community and the economy, and that process must be inclusive. We should be taking advantage of the opportunity to make our case, rather than having it dismissed, patronised or undermined. If that distinctiveness is not harnessed for good, it could be driven down and diverted for bad.

In recent months, for example, there has been concern in Cornwall about the vandalism and daubing out of signs and logos on the roadside and at some heritage monuments. The sign of the English rose for tourist destinations and the English Heritage sign have been affected. The two organisations responsible for those logos perhaps need to recognise that Cornwall is passionate about its distinctiveness, and many of its heritage sites were lived in and vacated long before Athelstan drew the line at the Tamar.

There is a great opportunity to develop the sense of distinctiveness in Cornwall, rather than having people express their frustration negatively through vandalism. We want to be inclusive, but we also want that distinctiveness to be recognised and harnessed, and it would not take a lot for the Government to do that. We want to unlock the door to a positive future. We want to build on the opportunity of distinctiveness rather than see it submerged in uniformity.

Perhaps the Minister will accept that the Government, certainly in recent months, have been susceptible to being criticised for control freakery. They have a chance to change that by loosening up and allowing communities and wider society to engage in a debate about diversity. In the spirit of constructive dialogue, I implore her to accept and support our agenda. We should recognise that standardisation does not help and that diversity is a good thing—something we can celebrate.

9.16 pm

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): I shall not detain the House for more than a few minutes, although my remarks are slightly longer than an intervention. I support many of the comments made by the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George). The Cornish are the west Welsh, who happen to have been cut off by an unfortunate accident of history. They lost the wrong battle at the wrong time. The Cornish are excellent engineers—they built many of the lead and silver mines in my constituency—and the hon. Gentleman must be congratulated on engineering such a long Adjournment debate on regional policy. He is a worthy successor to Trevithick in that respect.

I was concerned to hear that people in the hon. Gentleman's land—his nation, his county—using some spurious Celtic reasoning, want the kilt to be introduced. I am afraid that we have similar people in Wales, but I hope that we can form a Celtic alliance against such fashion fads and spurious ideas. The substance of the hon. Gentleman's remarks, however, was not spurious, nor historical forgery nor some Celtic daydreaming. What he had to say was extremely important for the future of regional policy in England, and I hope that the House will accept a few remarks from Wales on that subject.

[Mr. Simon Thomas]

What is a nation and what is a region is a matter of historical accident. The European Union has set up the Committee of the Regions to look after the regions in Europe, and a number of areas that are represented, such as Lombardy and Saxony, were once kingdoms. They are now regions in the EU. Luxembourg was once nothing more than a small minor region, but for some reason it has become a nation state. To take a lesson from Wales, after the Act of Union a part of Wales called Monmouth was unfortunately included in the Oxford judicial circuit. For four centuries, there was a wrestling match as to whether Monmouth was part of Wales or not, and it was not settled until the 1960s, with the establishment of the Welsh Office.

There is a lesson there for people in Cornwall and the south-west of England. They should identify with the real regions and not allow institutions and the Government to decide for them how their institutions should be organised. If the people of Cornwall want to stand up for Cornwall as an area for regional government, their voice should be clearly heard. If the Government are trying to increase public participation in government, in local elections and in the regional government to come—I think that they are intensely serious about that—the regions that are set up must identify with the people who live in them. Those regions must also identify with the communities.

I welcome the moves to regional government in England, which can only help devolution throughout the United Kingdom and support diverse and distinct communities. I was saddened when the hon. Member for St. Ives painted a picture of the destruction of Cornish institutions. I understand that Cornwall does not have a university, and that Cornish institutions have been sucked in by greater regionalisation. In Wales, we have had a long, hard battle for the past century, starting with the battle to disestablish the Church in Wales, to have institutions in Wales that reflect what the Welsh people want from their institutions. It led in time to a greater demand for self-government. The hon. Gentleman may not be ready for that yet—perhaps in a century's time!

Institutions at the right regional level build self-confidence and pride, and economic confidence can follow. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman and the Minister want to see Cornwall emerge from the situation, which Wales shares, in which we need objective 1 money to build for the future and a strengthened economy. That involves building a sense of pride into the area. One of the key steps is to have institutions at regional level that reflect and channel that pride and energy.

I welcome the debate and the comments by the hon. Gentleman, and I give him my support from across the water. Indeed, only last week, I signed the petition for a Cornish assembly, although it was sponsored by another party in Cornwall; he may not take that approach. If the Government want regional government to work, they must put the right institutions in place. They must allow regional government to reflect the way people feel in their communities, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman's views will be heard by the Government.

9.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): For a debate on Government policy on the regions, we have reached some philosophical heights tonight, and I shall do my best to respond without straying beyond my departmental brief. Feelings are obviously strong, and I acknowledge that. I thank the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) for his courtesy in letting me know some of the areas that he wished to cover, because that was helpful. I congratulate him on obtaining the debate, which is an opportunity—at perhaps more leisure than he would normally have had—to raise some of the issues he mentioned. It is good that he has been able to do so.

The hon. Gentleman started by talking about directly elected regional assemblies, and he wanted clarification of the Government's policy. He knows that the Government's longer-term policy—reflecting our commitment to the principles and practical implementation of devolution and decentralisation, which we have already demonstrated with what we have achieved—is to provide for the establishment of democratically elected regional assemblies in the English regions, where there is popular demand as demonstrated by referendums.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): Does the Minister accept that it is possible that existing regional development agencies may respond to more than one regional assembly?

Ms Hughes: If that is a point about the existing boundaries, and whether in the future a regional development agency might cover more than one area governed by a regional assembly, I have to say that at the moment we do not have a blueprint for those assemblies or a time scale for their introduction. Those policies have not yet been drawn up. I would imagine, however, that in time the assemblies would be expected to become accountable for a range of strategic issues and bodies at the regional level. That is a point to which I shall return in responding to some of the issues raised by the hon. Member for St. Ives.

We may not yet have a blueprint, but I assure hon. Members that that does not mean that we are not thinking about it. For example, on regional government in England, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has produced the first stage of a review of literature and research findings, which has broadly considered the international evidence on the range of different models of directly elected regional assemblies and their functions. We are just about to publish that first research document, which will be followed by others. We are beginning our thinking by looking at provision in other countries—some of those the hon. Gentleman mentioned, and also more widely in Europe.

Mr. George: Does the Minister know whether the document will deal with the question of size and its variability? She has not yet mentioned that issue.

Ms Hughes: The document is the first stage of some longer-term research. We are looking at what exists internationally and thus considering not only different models of directly elected assemblies but different sizes of population covered and the different functions that

have been ascribed to such bodies. When the document is published, the hon. Gentleman will see that there is much diversity in the models, range of functions and sizes of population for which directly elected assemblies in different countries are responsible. That is one of our starting points.

The hon. Gentleman asked how directly elected assemblies would work with the existing layers of democratically elected local and central government. He asked whether, for instance, a tier of government would be removed to provide for regional government. We are not in the business of adding to government specifically, but we want to make government better. I agree with the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) that that means bringing it close to the people. There must be a democratic mandate.

If there is such a mandate for a directly elected assembly, our policy, as we have demonstrated, would be to draw down functions from the centre, not pull them in from the localities. That would be the direction of our thinking. It is too early to say what that would mean in practice for each region, but we would need to take careful note of what people in each of the regions think. Several options needs to be explored before decisions are made. I hope that the hon. Member for St. Ives accepts that.

Our basic starting point is that regional government not only cannot happen, but will not increase democratic participation—the hon. Gentleman made this point—without popular consensus, understanding and support among local people. To achieve that, we must be satisfied that people in the regions are absolutely clear about the aims, functions and expectations of any new regional tier, so that they feel motivated to support it.

Mr. George: In view of that, has the Department or the Minister had an opportunity to review any lessons learned from last year's European elections when, for the first time, they were based on the standardised Government regions and in which, certainly in most areas, there was concern about low turnout?

Ms Hughes: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is trying to draw me into a debate on some form or other of proportional representation as a means of increasing democratic participation, but I shall not be drawn down that route. He will know that the aim of increasing participation in local, European and, indeed, national elections concerns us. Turnouts in local elections and, in some areas, European elections are of great concern. We need to address that issue because as politicians we cannot feel that we have much of a mandate unless more people participate in elections.

The hon. Member for St. Ives briefly raised the question of how regional government might relate to our proposals for city mayors. I welcome the opportunity to comment on that. As the hon. Gentleman said, the Local Government Bill provides for strong mayors—possibly city mayors—based on existing local authority areas and functions. That raises some interesting questions. We share the public's belief, revealed in a number of surveys, that mayors offer a good prospect of rejuvenation of local democracy in some areas. City mayors have the potential to be important players on the regional scene.

Debates about regional governance have to engage with the local agenda. Through the Local Government Bill and the opportunities it provides, we are deliberately attempting to create the potential for greater plurality and fluidity in the democratic landscape at regional and sub-regional level. We have started from the belief that if we can infuse some diversity into our democratic arrangements, we are likely to arrive at different arrangements in different areas which are more likely to engage local people. We are approaching a state of fluidity.

Through the Local Government Bill, we are attempting to strengthen local authorities and give them a power of well-being and some strategic responsibilities, and to enable the establishment of elected mayors. In all of that, we are trying to change the stultified and unified form of local democratic structures. The implications for the future of regional government are that different arrangements will unfold in different regions. To the extent that that was the thrust of the argument advanced by the hon. Member for St. Ives, I agree with him.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I would recommend the Spanish model. That country had to learn how democracy functions very quickly; it did so by allowing its different regions to develop at different speeds. It is no use asking the Spanish how it works: their response would be, "It works." Rather than look at all the concepts and theories, they simply allow their democracy to flourish.

Ms Hughes: My hon. Friend makes a very valid point, citing an extremely interesting example.

With devolution at a higher level in Wales and Scotland, and our efforts to strengthen local government and create fluidity, a climate is generated in which we cannot foresee the way in which the political landscape at regional and sub-regional level will pan out. We are providing for difference and diversity. Perhaps the end result will not be what the hon. Member for St. Ives wants, but we are creating the potential for different arrangements to be arrived at according to different time scales in different parts of the country. We shall have to wait and see how that works out. A key element in any future arrangement will be local people's perception of what is right for their area.

We have begun by creating regional development agencies to address urgent economic and regeneration issues in the regions. They are beginning to have a considerable impact, both individually within each region, and collectively to even out performance as between the regions. People will want take into account the RDAs' impact if and when they decide whether they want to go further and establish directly elected assemblies. The extent to which a local RDA has an impact will have a bearing on the formulation of local people's views on that issue.

In addition, we now have chambers in all the eight regions. It is important to mention those, as they are widely inclusive partnerships of all the stakeholders. They are not directly elected, but they comprise the elected representatives of the constituent authorities. They are developing an interesting role in different parts of the country and they are certainly adding value in many areas. The south-west of England regional chamber, in particular, has worked closely and constructively with the

[Ms Hughes]

South West of England regional development agency on economic strategy and is working on planning guidance. The agencies have a real role to play.

One of the core arguments of the hon. Gentleman's speech concerned what he referred to as the Government's "definition" of the regions. When we drew up the boundaries of the regional development agencies, we decided to base them on the areas covered by Government offices for the regions. Obviously, there were administrative and common-sense reasons for doing so. The boundaries already existed and had become familiar building blocks to constituent institutions, such as local authorities, and the areas offered population levels at which it was felt that regional economic strategies could make a difference.

I was interested in the hon. Gentleman's comment about the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), who leads for the Liberal Democrats on policy in this area—the hon. Gentleman said that his hon. Friend was now convinced that regions could be of different sizes and have different boundaries from those of Government offices and RDAs. One of the key points in a paper produced by one regional Liberal Democrat party in January on directly elected regional assemblies was that such assemblies would take over from the RDA and the Government office. That implies a clear acceptance of the existing regional boundaries.

I accept politically all that the hon. Gentleman said about celebrating diversity and difference and about that being an important part of our national heritage and cultural life. I would add another argument to his analysis, however, as I do not think that that celebration necessarily requires that all the administrative and strategic structures should be coterminous with the area one thinks has a clear coherent cultural identity.

Another question that we need to ask, in terms of a democratically elected institution, or an organisation such as an RDA, for example, is what the regional structure is for. There are questions about the sort of strategic decision making and the area for which it is sensible to think about that—whether it is for transport, economic development and regeneration or whatever. What sort of area is it sensible for the institutions to cover to have the scope to make the sort of strategic decisions that will have an impact on the people who live there?

Mr. George: I do not know where the paper to which the Minister referred came from, but I spoke to the Liberal Democrat party's official spokesman before this debate and party policy is certainly clear, as I set out.

On the subject on which the hon. Lady was elaborating, does she accept that there is a potential conflict? I mentioned branding. Clearly, a place with a distinctive identity could use it for economic purposes and gain. However, if a region without an identity surrounds it and wants to establish its own identity, there could be a conflict. It would be far better to establish a region that recognises cultural diversity because there are clear economic as well as administrative benefits.

Ms Hughes: In response to the hon. Gentleman, I am minded to cite my region in the north-west. The regional development agency, and any future directly elected assembly, will cover the north-west region. The organisations involved in the convention are not discussing any boundary other than the existing north-west Government office boundary as a suitable boundary for any future directly elected assembly.

Within that area, there is no difficulty with Manchester, Greater Manchester, Merseyside, Liverpool and parts of Cheshire and Lancashire having, for other purposes, under the umbrella of the north-west region, their own clear branding and institutions of their own to market and propagate that branding for inward investment purposes. From my experience, there does not seem to be a contradiction. Sub-regions may have distinct identities and may perform certain functions and yet be part of a larger region that might be necessary for other strategic purposes. It may make sense to have the scale of population, area or resources of the larger region, to bring about the changes that will benefit all the people in all the sub-regional divisions.

I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, and I know that he comes to the debate with a great deal of feeling. I acknowledge that, but I point out to him another argument. Noting and celebrating cultural diversity does not necessarily mean that the area that is culturally distinct must, for all purposes, have its own directly elected body or administrative agency. The celebration of diversity and difference is entirely compatible with a wider regional identity for other strategic purposes for which that makes sense.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned objective 1, the control of bureaucracy and red tape, and the possibility of a single point of entry as a means of overcoming problems that existed in the past. The Government office will provide a single point of entry for project applications, although discussion is still taking place with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. There are still issues to be resolved, but the Government office is working hard to achieve a single point of entry.

I am delighted that Cornwall and Scilly have secured objective 1 status. As the hon. Gentleman knows, that will bring in a substantial amount of additional money over the next seven years. That will offer an important opportunity to help to turn around Cornwall's economy. There is great potential for the local partners to have a say in the programmes and projects through which the money will be spent and change will be achieved.

In the various initiatives that we have taken, particularly the new deal for communities, and continuing through the strategy for neighbourhood renewal, it is a hallmark of this Government that we have learned the lessons of the past. Such projects and programmes are not sustainable unless they are owned by the people whom they affect, and unless the people feel that they have a real stake in what is done and the way in which it is done. Through the priority management groups and the programme monitoring committee, which is made up of representatives of the various sectors within the region, the local partners will have a substantial say.

The hon. Gentleman said that the Government seem intent on the gradual extinction of Cornwall, but we have no such objective. We certainly do not want Cornwall to become extinct. We want it to continue to celebrate its

many strengths and to build on those to the benefit of its people. For the reasons that I have outlined, I cannot say here and now that, in future, Cornwall will have its own directly elected assembly; but the Government are not into control freakery. We want the communities in the regions to engage in the process of enhancing democratic participation and to feel that they have a stake in the future of their area, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that the Government are doing a great deal to achieve that. We shall support Cornwall in future in any way we can.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at fourteen minutes to Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 22 June 2000

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

LONDON LOCAL AUTHORITIES BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

Order for consideration, as amended, read.

To be considered on Thursday 29 June.

MERSEY TUNNELS BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Thursday 29 June.

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Pension Increase

1. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby): If he will estimate the cost to public funds of the 75p increase in the basic state pension in the current financial year. [125824]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): Three hundred and seventy million pounds.

Mr. Robathan: I suspect that, like me, the Minister is just old enough to remember the 1959 general election, when Hugh Gaitskell promised to give every pensioner an immediate rise of 10 shillings on the old age state pension. After some 41 years of Labour rhetoric and a certain amount of inflation, is the Minister ashamed that this Government can manage only a 15 shilling rise? As an heir of Gaitskell and the Labour movement, is the Minister surprised that pensioners are increasingly disillusioned with this Government?

Mr. Smith: I do not recall the 1959 election—the relevant one for our purposes is the 1997 election. The hon. Gentleman would do well to recall that we shall spend, in real terms, £6.5 billion extra on pensioners during this Parliament, compared with what they would have got from the Conservatives.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the great concern expressed to me by pensioners in my constituency that if the Conservatives win power, pensioners will have their £150 winter fuel allowance taken away, as well as the free television licences for the over-75s and even the little sum at Christmas that helps them to buy presents for their grandchildren? That is the Conservatives' policy, with Portillo the pickpocket of pensioners' purses.

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is right. Pensioners have been appalled to discover that under the Conservatives they would lose the winter fuel payment, the free television licences and the Christmas bonuses. Not only that, 140,000 more pensioners would pay tax and that would hit those on the minimum income guarantee. The Conservatives' policy would not help pensioners; instead, it would hit the poorest pensioners hardest.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): Why should the pensions increase be based on last year's inflation when the motorists tax increase is being based on future inflation? While the Chief Secretary is thinking of an answer to that, could he tell us how many Labour Members have made representations about the 75p increase?

Mr. Smith: The uprating of the state pension based on the inflation figure for the previous September is a long-standing practice that was introduced by the Conservatives in 1988.

Charitable Giving

2. **Mr. Ian Pearson** (Dudley, South): What discussions his Department plans with voluntary sector bodies on the changes to the taxation of charitable giving set out in the Budget. [125825]

4. **Mr. Tom Clarke** (Coatbridge and Chryston): What impact he estimates his plans to encourage greater use of payroll giving will have on the charity sector. [125827]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): The getting Britain giving package of measures, which I announced in the Budget, gives the most generous tax relief on donations by individuals and companies, including donations of shares to charities, and has involved extensive co-operation and consultation with the voluntary sector.

We will now also bring forward a proposal that the voluntary sector, business leaders, employees representatives and people from the marketing and advertising industry examine proposals for a national campaign to promote the giving not only of money, but of time. Our objective for the payroll giving campaign, which will be launched in September, is to more than double donations to charities through payroll giving. Our changes have been broadly welcomed by the charities.

Mr. Pearson: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply and congratulate him on the steps that he is taking to encourage venture philanthropy and other forms of charitable giving. Andrew Carnegie's dictum that wealth brings responsibility was forgotten under the Tories, but philanthropy—giving something back—is an important part of what being a Labour Government is all about. Is not the big issue now the importance of letting people know about the opportunities that exist to give to worthy

causes, and can we speed up and financially support the proposals for a national television, press and radio marketing campaign to promote a new age of giving?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. As he rightly points out, the ceiling on payroll donations to charity under the previous Government was £1,200 and that has been lifted altogether. Individual donations below £400 did not attract tax relief, but now all individual donations do so. We will work with the industry and with charities to publicise the giving of time as well as money.

In addition, we are about to introduce a children's fund that will give grants to innovative projects that are being run by community and charitable organisations. We are making changes in our sure start programme so that charity and community organisations can become involved, and we are creating an alliance for children that will bring together all the charitable organisations involved in helping children. We have had extensive consultations with children's charities on those matters.

As I said, our proposals have been broadly welcomed by the charities involved. Mr. Brophy, of the Charities Aid Foundation, said about the Budget in March that it introduced

some of the most radical changes to charitable giving ever.

He added that at a stroke, Labour had

created a new age of giving.

Mr. Clarke: Is my right hon. Friend aware that there is much enthusiasm among voluntary organisations in my constituency about his various initiatives on world debt? Many of them want to contribute to organisations such as Christian Aid, Oxfam and, in Scotland, the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund. Does he therefore appreciate that his proposals are welcome to the Churches and charitable organisations, as they indicate both community and global involvement?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, and I applaud his work in furthering the cause of debt relief in the third world. Christian Aid issued a statement to the effect that it believed that the measures introduced in the Budget may help it to gain an additional £1 million in its charitable efforts for fund raising this year. Many people, not least my mother, have written to the Treasury asking us to do more on third-world aid. I believe that the proposals in the Budget help not only third-world charities, but all charities.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Does the right hon. Gentleman understand the concern of the Industrial Careers Foundation, about which I have written to him twice since the Budget? It is worried that companies are assumed to make net donations, that they have to reclaim the tax themselves and that the charities are not able to do so on their behalf. This year, as a result of his changes and because of the structure of its donor profile, the ICF will lose no less than £5,000.

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reminding me of the letter that he sent to me at the Treasury. Despite what he says, our proposals have been widely welcomed across the board. We have made it easier than ever for companies to give money to charities. We have introduced changes that the previous Conservative Government did not even contemplate.

I have a letter from the British Legion, arising from changes that we have made to the treatment of value added tax on poppies—another matter with which the previous Government did not deal. My correspondent says that he had the opportunity to make a statement about that VAT relief to his annual conference, and he tells me that it was "extremely well received".

Mr. Michael Portillo (Kensington and Chelsea): As the Chancellor claims to be helping charities, may I help him with his arithmetic? His changes to advance corporation tax have cost charities £500 million a year. His further claim, which is not necessarily substantiated, is that £400 million has been given back to the charities. Will he tell the House plainly: does that leave the charities better off, or worse off?

Mr. Brown: We have given £1.2 billion in additional relief to charities as a result of the ACT changes that we introduced. In addition, despite what was said about those changes, there has been a 20 per cent. increase in the amount of dividends that charities have received from company fund raising. As for verification of the figures on the generosity of the tax package in the Budget, £350 million is the figure that has been used by the Charities Aid Foundation and by individual charities.

However much he wants to, the right hon. Gentleman cannot deny that the previous Conservative Government talked a lot about helping charities, but never did what we have done. Our measures have been welcomed right across the board. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations said that our changes in the Budget were "very welcome". It is only one of a number of organisations that support our measures. Charities are better off as a result of what we are doing.

Mr. Portillo: That is simply not the case. The Chancellor put the tax package figure at £350 million, but he has taken away £500 million. However, if he will not take that from me, will he take it from the chief executive of Barnardos? He said that the Chancellor

is giving with one hand what he has already taken away with another.

Do not the charities know that the Government are taking away more than they have given? Is it not the case that no one believes a word that the Chancellor says?

If the right hon. Gentleman will not listen to Barnardos, will he listen to Ian Campbell, who is the director of another charity? He said:

The Chancellor sets up backdoor burdens on us. Spin doctors may think that sweeteners can con electors but they distrust politicians who say one thing and do another.

Does not that explain why Labour Back Benchers are now openly briefing against the Chancellor? Do not people in the country now contrast what the Chancellor says with what he does? Do they not say to themselves, in the words of the Deputy Prime Minister:

Isn't this spinning, and spinning is lying?

Mr. Brown: If the shadow Chancellor wants to be consistent, let him repeat the words that he used about the Conservative party. He said that the Tories were linked to

harshness and thought to be uncaring about unemployment, poverty, poor housing, disability and single parenthood. He said they were thought to favour greed and the unqualified pursuit of the free market, with a devil-take-the-hindmost attitude. That is hardly an attitude that would commend itself to the charities that operate throughout the country.

Barnardos is involved with us in setting up the children's fund, and it welcomes what we are doing in this area. Let us remember that it was the previous Government who put VAT on fuel. We have extended VAT exemptions to more charity fund-raising events, broadened the VAT zero rate for sale and hire of donated goods, broadened the VAT zero rate for charity advertising, given greater VAT relief on the sale by charities of donated goods, extended VAT relief for the provision of rooms for disabled people in day centres and increased to £100,000 the limit below which charities and other businesses do not have to account for VAT on goods in hand. We have taken action to deal with abuses of VAT, with which the previous Government failed to deal.

The right hon. Gentleman cannot deny that, for the first time, individual donations to charities can be made with tax exemption for all such donations from the Government. Equally, companies can make individual donations and receive tax relief. That is something that the Tory party never did and, from what the shadow Chancellor says about it, would never do.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is not one of the reasons why the Tories are not keen on large benefactors giving money to charity is that Brian Souter finances the Tory party campaign from Scotland, Paul Sykes finances the Tory party campaign from Yorkshire and Michael Ashcroft finances the Tory party campaign from Belize and the House of Lords? Why does my right hon. Friend not tell those three people that it is a waste of money? What is the point of giving money to this tinpot Tory party? It is like chucking money down the drain.

Mr. Brown: I agree with my hon. Friend. The Conservative party is not a charity and never will be.

Independent Schools

3. **Mr. Christopher Chope** (Christchurch): What the annual net cost or benefit to the Exchequer is of the charitable status of independent schools. [125826]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): There are no official statistics, but the Government are working in partnership with the sector, as the hon. Gentleman knows.

Mr. Chope: I thank the Minister for that reply. Can he confirm that independent schools provide excellent value for money to the Exchequer and the taxpayer? They save the Exchequer having to fund some 600,000 school places out of taxation. For every pound received in charitable relief, the sum of £2 is spent on community benefit. Some £180 million is received in foreign earnings each year.

Why are the Government obsessed with making remarks detrimental to the success of independent schools and universities? Why do they not concentrate instead of trying to improve standards in state schools? Why does the Minister think that the number of pupils educated in independent schools has risen during the lifetime of this Government, rather than declined?

Mr. Smith: The Government do recognise the distinctive strengths and contributions of the sector, which is why we are working in partnership with it. We believe that there are clear educational and social benefits from that collaboration. That is why we have set up our partnerships fund scheme, which this year will benefit 6,000 pupils from both state and independent schools on collaborative projects—part of a £400,000 fund that is available this year. So I dispute the hon. Gentleman's assertion, and repeat that we are committed to working in partnership, drawing on the strengths of both sectors.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): In the lottery of British life, far too many of the big prizes go to the 7 per cent. of people who are educated privately. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the social costs associated with this far outweigh the small sums referred to by the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope)? Does my right hon. Friend agree with the former deputy leader of the party, and myself, in that we can never be a mature and progressive country while the levers of power of our nation are so often exercised by people who have been educated in public schools?

Mr. Smith: The important thing is that this Government and our party stand for opportunity for all, regardless of their background or, for that matter, the school that they go to. However, it cannot be acceptable when, for example, 67 per cent. of those achieving the top grades at A-level come from state schools, but achieve only 52 per cent. of the places at the top universities. That is what our campaign for opportunity for all is about: ensuring that everybody, regardless of background or education, has the opportunity to make the most of his or her potential.

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): As the Minister will be aware, all educational institutions, as well as charities, suffer considerable tax costs as a result of irrecoverable VAT as well as the £500 million lost on ACT recovery. What plans have the Government for reforming the arbitrary and unjust VAT imposition on charities as well as for compensating for the ACT cost? Those are the two key issues about which charities, and in particular educational charities, are concerned.

Mr. Smith: I note that during the 18 years they had the chance to do something about that, the Conservatives did nothing at all. When we talk about the independent sector we are not just talking about conventional public schools; we are talking about the state schools, the choir schools and the ballet schools, as well as those educating children with special needs and those serving ethnic and religious groups. Those with charitable status are, of course, benefiting from all the measures that the present Government have taken to promote charitable giving, and that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has just set out.

Employment (North-East)

5. **Ms Dari Taylor** (Stockton, South): What assessment he has made of the impact of his economic policies on levels of employment and unemployment in the north-east. [125828]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): In the north-east, as in the rest of the United Kingdom, we have created a sound and credible platform of economic stability; we have also created the new deal and the working families tax credit, which will help us to attain our objective of high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the election, employment in the north-east has risen by 20,000 and unemployment has fallen by 19,000. There are more than a million people in work in the north-east, the highest-ever figure.

Ms Taylor: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Has any consideration been given to extending the new deal as a training and employment programme? In my constituency, overall unemployment has dropped by 13 per cent.; youth unemployment by 54 per cent.; and long-term unemployment by 57 per cent. It has been without doubt a success. Will my right hon. Friend refute the statement by the shadow Chancellor that the new deal has been an expensive failure? It has been a cost-effective success in my constituency.

Mr. Brown: This is the difference between the two parties: we will extend the new deal to give young people, the long-term unemployed, single parents and others greater opportunities to get jobs. In that way, we are creating nearly a million jobs. The Conservative party would abolish the new deal and the working families tax credit. While it talks about full employment, it is removing the means by which we can achieve it.

It is very interesting that throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the shadow Chancellor never mentioned the words "full employment" as a commitment of the Conservative party. When he was at the Treasury and unemployment was rising, he said nothing about full employment. When he was Secretary of State for Employment, he said nothing about full employment. Even when the election was over and he was criticising the Conservative party for being harsh and uncaring, he said nothing about full employment. Now, as the next Conservative party leadership election comes nearer, he tells us that he supports full employment. If the Conservative party supports full employment, why is it trying to abolish the new deal, which is helping to create full employment?

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Is not the Chancellor of the Exchequer ashamed that under his stewardship at the Treasury there have been closures, not least at Samsung in the constituency of his right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and a plant within the Vale of York, as well as Siemens in the north-east? When will he take measures to tackle the high level of the pound, the low level of the euro and record unemployment in manufacturing and farming?

Mr. Brown: The record closures happened under Conservative Governments: 1 million manufacturing jobs were lost in the early 1980s and another 1 million in the early 1990s. The Government are creating jobs—nearly 1 million of them. If the hon. Lady wants to help us to create jobs, she should tell the shadow Chancellor to support the new deal instead of trying to abandon it.

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): May I draw to the Chancellor's attention a proposal by Sage, an information technology company on Tyneside, to create a new cluster of enterprises centred in the employment area just north of Newcastle, which would bring the benefits of employment to the whole of Tyne and Wear? May I also draw to his attention the proposals of the regional assembly of councils and the regional development agency, which will be published today and tomorrow? They are offering significant proposals to bring about in the north-east of England the self-sustaining growth that we have not had for many years. Will he respond to those proposals with more support and more investment through the comprehensive spending review?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising those points. I have visited Sage in Newcastle, and I can say that we shall announce more help in future for the regional development agencies, including One North-East, to allow them to adopt the kind of strategy that he mentioned. In the north-east, 40,000 more jobs have been created during the past year alone. I have examined the unemployment figures for each constituency: since the general election, there has been only one Conservative Member from the north-east, and youth unemployment in his constituency has fallen by 60 per cent. and long-term unemployment by 50 per cent. Jobs are up in the north-east, vacancies are up in the north-east, investment is up in the north-east—all of which the Conservatives would find out if ever they were up in the north-east.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): Is the Chancellor aware that businesses in the north-east have expressed serious alarm about his decision to impose a new energy tax—the so-called climate change levy—from next April? Businesses have told the Chancellor and the Treasury that that new tax will threaten future investment and jobs. Why does the Chancellor ignore the voice of industry, which produces investment and jobs? Does he agree that the new energy tax is completely unnecessary as the environmental changes to meet our international commitment could be far more easily achieved by other means?

Why is the Chancellor imposing a new stealth tax that all businesses, of whatever size, will have to pay, but which will bear particularly heavily on the manufacturing industries of the north-east, which face international competition? Is the Chancellor aware that the Government's talk of partnership with industry is mere empty rhetoric if he is simultaneously imposing new burdens and taxes on the wealth-producing sectors of the economy?

Mr. Brown: The longer the right hon. Gentleman speaks, the less convincing he becomes. Let me remind him that the climate change levy originated in a proposal from a committee chaired by Lord Marshall, the president of the Confederation of British Industry. The proposal is revenue neutral for businesses and for manufacturing industry. There will be no revenue gain to the Treasury.

May I also remind the right hon. Gentleman that we have done something that the Conservative party never did, by cutting corporation tax to the lowest level in the industrialised countries? We have also cut small business tax to the same level. Given that unemployment is at 1.5 per cent. in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency—and in that of the shadow Chancellor—I should have thought that he would congratulate the Government on creating jobs. In my constituency, the Rosyth unemployed workers centre existed for 15 years under a Conservative Government, but will soon hold an emergency meeting to decide whether to disband because we have created jobs. If the Conservatives want to help us to create employment, they should start backing the new deal instead of attacking it.

Married Persons Tax Allowance

6. **Dr. Brian Iddon** (Bolton, South-East): What representations he has received on the impact of the withdrawal of the married persons tax allowance on those who receive DSS benefits. [125829]

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): The Chancellor regularly receives representations on all aspects of the tax system.

Dr. Iddon: One of my constituents has lost more than £15 per month—even after all the Budget changes and his increase in benefit have been taken into consideration—largely due to the loss of the married couples allowance. He had to retire early because of cardiovascular disease and take incapacity benefit. Although he receives a small occupational pension, I do not consider him to be well off. Will my hon. Friend agree to look again at how the Budget 2000 has affected such incapacity benefit recipients?

Dawn Primarolo: I am sure that my hon. Friend fully appreciates that, without all the facts, it is difficult to respond to individual cases. The relationship between tax reliefs and qualifying benefits in the DSS system is complex. Of course, I am prepared to look again, with my hon. Friend, at the particular circumstances of his constituent.

I remind my hon. Friend that the withdrawal of the married couples allowance was to enable the Government to focus on families with children and to start by helping the very poorest first. The children's tax credit, which will start next April and could be worth as much £8.50 a week to families, is being advertised and families are being written to directly to encourage them to apply. I am sure that he would agree that the Government should always start by helping those who are the poorest in our society.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): Will the Government now apologise to those couples in which an older partner is of pensionable age after 5 April this year? They will now be up to £500 a year worse off as a direct result of the abolition of the pensioners married couples allowance.

Dawn Primarolo: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman understands that those pensioners who receive the married couples allowance will retain that—they have not lost it. With the withdrawal of the married couples allowance, there are a number of other additions in the tax system for those aged under 65: the 10p starting rate for tax; the reduction to 22p; and the introduction of the children's tax credit, which will be worth up to £442 a year—far more than the married couples allowance. There are several other benefits in the system.

The hon. Gentleman sat on the Treasury Select Committee so he knows all that. Instead of saying that pensioners are losing their married couples allowance, he should remind people that those pensioners who receive it are keeping it.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): That is all very well, but does the hon. Lady not realise how the withdrawal of the married couples allowance for pensioners discriminates against male pensioners of 64 years of age? How does she justify that?

Dawn Primarolo: Pensioners will qualify at the age of 65 for the age-related allowance. That will put them in a far better position than non-pensioners. They will have the winter allowance of £150 that they have not previously received. They will have the benefit of the tax changes of 10p and 22p. The hon. Gentleman just wants to cherry-pick; he does not want to look at the whole set of changes to see how people's positions are being improved. He is considering only one of those changes. I encourage him to consider the matter in the round.

HIPC

7. **Ms Julia Drown** (South Swindon): What assessment he has made of the time scale for the implementation of the heavily indebted poor countries initiative. [125830]

14. **Mr. Tony Colman** (Putney): If he will make a statement on his discussions with the IMF on debt relief for the heavily indebted poor countries. [125839]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): The funding available for debt relief is proceeding this year. Five countries—Uganda, Bolivia, Mauritania, Mozambique and Tanzania—have already reached their decision points under the enhanced initiative agreed at Cologne last year. Another four—Senegal, Burkina Faso, Honduras and Benin—are expected to come to the boards for their decision points before the G8 Summit in Japan next month.

To speed up the timetable, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development and I wrote to the managing director of the International Monetary Fund and the chairman of the World Bank suggesting a joint implementation unit; that has now been set up and has begun its work. This week, we sent two officials to Washington to work with it.

We shall continue to work closely with our G8 partners, the IMF and the World Bank to ensure that what the whole world wants is achieved—further progress on debt relief for those countries where poverty reduction is essential.

Ms Drown: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Although the Government deserve much congratulation for leading the way on debt relief, thousands of people in this country expected more debt relief to have been

achieved by now. I ask my right hon. Friend to be a little more specific about the concrete proposals that the Government will take to the Okinawa summit, so that we can hope—in this new millennium—for the debt relief needed to ensure that the huge waste of life that we see at the moment becomes a thing of the past.

Mr. Brown: I thank my hon. Friend and colleagues in the House for their work in publicising the international debt issue. We have agreed that there will be £100 billion of debt relief, and we have set up the implementation unit in the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to consider the issues affecting individual countries. It is unfortunate that 11 of the potential recipients of debt relief are now in civil war or in conflict. That makes it difficult to agree solutions to their problems and to have the guarantee that the money will go to poverty reduction. However, we are continuing with our efforts to make progress on this matter and new proposals will be made at the Japan summit.

I can inform my hon. Friend that the funding problem, which was the immediate blockage last year, has been solved for this year. We must now ensure that countries that are ending or moving out of civil wars can get debt relief as quickly as possible and that those that are not in civil war can get through the process with speed. That is our aim.

Mr. Colman: I wish to mention a country that is not in civil war and that has recently returned to democracy. Does my right hon. Friend agree with the leader in the *Financial Times* of 19 June which argued for Nigeria's inclusion in the HIPC initiative—a call that was backed up from the United States by Larry Summers and from the Commonwealth by Chief Emeka Anyaoku, who this week returns to Nigeria? Will my right hon. Friend use his considerable influence at the IMF and the World Bank to press for the inclusion of Nigeria in the HIPC initiative? There is a crucial need for Nigeria to be backed on its return to democracy, given its importance to the region.

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his interest in Nigeria. Since Nigeria returned to democracy, we have taken an interest in trying to help it speed through the process of both debt reduction and economic recovery. Two proposals are being worked through at the moment. The first is to achieve agreement on the IMF programme that would provide help to Nigeria in the short and the long term, and the other is to move forward with the Paris Club creditors to secure the necessary debt relief.

As my hon. Friend knows, the scale of the debt problems in Nigeria is enormous. The problems that have built up over the years are difficult to solve, but the two initiatives, in which Britain has led the way since Nigeria's return to democracy, will be pursued vigorously with the rest of the world community.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): The Chancellor deserves congratulations on following with such energy the precedent set by the former Prime Minister on the debt relief operation. Will the right hon. Gentleman assure us that, when debt relief is given, the monitoring of whether the money thus saved is duly spent on health and education, as is the intention, is robust?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I support everyone on both sides of the House who has made the effort to make debt reduction a central issue for the world community.

The conditionality is that the money that was previously spent on debt should go to health, education or anti-poverty programmes. It is because we have now agreed, as international institutions, that countries must sign up to a poverty reduction strategy that it is possible for money to be spent in that way, and to monitor how it is spent. For example, Uganda has promised that, when it receives the debt relief, it will use it to halve the pupil-teacher ratio in its schools from 100:1, which is an appalling rate for a country in any part of the world, to 50:1. We want the countries that receive debt relief to introduce such measures.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I, too, welcome the Chancellor's announcement about the further progress made by the original 10 countries to meet the HIPC conditions. However, what personal representations have the British Government made, either directly to the countries or through the World Bank, to ensure that countries in civil war meet the conditions of good governance? They should be able to see how, by meeting the conditions of good governance and getting rid of the problems of civil war, they could be helped into the HIPC initiative, and that would improve the standard of living of their peoples.

Mr. Brown: That is exactly the message that has gone out, particularly from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, who should be praised for making fighting corruption as well as good governance a central issue with every country that she talks to about debt relief and poverty reduction. The Government have also offered countries that are either moving out of conflict or simply trying to solve debt relief problems specific help in making representations to the IMF and the World Bank and, indeed, in convening as a group of countries so that they can make far greater progress with international institutions. I am determined that we use this year to make as fast progress as possible, because that is one way in which we can respond to the massive expression of public opinion which demands that we have a solution to what has been an intractable problem for years.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): My right hon. Friend's initiative in persuading the G7 countries to reduce the debt of heavily indebted poor countries is greatly appreciated, but globalisation is steaming on and poorer countries are not sharing in the wealth thus created. Today, Oxfam will report that 200 children an hour are dying in poorer countries, and that we are unlikely to reach the Copenhagen target of reducing the number of child deaths in the poorest countries by two thirds by 2015. Will he, as a matter of

urgency, attempt to persuade the G8 countries to act to cut debt and to make more resources available, so that poverty can be tackled?

Mr. Brown: It is true that 30,000 children die unnecessarily every day as a result of our failure to tackle poverty and malnutrition. Around the world, 200 million people, adults and children, can barely move their bodies because of hunger and suffering. It is incumbent on us to take a lead as a Government and as a country.

In the longer term, we need to replace the vicious circle of debt, poverty and underdevelopment with a virtuous circle of debt relief, poverty reduction and economic development. To achieve those three aims, the IMF and the World Bank have been persuaded to have poverty reduction strategies for each of the poorest countries and to help those countries to make the transition to economic development. That is what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development is trying to do. As everyone knows, there is a world target to halve poverty by 2015. That is not enough in itself, but that is the target that we have set and we are determined to take action to meet it.

Married Women (National Insurance)

8. **Mr. Steve Webb** (Northavon): If he will estimate the number of married women who were paying national insurance in 1990–91 at the reduced rate for married women in circumstances where they would have paid less national insurance had they paid the full rate of national insurance contributions. [125832]

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): In 1990-91, under the previous Government, about 60,000 married women could have paid more national insurance contributions at the reduced rate than if they had paid at the full rate. With effect from April 1999, the Government ended that situation.

Mr. Webb: I am grateful to the Paymaster General for that estimate of the number of women suffering that injustice. Does she accept that those 60,000 women were paying more national insurance than other women in the same workplace, but receiving no pension rights, unlike their neighbours, and that that was bizarre, unjust and unfair? That injustice was created under the previous Government; will the hon. Lady do something to rectify it?

Dawn Primarolo: The hon. Gentleman knows that from 1948 to 1977, married women had the ability to elect to pay reduced national insurance contributions. Women had to apply for the reduced rate and sign a declaration stating that they fully understood that the reduced rate would mean reduced entitlement. That was changed in 1977 and the Department of Social Security ran publicity campaigns, both through employers and directly to individuals, to remind people that they could withdraw that declaration and return to making full contributions. The reasons why some women chose not to withdraw it are a matter for them.

Child Poverty

9. **Judy Mallaber** (Amber Valley): What will be the impact on levels of child poverty of the changes to the working families tax credit announced in the Budget. [125833]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): The Budget increased the rates of income support and working families tax credit by £4.35 for each child under 16. As a result of that and of other changes to the tax and benefits system made during this Parliament, a family with two children on half average earnings will, by the end of the Parliament, be £2,600 a year better off.

Judy Mallaber: During last week's national child minding week and the preceding child care week, I spoke to parents and child care providers in my constituency about the value of the child care tax credit linked to the working families tax credit. Does my hon. Friend agree that the working families tax credit and the child care tax credit are among the most important weapons the Government can use against child poverty, because they both boost family incomes and give parents real choices on whether to enter paid employment? Will he tell the House how many parents currently receive the child care tax credit and will he take further steps to promote its take-up?

Mr. Timms: My hon. Friend is quite right. Well over 100,000 people have taken up the child care tax credit, which has been a big success and represents almost three times the level of payment under the earnings disregard in family credit. We are ensuring that every applicant for the working families tax credit knows about the child care tax credit and, as my hon. Friend asked, we shall continue to draw attention to it. We shall also remind families that the Opposition would abolish it if they had the chance.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Will the Minister look into a problem that one of my constituents has raised with me? She has received the working families tax credit through the post office since its introduction. She now has to switch to getting the credit from her employer, and is moving from receiving it in advance to receiving it in arrears, which is causing her real financial problems in looking after her children. Also, the money that the post office was earning for paying out the credit has been removed. Will the Minister look into the possibility of people receiving the credit through post offices and not necessarily through employers?

Mr. Timms: The hon. Gentleman acknowledges the importance of the working families tax credit in helping many people to return to work. I am pleased that so many people have taken it up. I am certainly happy to look at any individual case that the hon. Gentleman may wish to draw to my attention.

Mobile Telephone Licences

10. **Mr. Lindsay Hoyle** (Chorley): If he will make a statement on the revenue received from the auction of the third-generation mobile telephone licences. [125834]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): Receipts from the third-generation mobile spectrum auction will total £22.5 billion. That is good news. We have already received £12 billion, and I told the House on 17 April that those proceeds would be used to reduce net debt. On Monday 12 June, we set out how we plan to do that.

Mr. Hoyle: That is very good news. Can we make it even better for certain parts of the population? This Government have helped pensioners after 18 years in which they were neglected. Here is a golden opportunity to help them even more by introducing free television licences for all pensioners. Alternatively, can full consideration be given to a windfall for all pensioners using third-generation money? If we are using that money to reduce debt, perhaps we can put the debt repayments that we will save ourselves towards helping pensioners.

Mr. Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for his suggestions. Of course, the whole country benefits from reduced debt payments and reduced debt interest achieved as a result of having diminished the millstone of debt that we inherited from the Conservatives. People are already benefiting because debt interest payments are £4 billion lower than they were when the Conservatives left office. That enables us to re-allocate resources to priorities such as pensioners, health and education. I am pleased to reassure my hon. Friend that pensioners will share the benefit of that £22.5 billion.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Will the Government treat the receipt of telecom licence fees as a revenue item, which would suggest that they intend to spend it eventually? Or will they treat it as a capital item, which would mean that they intend to bank it? Which option will they take under their new resource accounting rules?

Mr. Smith: As the hon. Gentleman implies, the £21 billion will accrue over the 21 years of the licence, and that is how the sum is treated in the national accounts. Because it accrues over that period, the benefit is also spread over 21 years. Reducing net debt is, therefore, the prudent way of helping the public finances and benefiting the public through reduced debt interest payments, as I explained. The receipt does not alter the total managed expenditure projections set out in the Budget.

Capital Gains Tax

11. **Mr. Keith Darvill** (Upminster): What representations he has received from businesses on his decision to cut capital gains tax for long-term investments. [125835]

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): This year's Budget proposals for the improvements in the capital gains tax business assets taper were formulated after wide consultation with venture capitalists and others. The views of business on the proposals to use taper reform to boost productivity and increase the provision of risk capital have been very positively received.

Mr. Darvill: It is refreshing that we have a Government who are taking measures that will increase the flow of investment and are widely supported, particularly by owners of small and medium enterprises. Will my hon. Friend tell the House about any other measures that she may be considering to increase investment in businesses which will help to create more jobs and prosperity?

Dawn Primarolo: I am glad that my hon. Friend acknowledges that the vast majority of people will receive a significant benefit from these provisions. I think that he may have been referring to proposals for new deferral relief on corporation tax paid by companies in respect of capital gains or on disposal of large shareholdings. A consultation document on the matter will be published shortly.

Euro

12. **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): What discussions he has had with *(a)* the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe and *(b)* the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on the timing of any move to replace the pound by the euro. [125837]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): The Government's policy on membership of the single currency remains as set out by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in October 1997, and restated by the Prime Minister in February 1999. The Government have said that they will recommend joining a successful single currency only if it is in our national economic interest to do so, and if the economic case for the UK joining is clear and unambiguous.

Dr. Lewis: I hesitate, Madam Speaker, even to dream of usurping your job, but I am not sure that that was an answer to the question that I asked, which was whether the Chancellor had met the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe or the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to discuss factors determining their decision to join the single European currency. I even spared the Chancellor's blushes by not including the Foreign Secretary in that list.

Is it not the case that if the Chancellor ever gets back on speaking terms with any of his ministerial colleagues, the test that they will be discussing will be not the economic tests with which he is so fixated or the Euro-federalist test with which his colleagues are so fixated, but the size of the overwhelming majority of the British people—two thirds—who are resolutely opposed to abandoning our economic and political sovereignty by replacing the pound with the single currency? Is that not what it is really about?

Miss Johnson: I am afraid that, according to the Tory party, Paul Sykes will decide what is in the national

economic interest. We believe that there should be a referendum and that the people of the UK should decide what is in our national economic interest.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): I was wondering whether the representations that have been made on the euro include representations from Mr. Ian Campbell, who was mentioned earlier in this Question Time by the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) as a director of a national charity, which indeed he is. The charity that he directs is the Institute of Export, which regularly echoes the language of the Conservative party in its broadcasts, and which has nothing to do with dealing with child poverty and the other issues that we were discussing at the time.

Madam Speaker: Order. That question was totally out of order, and does not relate to the original question. Let us try somebody else.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Does the Minister agree that there is absolutely unity of purpose within the Government on the single currency? Is not that the most enormous contrast with what happened under the last Conservative Government, when we had Conservative MPs putting out different general election manifestos and we even had the previous Conservative Prime Minister describing three of his Cabinet colleagues as the illegitimate ones?

Miss Johnson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Tory party has always been split on Europe and on the euro. A survey in *The Daily Telegraph* of 50 prospective Conservative candidates suggests that the party is shifting even further to the right on Europe, if that is possible. Out of those 50 candidates, 33 take a harder anti-European stance than the Leader of the Opposition.

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): The House will draw its own conclusions from the fact that the Chancellor prefers to speak on charities and unemployment in the north-east than on the euro or pensions. Notwithstanding the fact that he will be sitting immediately behind the Economic Secretary, might she care to tell the House, assuming that the conditions of entry are met in the Chancellor's opinion, why she thinks Britain should join the euro and what the advantages are?

Miss Johnson: We have said that we will consider whether we meet the five economic tests early in the next Parliament and that we will do so in terms of our national economic interest, which includes the 3.5 million jobs that are highly dependent on our continued membership of the EU—something that is deeply in question with Conservative Members.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Can I lob my hon. Friend a very friendly question? Can I tell her that, when I meet business men in my constituency, they ask me, "When can we have the referendum?", and I tell them, "I guess it'll be in 2002"—discuss?

Miss Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his very helpful question. Of course, early in the next Parliament, we will look at how we are meeting the economic tests that we have set ourselves, and then we will decide whether it is right to put it to the British people. It should be remembered that, in all of this, we have at heart Britain's economic interests and that we play a constructive role in the EU. In the past few days, we have secured a victory for the United Kingdom's national interest on the withholding tax, so it is clear what a constructive role in Europe can do for this economy and its people.

Mr. Michael Portillo (Kensington and Chelsea): May I suggest to the Chancellor of the Exchequer that he will come to regret his decision not to answer this question, because it speaks volumes about the state of the Labour party that he is not willing to answer a question on the central economic issue of the day—the Government's position on the euro? Will the Economic Secretary, who has been put in this hapless position, admit that only one of the five economic tests that have been set out by the Chancellor could in any way be thought of as being objective—even that could be massaged by the Chancellor—and that the other four tests are wholly subjective? The potential effect of the euro on unemployment, on the City, on flexibility and on investment are merely matters of opinion, on which different members of the Cabinet will doubtless take different views in due course. The tests that he has set out offer Britain no protection whatever against a potentially catastrophic decision. Will the Financial Secretary accept that the five economic tests amount to little more than four fudges and a fiddle?

Miss Johnson: That is complete rubbish. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman would care to comment on whether he supports his earlier statements on Europe, including that in "A Vision for the 1990s"—published by the Conservative Political Centre in 1992—in which he said that the British people and British business in particular did not want to be left out of Europe. Does he agree with that statement, or does he wish to retract it?

Pensioner Incomes

13. **Mr. Bob Blizzard** (Waveney): What plans he has to increase pensioner incomes. [125838]

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): As announced in the Budget, next April, we will again increase the minimum income guarantee in line with earnings, and we will double its lower capital limit. We are also developing a new pensioner credit to reward those pensioners who have made some provision for themselves.

Mr. Blizzard: Although the Government are spending more on pensioners through the minimum income guarantee and the winter payments than if the earnings link had been restored, and although it has to be right to help the poorest pensioners first, is my hon. Friend aware that many, many pensioners are still unhappy with the situation? Is not the problem the 1.1 per cent. index inflation figure from last September, which has failed to maintain the value of the basic pension? In making plans for next year, will she ensure that a realistic inflation index is used? Will she make up for the shortfall in this year's figure? If she can add something more, it will be even clearer that the Government are committed to

increasing pensioner incomes, unlike the Conservative party, whose policy of giving with one hand and taking away with the other would give pensioners only 42p.

Dawn Primarolo: On current inflation forecasts, we expect the basic state pension rise in April 2001 to be more than £2 for single pensioners and more than £3 for couples. Over the Parliament, the Government are spending more than £2 billion more in real terms on pensioners than if we had restored the earnings link in the state pension. The combination of measures—the winter allowance, the change to the capital limits for the minimum income guarantee, the level of the income guarantee and the fact that it is pegged to earnings—in addition to the development of pensioner tax credits is the way forward to ensure that those who are poorest get the help that they urgently need.

Business of the House

12.31 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): May I ask the right hon. Lady to give the House the business for next week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 26 JUNE—Motion relating to the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill, followed by the remaining stages of the Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate Bill *[Lords]*.

TUESDAY 27 JUNE—Remaining stages of the Learning and Skills Bill *[Lords]*.

WEDNESDAY 28 JUNE—Remaining stages of the Limited Liability Partnership Bill *[Lords]*, followed by the remaining stages of the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill.

THURSDAY 29 JUNE—Opposition Day [15th Allotted Day]. There will be a debate on "Priorities in the NHS" on an Opposition motion.

FRIDAY 30 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the following week will be:

MONDAY 3 JULY—Opposition Day [16th Allotted Day]. There will be a debate on an Opposition motion whose subject is to be announced.

TUESDAY 4 JULY—Progress on remaining stages of the Local Government Bill *[Lords]*.

WEDNESDAY 5 JULY—Conclusion of remaining stages of the Local Government Bill *[Lords]*. The Chairman of Ways and Means is expected to name opposed private business for consideration at 7 o'clock.

THURSDAY 6 JULY—Estimates Day [2nd Allotted Day]. At 7 o'clock, the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

FRIDAY 7 JULY—Debate on the report of the Committee of Inquiry into hunting with dogs in England and Wales on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

I should also like to inform the House of business to be taken in Westminster Hall during July.

THURSDAY 6 JULY—Debate on the development of Community Legal Services.

THURSDAY 13 JULY—Debate on EC development assistance.

THURSDAY 20 AND THURSDAY 27 JULY—Debates on Select Committee reports are scheduled, both subjects to be announced.

Sir George Young: The House is grateful for next week's business and an indication of the business for the following week.

The House was hoping for the date of the summer recess, not least because it was hinted at by one of the right hon. Lady's ministerial colleagues in a speech in Westminster Hall yesterday.

In the Queen's Speech, it was announced that legislation would be introduced to improve the education of children with special educational needs. As the parliamentary Session matures, what has happened to that Bill and, indeed, to the Disqualifications Bill, which the House dealt with, at some inconvenience, in January and which has subsequently sunk without trace? Is that not further evidence of a badly managed legislative programme?

Yesterday, the Prime Minister said that the Government would produce a plan in the next few days to strengthen the post office network. Will the right hon. Lady confirm that that will be outlined in an oral statement, given the widespread concern about the matter? In villages in my constituency, fashionable addresses such as the old rectory and the old school house are now being joined by the old post office.

Before the House rises for the summer recess, will we have the third of the three armed forces debates, this one on procurement, given widespread concern about redundances at British Aerospace? Would it be reasonable to assume that the Chancellor will be making his statement on the comprehensive spending review in the second of the two weeks? What has happened to the arrangements for discussing the economy?

Following our exchange last week, when there was widespread support for a public holiday to commemorate the 100th birthday of the Queen Mother, has the right hon. Lady had the promised discussion with the Home Secretary?

Mrs. Beckett: I should have liked to be able to give the recess date today, and I apologise that I am not able to do so. I said some time ago that I hoped that the House would not need to sit in August, and that hope has strengthened. That is all I can tell the right hon. Gentleman today.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me about the debate on special educational needs. I am aware that that matter is being considered. He will know that since the Bill was first proposed, there has been a pertinent, relevant, but unfortunately rather late further report about disability, which my right hon. Friend is considering alongside earlier proposals.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the Disqualifications Bill. The Session is not yet at an end, and the Bill has had some hearing in the House. If I recall correctly, it had an extensive hearing.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me also about the Post Office. I anticipate that when proposals for the Post Office come forward, there is likely to be an oral statement. As for his reference to the address, the old post office, no doubt in rural areas like the one he represents there are already such addresses—so many post offices closed under the Government of whom he was such a star member.

As for the armed forces debate, I am aware of the pressure last week in the context of British Aerospace. I cannot announce a debate in Government time, but I have announced a number of opportunities in Opposition time, for which Conservative Members can press their right hon. and hon. Friends. I hope and anticipate that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will be able to make a statement about the comprehensive spending review in the not too distant future.

As for whether there should be a holiday to celebrate the Queen Mother's birthday, I undertook last week to raise the matter with the relevant authorities, and have done so.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): I wonder whether we could have an opportunity soon to discuss the work of

[Fiona Mactaggart]

the Modernisation Committee and the hours of the House. Many of us had hoped that we would be able to discuss these matters and come to conclusions before the end of the Session; I had hoped that we might hear some news today.

Mrs. Beckett: The matter remains under discussion in the Modernisation Committee. It is my hope that in the not too distant future the Committee may have reached conclusions that it is in a position to lay before the House in a report. I cannot, of course, anticipate the judgment of the Committee. I would remind my hon. Friend that the Session does not end until the autumn.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): Bearing in mind the rather strange sequence of events surrounding Question 12 in the Chancellor's Question Time, will the Leader of the House provide time for him to make a statement on the euro and his approach to it? If he is too busy, perhaps she can persuade the Foreign Secretary to come instead.

May I draw the right hon. Lady's attention to early-day motion [redacted]?

[*That this House notes that the 1986 Social Security Act introduced a halving of widows' SERPS entitlements in respect of deaths occurring after April 2000; notes that DSS leaflets and correspondence failed to reflect that change for at least a decade after the Act reached the statute book, leading to an investigation by the Parliamentary Ombudsman; notes that many more pensioners who were not actively misled by these leaflets nonetheless knew nothing about the change until they were too old to make realistic alternative provision; and therefore calls on the Government not only to compensate those future pensioners who were misled but also to exempt from the proposed cut any person who has already reached state pension age.*]

There continue to be real anger and dismay at the failure to correct the Conservatives' administrative blunder, going back more than 10 years. Can the right hon. Lady find time for a Minister to explain to the House in detail how those affected can establish a claim and receive compensation for that major pensions mis-selling scandal?

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that I did not hear Question 12 at Treasury questions, but I see not the smallest necessity for the Chancellor to come to the House in order to repeat what he and all of us have said on hundreds of occasions. The tendency of the press to try to reinterpret a policy that has not changed over the past two to two and a half years is deeply boring, and it is even more boring when that keeps happening in the House.

With regard to widows' SERPS entitlement, the hon. Gentleman knows that Ministers have the matter under consideration and are in the process of seeing what can be done to rectify what he rightly calls a serious case of pensions mis-selling. He might, of course, press the official Opposition to raise the matter during their time, as it is they who were responsible.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Is my right hon. Friend aware that when Ministers discuss the health service next week, it would be helpful if they could make clear not only the short-term implications of a massive transfer of NHS funds into the private sector for the short-term care and treatment of NHS patients, but the long-term effects on the NHS? Ministers should also make clear the need for people being treated in the private sector to enjoy not only the same standards of care, but protection in terms of insurance and the ability to sue anyone who is not providing that high level of care, if they have been transferred without their consent into the private sector.

Mrs. Beckett: I know that my hon. Friend is extremely well aware that it is important to the Government, as to individuals, that NHS patients be treated in the private sector only if the standards that we would all expect are preserved. I know that from time to time concerns have been expressed about those standards. Equally, my hon. Friend knows that it is the Government's intention to announce in the not too distant future proposals for a long-term plan for the health service, which should not only raise those standards, but make sure that people have access to NHS care. That is not the position that we inherited, as my hon. Friend knows, but I feel confident, Madam Speaker, that she will seek to catch your eye to make those points during the debate that has just been announced.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): During the debate on the Lords, the Leader of the House expressed a commitment to set up soon a Joint Committee of both Houses. If the Government take the view that

> Being democratic does not necessarily mean having elections—[*Official Report*, 19 June 2000; Vol. 352, c. 124.]—

what does the right hon. Lady think that being democratic does necessarily mean?

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman was in his place, so he will know that he did not repeat with absolute accuracy the words that I used. I am sure that that was an oversight on his part. It was my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, who made the remark to which he has referred. I share the view that an extra group of people elected to the second Chamber would not necessarily be an addition to democracy. If we and the people of this country want a means of electing people who then form the Government, which gives them a direct input into the use of power, it seems to me that that is best expressed through one superior Chamber and another that may give advice. That superior Chamber is this body, and I am surprised to learn that some Members of it do not wish it to remain so.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): My right hon. Friend is no doubt aware of the new targets for waste recycling recently proposed for local authorities. Is she also aware that a number of waste disposal authorities are having difficulty reaching those targets because of the financial regime and the amount of investment in waste management plant, and because the landfill tax operates against such investment? Will she make time in the House for a debate on the matter, given the importance of the new targets to this country's approach to recycling in the future?

Mrs. Beckett: I am indeed aware that there is great concern throughout the country that we should pursue the

right policy on waste management and that all the details and implications of its implementation should be covered. I understand my hon. Friend's anxiety. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time on the Floor of the House, which is under great pressure. However, I recommend the extra opportunities for debate and scrutiny of the Government that Westminster Hall provides.

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): I am sure that the right hon. Lady agrees that anorexia is a serious illness. However, will she advise us whether it would be possible for the Minister for Women to come to the House and explain the apparently ludicrous policy of having weight-watching police to monitor the number of appearances on television by fat people as compared with those by thin people? Will the right hon. Lady tell us whether the policy is simply a plot to ensure that the Deputy Prime Minister gets more television time? If so, Conservative Members heartily approve of it.

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that I missed the hon. Gentleman's punch line. The relevant Minister will attend Question Time on Tuesday week. I presume that the hon. Gentleman is referring to an article in the *Daily Mail*. I agree that anorexia is a serious and difficult subject, and I believe that some serious discussion took place yesterday about the way in which it can be tackled, but for me the tone of the article was set by a photograph on the next page—of two women wearing lampshades.

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): My right hon. Friend will have seen report this week about the attack on the house of Margaret Dongo, who is a Member of Parliament in Zimbabwe. Margaret Dongo is the only Member from the Movement for Democratic Change because she is a courageous woman who had the guts to challenge the electoral malpractices of the ruling party. When I spoke to her the night before last, she told of her house being attacked by rocks and stones. She cowered under a table in fear of her life. My right hon. Friend also knows that elections take place in Zimbabwe this weekend. Will she consider a debate next week on their outcome and the difficulties that will remain whatever the result?

Mrs. Beckett: I know that the whole House deplores the violence to which my hon. Friend referred and the pressure that the opposition are under in Zimbabwe. My hon. Friend knows that the Government and, indeed, the whole House have repeatedly urged the right of the people of Zimbabwe to make their choice freely and fairly in the elections this weekend. The event that my hon. Friend described is a sharp reminder of how fortunate we are to have the political peace that we enjoy in this country.

I am confident that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary wishes to keep the House informed. Perhaps a time scale will be set as the information comes in. I cannot give an undertaking for a debate at the moment, but I will bear my hon. Friend's observations in mind.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): In a week in which the flower of English cricket has been bundled out of a test match in three days, the flower of English football has been bundled out of Euro 2000, and the flower of English hooliganism has been bundled out of Belgium, the only people not able to move about much were those who were trying to escape this country and who were paralysed by a computer failure at three of the main British airports and a broken rail on the London underground. Could we have a debate soon about when and whether life will improve under new Labour?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman began his remarks by referring to the unfortunate lack of success of some of our sportsmen and women. I attribute a lot of that to the sale of school playing fields under the Conservative Government.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): I know that the House of Lords is a problem for everybody and that we have had a big discussion of it, but I support the third way. The third option is to abolish the House of Lords. We could then have a revising Chamber of about 100 lawyers in this place; they could dot the "i"s and cross the "t"s. We do not need a second Chamber. At least two countries do not have one. And now that we have got rid of the hereditary principle, why not abolish the monarchy as well?

Mrs. Beckett: I am not entirely sure that that is what is conventionally regarded as the third way. I do know, however, that Lord Wakeham, for instance, believes that unless the second Chamber is a distinctly different Chamber bringing different experience to bear, there is no point in having it. In that sense Lord Wakeham is a unicameralist, as he has made plain, and—although it does not represent the policy that the Government are advocating—I understand the logic of that approach.

As my hon. Friend knows, the Government agree that the second Chamber should be different and distinctive, and not a clone of, or competitor with, this Chamber. That is why we are minded to accept the broad proposals in the Wakeham report.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): The 8,500 multiple sclerosis sufferers who would benefit from beta interferon will be bitterly disappointed by the Prime Minister's airy dismissal of the question asked during yesterday's Question Time by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition. I rather suspect that, by now, the Prime Minister himself may regret having so cheaply dismissed the concerns of those who are worried about the leak from the National Institute for Clinical Excellence.

Is it not time the Government found time for a debate on the way NICE works? Should we not debate not just the question of the drug's cost-effectiveness—which it may be reasonable for NICE to consider—but why civil servants, professors and doctors are considering the issue of affordability? Affordability is at the heart of the decision about beta interferon. Is it not time that the House engaged in a full debate to discuss the implications?

Mrs. Beckett: I utterly contest—as I think anyone who heard him would—the notion that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister airily dismissed the concerns of MS sufferers. He did no such thing, as the hon. Gentleman should know if he was present yesterday—and I think, from memory, that he was.

It is nonsense to suggest that NICE is making decisions simply on grounds of cost. Only last week, it ruled that taxane drugs for the treatment of breast and ovarian cancer,

[Mrs. Beckett]

which are also very expensive, should be made available throughout the health service. That did not happen under the Government whom the hon. Gentleman supported. The hon. Gentleman should also know, as there have been television interviews and so on, that there is some difference of view in the medical profession about the effectiveness of beta interferon. In any event, he must be aware that conclusions have not yet been reached. These are preliminary views which are out for consultation.

What I found most striking yesterday was the sheer opportunism of the Leader of the Opposition. As recently as 11 May, the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), the Opposition health spokesman, said:

> In any limited budget, priorities have to be set. These must be on the basis of clinical need, not political convenience.

That is quite correct, but it is not what the hon. Gentleman is saying—and he may have noticed that there is a health debate next week.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the Conservative party has set up a commission to consider the modernisation of Parliament? I believe that it is due to report at about the same time as the Modernisation Committee. Will my right hon. Friend give us an early opportunity, preferably before the recess, for the two important reports to be debated? The issue is pressing for many of us, and such a debate might just give us a unique opportunity to secure cross-party consensus.

Mrs. Beckett: I am not aware of the timetable for the Conservative party commission report, and I have no idea whether it is likely to be produced before the recess. I am not sure whether I would be able to find time for a debate before the House rises for the summer but, as I told my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), these matters are under consideration.

I hope that there will be a report from the Modernisation Committee in the near future, and that it will help the House to reach some views. If such a report is produced, however, and if the House can pronounce on it, the matter must be resolved before the next Session. That seems to me to be the important thing, rather than the precise timing of any possible debate.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): May we please have an urgent debate on the reliability, and extent of commitment, of ministerial statements? Can the debate please be led by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment? Can we have, before the debate commences—although I hope that it is held very soon—a full briefing from the chief inspector of Ofsted? That would enable us to assess how far the Secretary of State should be taken seriously, as he made an important commitment to resign his office if an important educational target was not met. We could also include a much wider-ranging debate involving several other Ministers, in order that we could judge their statements and commitments appropriately.

Mrs. Beckett: There are regular opportunities to discuss issues with the Secretary of State for Education and Employment in the Chamber. He did indeed make that commitment. He and his Department are well on course to deliver the targets that they have set. I thought that those who wished to see better government would applaud the Government's determination both to set targets and to ensure that they are achieved.

Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): My right hon. Friend will recall that, on Tuesday, the House was asked to consider the Second Reading of a Bill after 10 o'clock at night. That resulted in the House rising at about 1.30 am. It afforded another splendid period of nocturnal playtime for the kindergarten group on the Opposition Benches, but it did nothing to enhance the reputation of the House of Commons. Three years into the modernisation programme, the question of hours and the sensible organisation of business must be resolved. Will she ensure that the House has an early opportunity to come to a view and a decision on that?

Mrs. Beckett: I understand the point that my hon. Friend makes. I have said repeatedly that I think that no hon. Member objects to being here for long hours on occasion when there are matters of real substance, importance and delicacy to be addressed, but I accept that there are occasions when that is not always judged to be the case. I am also mindful of the need not to curtail debate.

I have some proposals. We have given much thought to whether it is possible to reconcile these two difficult elements. I hope that it will prove to be so. It is more important to achieve improvements in the efficiency of the way in which the House works than to be perhaps excessively nervous about the precise time that takes to achieve.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): May I urge the Leader of the House to reconsider her response to a request for a debate on the role and remit of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, given that, on Tuesday, a number of Members on both sides of the House from the north-west of England had meetings with leading neurologists, who made it clear that there is consensus in the profession that beta interferon is an effective drug for many multiple sclerosis sufferers?

In that context, is it not important that NICE should not just take a view based on the cost to the national health service budget, but bear in mind the enormous cost to welfare budgets and social service budgets, and the costs in lost earnings and lost tax revenue, which arise from the avoidable sickness of so many people?

Mrs. Beckett: I am very conscious of the concern felt by many people with MS, and that a strong body within the profession believes that beta interferon will help some sufferers, although the hon. Gentleman should be aware that it will not necessarily help all sufferers. He will know, I hope, that there is no suggestion in the NICE report that those who receive beta interferon should cease to receive it. The report is out for consultation. It is a preliminary report in draft. Neither I nor any other Member has seen it.

Yet again, I remind the hon. Gentleman of the sensible remarks of the shadow health spokesman, which I anticipate will, in consequence, be repeated in the debate in the House next week, pointing out that there has to be

a system of clear, explicit and transparent priority setting, and that not to have such a system—it is exactly what NICE is—would mean putting our heads in the sand and pretending that the problem did not exist. That is what some Opposition Members seem to be trying to do.

Ms Jenny Jones (Wolverhampton, South-West): Following the front-page story in today's *Daily Record* that Mike Tyson has physically assaulted someone so that they required hospital treatment, can my right hon. Friend arrange for the Home Secretary to make a statement on whether he will review the conditions of Mike Tyson's entry into this country, bearing in mind the fact that one of the reasons for allowing him entry was that he was not considered a threat to anybody outside the boxing ring?

Mrs. Beckett: I am well aware that my hon. Friend has taken a great interest in the matter that she raises. I have not seen the story to which she refers, nor indeed do I know whether it is well founded. May I draw to her attention the fact that it is Home Office questions on Monday, so she might find an opportunity to raise the matter then?

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Can the right hon. Lady give us any indication of when the House will have the opportunity to discuss the ratification of the statute for the International Criminal Court? Given the number of individuals around the world who would benefit from the attentions of such a court—not least General Mladic, Mr. Milosevic and Foday Sankoh—is it not extraordinary that Britain took the lead in setting it up, yet we are one of the Parliaments that is slowest to undertake the necessary ratification procedure? The House deals with a number of other measures that may be of less consequence; this is of international importance. Is it not time we got on with it?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman will know that no one is more mindful of pressure on the legislative timetable than I am. He will know that the ratification that he seeks will require further legislation. Although I would have hoped that the matter was not particularly controversial across the House, the hon. Gentleman will be aware, as I am, that matters that one would not have considered controversial have taken up a considerable amount of time this Session. In effect, the hon. Gentleman is making a bid for the next Queen's Speech and he will know that I cannot comment on that.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): Is my right hon. Friend is aware of the fact that the Home Office working group that has been looking into forced marriages will report at the end of this month? Does she agree that it would give a great deal of encouragement to many young Asian women in my constituency and throughout west Yorkshire were we to have a debate on the outcome of that report?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has taken a great interest in this subject and has done a great deal of work on it. Although I am aware of the existence of the working group, which does extremely important work, I was not aware that the report was likely to emerge on that timetable and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for reminding me of that. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a debate on the matter on the Floor of the House, but it is exactly the kind of issue that she might seek an opportunity to raise in Westminster Hall.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Will the right hon. Lady agree to a early debate in Government time on the excessively high fuel duties and their adverse impact on road hauliers, other industries, not least the farming community, and those of us who live in rural villages and communities? It would also enable the Government to explain to the wider British public why two separate formulae were used to calculate the inflation rate for pensions and for fuel duties.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Lady raises the issue of the impact of high fuel duty, which has been much discussed in the House. She will know that an escalator was introduced on fuel duties for environmental reasons and that the precedent was set by the Conservative Government. This Government continued to follow that precedent for some time, although we have now ceased to do so. The hon. Lady will also know that the index on which the level of inflation for the pension increase was judged was set many years ago by the Conservative Government and this Government have not changed it, although these matters are reviewed from time to time. I fear, however, that I cannot undertake to find time for a further debate in Government time, although I have no doubt that in various ways they will continue to be raised.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): At a meeting of the all-party group on leasehold reform the other evening, Ministers indicated that a draft Bill would appear in the next month or so. Has my right hon. Friend had the opportunity to take further with her ministerial colleagues the discussions that were mentioned at business questions earlier this year? I refer to whether a Scrutiny Committee could examine the proposed legislation, which will introduce for the first time in English law a new form of property tender.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend—who takes a close interest in the subject, which is of considerable importance in his constituency—makes the interesting suggestion that the draft Bill ought to be subject to some form of pre-legislative scrutiny. I undertake to raise that matter with the ministerial colleagues primarily concerned.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Notwithstanding this afternoon's debate on the intelligence agencies, may we have at least a statement on the activities of another intelligence agency operating in the House—given truly shocking reports that Labour party researchers have admitted to habitually eavesdropping on a right hon. Gentleman and passing that intelligence to 10 Downing street? Does the right hon. Lady recall the fate of a politician on the other side of the Atlantic who encouraged such practices?

Mrs. Beckett: I have heard of such reports but am not aware that anybody has admitted to habitual eavesdropping on the leader of the Liberal party. If anyone employed as a so-called political adviser has been doing so, they should be sacked for incompetence.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Does my right hon. Friend accept that there will be great dismay and

[Mr. Denis MacShane]

disappointment among not scores but hundreds of hon. Members of all parties at the news that the House will not debate before the summer recess the urgent matter of modernisation? Many of us are getting fed up with a few Conservative Members jerking at the end of their chain to frustrate the clear will of the majority of right hon. and hon. Members. I ask my right hon. Friend not to say definitely today that we will be denied the opportunity to debate that matter before the summer.

Mrs. Beckett: I try never to say anything definitive during business questions. I do not definitively rule out such a debate, but at present one seems unlikely. I do not fully understand the concern as to whether or not the matter is debated before the summer recess. If such a report emerges and is debated, the important point is that a decision be made in time for it to become effective at the only point when it could be given effect to—perhaps in a new parliamentary Session. I assure my hon. Friend that I have in no way lost sight of the matter.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Given that time is drawing on, may I give the Leader of the House the opportunity to say yes to a request for a debate? The right hon. Lady has considered sympathetically in the past the fate of people living in Kingskerswell and the lack of a bypass there. Holcroft Fox has now reported that the people of Kingskerswell are entitled to relief and that only a bypass can provide it. Will the right hon. Lady urgently find time for a debate, so that the Government can clarify their position on the construction of bypasses? If they mean to go ahead with the building programmes they have suggested, there is one ready and waiting to start.

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot undertake to find time for a debate in the near future but I will draw to the attention of my noble Friend the Minister for Transport the hon. Gentleman's strong view that there is an urgent need to implement that project. My noble Friend anticipates making some proposals about his transport plan in the not too distant future.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): Has my right hon. Friend yet heard when the Government's response to the Stewart report might be available? When it is available, will she ensure that we have a debate in the House on the issues surrounding mobile phones and the erection of mobile phone masts? The latter is an issue of great concern to many of my constituents, not least in my own village of Culcheth. Will she draw those concerns to the attention of Ministers in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, so that the House has an opportunity to review the laws that were brought in by the previous Government, which give residents little or no chance to make their views known through the planning process before the masts are erected?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that matter, not least because it enables me to say from the Dispatch Box that that concern is deeply felt in my constituency, where several residents are running a strong local campaign. I fully understand the concern that is being expressed. There has been an initial response to the Stewart report, and consideration is being given to the planning implications, but of course I undertake to draw her remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): The right hon. Lady will be aware of the rally and lobby of the House today by the British Weights and Measures Association, which is fighting a laudable, vigorous and, patriotic campaign to prevent further metrication of our weights and measures. Will she confirm that Ministers will make time to meet the association today? Will she also confirm that we will have a statement responding to its legitimate requests to protect the interests of small traders especially, who have already buckled under the burden of £5 billion of extra red tape from this Government and who face further regulation through the programme to get rid of British imperial measurements?

Mrs. Beckett: I do not know what pressure ministerial diaries are under, but of course I recognise the strong concern that has been long expressed by the British Weights and Measures Association. All that I can do is ask the hon. Gentleman where he was when the previous Government made the changes. This Government have already once, if not twice, postponed the implementation of the measures because we are mindful of their impact on small traders. It is yet another example of Opposition Members deploring things that they themselves did.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): With her deep knowledge of social security, my right hon. Friend was, I am sure, burning the midnight oil last night reading the fascinating report by the Social Security Committee on the contributory principle, which was published yesterday. The report drew attention to the long-standing unfairness in the national insurance fund whereby contributions are increased annually by the higher rate of inflation, but benefits—including pensions—are paid out at the lower rate of inflation. As the report makes clear, the national insurance fund has an unneeded surplus, above the contingency funds, of £6 billion, which will grow considerably over the next 20 years, thus allowing the link between pensions and earnings—the higher rate of inflation—to be restored now and in the future.

Can we debate early-day motion 1?

[*That this House welcomes the Government's decision to raise income support for pensioners annually in line with average earnings, but regrets the widening gap between the basic pension and income support; notes the Treasury's estimate that by April 2002 the National Insurance Fund's balance will be £8.43 billion above the minimum recommended by the Government Actuary; and urges that part of that surplus should be used to restore the link between the basic pension and average earnings for the remaining years of this Parliament, thus ensuring that all pensioners share in the nation's increasing prosperity and preventing a further increase in the number receiving income support.*]

By doing so, the Government could add to the magnificent and beneficial measures that they have taken for pensioners, including the restoration of the link, as the nation's pensioners want.

Mrs. Beckett: Of course I understand the importance of the issue that my hon. Friend raises. He will know that the Committee said in its report:

> We do agree with the Secretary of State that any use of the present surplus in the national insurance fund must be sustainable in the long term.

He will also know that the Government are committed to improving the welfare of pensioners as fast as we can, but we have set as our priority giving the most to the pensioners who are, by definition, in the greatest need. We will continue to do that, and we shall also continue to try to assist other pensioners, but I fear it is a matter of the time needed to remedy the deficiencies that we inherited.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Will the Leader of the House try to persuade a defence procurement Minister to come to the House and make a statement about the unusual controversy in the Ministry of Defence over the naming of the next two Royal Navy survey vessels? They were to be named HMS Shackleton and HMS Cook. There is no problem with HMS Shackleton, but I understand that the name of the other vessel has met resistance in the Ministry of Defence.

If the right hon. Lady cannot do that, can she persuade a Foreign Office Minister to come to the House and explain why, when I tabled a written question on 13 April to ask whether Lord Levy had had contact with foreign intelligence and security agencies, it took until 7 June to get a one-line reply? It read:

> In line with long standing practice of successive Governments we do not comment on intelligence matters.—[*Official Report*, 7 June 2000: Vol. 351, c. 291W.]

Would she not agree that, if that was the right answer, it should have been given me two days after I posted the question, not two months?

Mrs. Beckett: I know nothing about the naming of ships commissioned for the Royal Navy. However, I do know that the contract that has been placed will sustain 800 jobs in Devon. That seems much more important than what the ships are called, although I have no doubt that that will be a matter of concern to someone.

Secondly, of course I regret that the hon. Gentleman did not get an answer to his question sooner. We continually remind colleagues of the importance of responding more speedily, but I fear that, as the answer revealed, there is nothing further that I can add on security and intelligence matters.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): Will my right hon. Friend find time for the House to debate the real cost of rail travel in this country compared with other European countries? According to research that I commissioned from the Library, the standard inter-city fare from, say, Paddington to Cardiff costs twice as much as the fare for an equivalent journey in Belgium or France, and more than six times as much as in Italy. That is a direct result of the policies of the previous Conservative Government, although the train operating companies deny that and try to argue that British passengers get a fair deal.

Given the amount of taxpayer's money that subsidises fares in this country, does she not agree that passengers have a right to know whether they are getting ripped off by the train operators?

Mrs. Beckett: I have some sympathy with the point that my hon. Friend makes. I know that there is considerable concern about fares in this country, especially in connection with the contracts signed with the rail operators. I know also that the Rail Regulator and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions keep the matter under review. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a debate on the matter in the near future, but I will certainly draw my hon. Friend's remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): May we have an early debate on the effect of this Labour Government on Parliament and on the democratic accountability of the Executive? Charter 88 has stated that the Prime Minister has created an elective dictatorship by concentrating power in Downing street, and that the result of his control freakery is that everything is managed from the centre. Would not an early full-day debate be the appropriate way to answer that charge?

Mrs. Beckett: I have rarely agreed with much of what Charter 88 says, and I do not propose to start now.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): May we have a debate on developments in the steel industry? That is especially important because the Corus group is stripping out the industry's heart and creating thousands of redundancies throughout the United Kingdom. The situation is especially bad in my constituency. Strategic sectors of British industry are being closed down, so is it not about time for the voice of Parliament to be heard?

Mrs. Beckett: Of course I understand the concern expressed by my hon. Friend, and I am very mindful indeed of the anxieties felt in constituencies such as his. He will know that steps have been taken by my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities to offer help and support to those who unfortunately lose out as a result of the changes.

I also understand and accept that my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) and others have concerns about manufacturing employment more generally. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate on the matter on the Floor of the House, but my hon. Friend might like to consider Westminster Hall.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate on democracy so that Conservative Members can talk about this week's Charter 88 report, which referred to the worrying concentration of power in the hands of the Executive? We could also talk about the burgeoning cost of government: more than £2 billion a year more is spent now than three years ago, and the number of special advisers funded by the taxpayer has doubled. Such a debate would also afford Labour Members the opportunity to talk about the matters that interest them, such as why they cannot get home to bed by 10 o'clock at night.

Mrs. Beckett: I have not read the Charter 88 report. I wholly reject the notion that there is something unseemly in the way in which the Government is being run and managed.

[Mrs. Beckett]

I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be aware that the figures for extra costs are completely spurious. The figures that Conservative Members continually use are simply the cash figures. In real terms, we are spending less on administration than did the Conservative party when it was last in government. Indeed, not only are we spending less, but the number of those employed in the public services at the centre has gone down, while the number of public servants in services such as health and education is rising and will continue to rise.

On special advisers, we take the view that Ministers should have a proper range of advice, and we take the same view with regard to the Opposition. The increase in advice to Government has been more than matched by the increase in advice to the Opposition, who are clearly in sore need of it.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given that this morning, for some strange reason, the House failed to reach my Question 34 on taxation, I would like to ask the right hon. Lady for an early debate on the need for transparency in taxation. In the light of the criticism by the Select Committee on the Treasury of the Chancellor's refusal to publish the figures that show the impact of direct and indirect taxes on the typical household and on households in other income deciles, would not such a debate allow the Chancellor the opportunity to explain whether he will mend his ways and, if he will not do so, why on earth he expects to be taken seriously when he is picking the pockets of the British people on an unprecedented scale?

Mrs. Beckett: I remind the hon. Gentleman that the Government have given independence to the national statistical service, something that the previous Government never had the courage to do. That will, over time, undoubtedly increase confidence in the statistics that we publish—confidence that was sorely missing under the previous Administration.

As for the idea that the Chancellor should come here to debate the figures that he gives, I think that when he comes to the Dispatch Box we should debate the fact that we have the lowest inflation for a generation, the lowest mortgage rates for a generation, with the best levels of employment and the lowest levels of unemployment since 1980, which was the beginning of the Conservative party's term in office. Those are the issues that really matter to the British people, not the Conservative party's allegations.

SCOTTISH GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order 100(1) (Scottish Grand Committee (sittings)),

That the Scottish Grand Committee shall meet on Monday 10th July at half-past Ten o'clock at the Glasgow City Council former High School buildings, Glasgow, to consider a substantive Motion for the adjournment of the Committee—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Question agreed to.

Security and Intelligence Agencies

[Relevant documents: Intelligence and Security Committee Annual Report 1998–99, Cm 4532, and the Government's response thereto, Cm 4569;

Intelligence and Security Committee's Report on the Security and Intelligence Agencies' handling of the information provided by Mr. Mitrokhin, Cm 4764, and the Government's response thereto, Cm 4765;

Second Report from the Foreign Affairs Committee, Session 1998–99, HC 116, on Sierra Leone, and the Government's response thereto, Cm 4325;

Third Report from the Home Affairs Committee, Session 1998–99, HC 291, on Accountability of the Security Service, and the Government's response thereto, Cm 4588; and

First Report from the Liaison Committee, Session 1999–2000, HC 300, on Shifting the Balance: Select Committees and the Executive (paragraphs 90 to 92), and the Government's response thereto, Cm 4737 (paragraph 56).]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

1.23 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): Today is the second occasion in this Parliament that we have had the opportunity to debate intelligence and security issues. The three agencies together make a valuable and unique contribution to the safety and security of our society and, in an international context, to that of our allies.

The agencies provide us with a vital edge in tackling some of the most difficult problems that we face. They play a significant role in our efforts against terrorism, drugs and serious crime and in defence of our national security. Because of the necessary secrecy of their work, their contribution often goes unremarked and unacknowledged. Much of what they achieve cannot be given the recognition that it deserves. To do so would give those against whom the agencies work the opportunity to sidestep their efforts. It could very well also undermine the protection of those who already carry out their service to this country, sometimes at considerable personal risk.

Among other things, today's debate provides a welcome opportunity to thank the agencies and their staff for their valuable contribution. All of us who have had contact with the agencies—Secretaries of State and members of the Intelligence and Security Committee over the years—will readily acknowledge that they are world-class services.

The reports before the House are two from the Intelligence and Security Committee, one from the Home Affairs Committee, one from the Foreign Affairs Committee and one from the Liaison Committee. Of these, the one that inevitably has attracted the most immediate attention is that of the Intelligence and Security Committee on Mitrokhin. For the convenience of the House, I shall deal with that report first.

On 13 September last year I announced that, with the agreement of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, I had invited the ISC to examine the policies and procedures adopted within the security and intelligence agencies for the handling of information supplied by

Mr. Vasili Mitrokhin. The Committee's report was published earlier this month alongside the Government's response and a parliamentary reply from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

My right hon. Friend and I are very grateful to the ISC, and not least to its Chairman, the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), for their readiness to take on the additional work thrown up by the handling of the Mitrokhin material and for the thoroughness of their report. The right hon. Gentleman has also generously acknowledged that his Committee was afforded unparalleled access to material beyond that of a Select Committee in order to carry out its inquiry.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that through his willingness, when pressed, to make available to the Committee all information, including advice to Ministers, he made possible the thoroughness of the report; that it would not have been possible for the Committee to reach conclusions on some matters had it not had that degree of access; and that lessons ought to be learned for the Committee's future access?

Mr. Straw: I certainly recognise the substance of the right hon. Gentleman's first point. As I and my right hon. Friends acknowledged, it would otherwise have been impossible to arrive at both a proper understanding of the story as it unfolded and proper conclusions. I also accept his other comment, without entering into any commitments about the exact boundary that we should draw, as a result of this experience, as to the extent to which the ISC should have access to material. The right hon. Gentleman will appreciate, from his long membership of the Committee, that there are some very important operational matters that the Committee itself acknowledges it would not be appropriate for it to have access to. I also believe that it would be inappropriate.

The main criticisms made by the Committee were of the failures of the Security Service in not referring cases to the prosecuting authorities in a timely manner and of failures by officials in the provision of advice to Ministers. However, there was no suggestion of any attempt to mislead Ministers. In the ISC reports, there was no criticism of Ministers in previous Administrations, nor of Ministers in the current Administration.

As the inquiry report made clear, and as the Government acknowledged in their response, mistakes were made in the handling of this material, not least in the decisions that were made and not made as to whether or not individuals should be prosecuted. The agencies as well as the central Departments concerned—the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Home Office and the Cabinet Office—have learned a great deal from the report and this experience, and I believe that the lessons have been identified and accepted.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): Can the Home Secretary shed any light on paragraph 60 of the report, which records that in his statement on 13 September 1999 he had the opportunity to reflect on the Security Service's view of the significance of Mrs. Norwood's activities but did not do so, and that, as a result, the public perception of Mrs. Norwood is that, in the words of the paragraph,

> she provided a real contribution to the Soviet atomic bomb development

when in fact, in the view of the Security Service, she did not?

Mr. Straw: I shall do my best to answer. I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his warning to me that he was likely to raise the matter.

The explanation is an unusual one but is entirely accurate, as indeed everything I say in this House is. It is that in the preceding week I had had an operation on a damaged cartilage in my knee and had undergone a general anaesthetic. I was on crutches and groggy for the rest of the week. On the Saturday morning, when I was telephoned to be told that various allegations had been made in *The Times* that, for example, I had blocked a prosecution of Melita Norwood, which was completely untrue, I was still coming round from the effects of the anaesthetic and was hoping for a quiet lie-in, although, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman knows, the prospects of that if one is Home Secretary are random and infrequent.

I returned to London from my constituency on the Sunday, having decided that I should issue a statement as soon as I had been able to go through the material. Officials worked on the Sunday to pull together all that I had seen over the period since May 1997. My recollection is that, as I was not in a position to make a proper judgment about whether or not Mrs. Norwood's position as a spy had been either of huge or of any significance, and as the public would not have taken comfort if I had merely repeated what I was being told, I decided that it was better left alone. That is my explanation.

With the benefit of history, we know that less damage was done by Mrs. Norwood's spying than might otherwise have been the case; in the event, as the report says on page 23, the Soviets copied American designs that they had obtained. However, during the time that she had access to highly secret material and was passing it to the Russians, her behaviour was damaging both because it was treacherous and because it had the potential to be extremely damaging to the interests of this country.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): Although there has been great concentration on the nuclear secrets that Mrs. Norwood may or may not have passed on, it is worth noting that she remained active for a considerable period after she had ceased to be directly involved in that area. It is alleged that she recruited another defector as late as 1969, which makes it clear that she was still considered to be of value to the Soviet Union.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, whose point suggests that my befuddled caution on Monday 13 September was well placed. He is quite right. Although it was clear, as I made plain in my public statement at the time—Parliament, of course, was not sitting—that Mrs. Norwood's direct access to highly classified material had ended in 1951, she remained active and was obviously seen by the Russians as having some importance.

[Mr. Straw]

We should not forget the positive points identified by the ISC's inquiry. They include confirmation of our success in obtaining Mr. Mitrokhin's material, which was, and remains, of huge significance to us and our allies. In addition, it confirms success in exploiting his material at home and abroad, and confirms that a decision to allow publication of a book on the material was correct and that much of the publication process—although not all of it—was sound. Finally, the report serves to highlight a point arising from the Mitrokhin material—namely, the effective work of the security and intelligence services in countering the significant and potentially damaging intelligence threat posed by the former Soviet Union.

The House will recognise the significance of the success of the ISC's inquiry. It demonstrates both the developing role of the Committee and its maturing relationship with the agencies. I am glad that there was no suggestion that the statutory accountability of any agency is inadequate, or that proper oversight and internal management are not taking place. By definition, the work of the agencies cannot be open. Proper mechanisms for scrutiny are, therefore, all the more important.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, since he entered the House in 1974, and I, since 1979, have been among Members of Parliament on both sides of the House concerned about the lack of a proper statutory base for the intelligence and security agencies and for the part of their operations to do with the interception of communications. A series of measures put that right: the Security Service Acts 1989 and 1996, for the Security Service, and the Intelligence Services Act 1994, for the Secret Intelligence Service and for the Government communications headquarters.

Those Acts, together with the Interception of Communications Act 1985, provide for independent scrutiny by commissioners of the actions of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and myself in respect of the agencies for which we are responsible, and for scrutiny of the actions of the agencies themselves. Each officer in each agency has a duty under the law to provide the commissioners with the information they need.

I pay tribute to the work of the previous commissioners, Lord Justice Stuart-Smith and Lord Nolan, for their contribution as commissioners and for the important scrutiny role that they played. I am sure that the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) will confirm that the work of Lord Nolan—the interception commissioner—was very thorough indeed. The Home Secretary has the bulk of the responsibility for telephone interception—although the point also applies to successive Foreign Secretaries—and were any Home Secretary ever to think about approving a warrant without proper consideration, he would be brought up sharp by Lord Nolan. That fact would be made public—and quite right too. I am glad to say—on behalf of the right hon. and learned Gentleman and myself—that, so far, that has not happened.

Both commissioners retired from their role earlier this year. On behalf of the Government, the agencies and previous Ministers with whom they worked, I thank them warmly for their contribution.

We achieve accountability of the work of the agencies through the scrutiny of the ISC whose reports form the bulk of the subject of our debate.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is it not of interest that when David Bickford, the former legal adviser to the security and intelligence services, gave evidence to the Home Affairs Committee last year, he said that the credit for oversight was due to the cases of our right hon. Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and our hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce. It was because they had been targeted by the security services and had taken their cases to the European Court that it was decided that some oversight was essential. Perhaps we should acknowledge the important role played by our two parliamentary colleagues.

Mr. Straw: We shall not know exactly what went on under the previous Government until the records are made public. However, there is no doubt that those two cases played an important part in concentrating the mind of the Government on the need for the establishment of proper oversight.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Does the Home Secretary agree that, from time to time, it is inevitable that the Security Service will look at the activities of people who subsequently become Members of Parliament? Bearing that in mind, what would he recommend as an appropriate recourse for such people if they were anxious to find out whether they had been wrongly targeted? Does he agree that it would be unacceptable for them to be able to demand to see their files and that perhaps someone else should do the job on their behalf? Will he take this opportunity to state that the request of the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), for such access will be refused?

Mr. Straw: As far as I am aware, no request has been made to me by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) is waving a piece of paper at me. If he says that such a request has been made, I take his word for it. I am trying to satisfy him with the answer that I am about to give, so there is no need for him to wave something that has been pulled off the internet—even with my eyesight, I cannot read small type at that distance. I do not believe that Members of Parliament should be treated differently from anyone else before the law. That applies to cases of corruption, immunity from prosecution and matters relating to the security and intelligence agencies.

The House knows that the Security Service held inquiries into me over a period of years and that it holds a file on me. On one occasion, as I think the House knows, I was shown the file by a properly authorised officer of the Security Service, but I saw only one part of its contents. That was its decision; certainly not mine. I learned of that when I was positively vetted—successfully, I might say—in 1974 and I decided that I would never make public the facts that I had learned. Someone else decided to make the information public, but I have never sought to have access to that file. It would have been wholly improper if I had sought to do so, and

a reply in the negative will be given to any Member of this House who asks to see his file. I hope that that satisfies the hon. Gentleman.

Dr. Lewis *indicated assent.*

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): Make an exception of the hon. Gentleman's file.

Mr. Straw: I do not know whether there is a file on the hon. Gentleman.

There has been some debate—the matter has been raised by the Home Affairs Committee over the years—about whether scrutiny of the intelligence and security agencies should be carried out by a Select Committee of the House or by a Committee of the kind that has been established. It needs to be made clear that that Committee is a parliamentary Committee and that, in some ways, it has clearer and stronger powers than a Select Committee because it has been established by an Act of Parliament.

I have always been relatively relaxed about what the Committee should be called because of two realities. First, the members who would be appointed to any Select Committee would be appointed in a similar manner to the way in which the members of the current Committee are appointed. Secondly, any Select Committee that was going to do its job properly would have to operate in a similar way to the Intelligence and Security Committee. Indeed, it is impossible to conceive of how it could operate in any other way if it were to be able to carry out the thorough inquiry that the ISC conducted into the Mitrokhin matter.

Although I know that the Mitrokhin saga has been uncomfortable for the agencies—one understands that—there is a silver lining. The case has emphasised the strength of the mechanisms that Parliament as a whole has agreed for the accountability of the agencies. It was a huge relief to me when I was faced with the situation over a weekend in early December that, instead of having to establish a specific inquiry led almost certainly by someone from outside the House, I was, with the agreement of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, able to telephone the right hon. Member for Bridgwater. I said that the case seemed to be exactly the type of issue on which Parliament would expect his Committee to conduct an inquiry. We had an altogether much more thorough inquiry than we might have had. It certainly commanded greater public and parliamentary support than one conducted by someone specifically brought in from outside.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): On the issue of Select Committees, I have a copy of the Government's reply to the third report of the Home Affairs Committee on "Accountability of the Security Service". I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to a Home Office comment that reads:

> The Government is not convinced that there is a strong case for change in the fundamental structure of these arrangements

and the word "now" is added at the end.

Mr. Michael Mates (East Hampshire): That was for you, Dale.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: If so, I am thankful. I understand that the word "now" was the subject of intense debate. Because I cannot debate the matter today with someone from the civil service, will my right hon. Friend explain why it was added?

Mr. Straw: As the whole House knows, the Government are entirely seamless and joined up and we all agree with each other all the time.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Not a cigarette paper between them.

Mr. Winnick: I hope not.

Mr. Straw: I hope that no one has cigarette papers in the Chamber.

It follows that every word of the response has been carefully drawn and is subject to collective responsibility. I cannot remember whether it was I or someone else who inserted the word "now", but the point is clear: we are

> not convinced that there is a strong case for change in the fundamental structure of these arrangements now.

It would be absurd to say that there should never be any change in the arrangements. We should always consider such matters in the light of experience. My hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) has been a member of the ISC for some time. The experience of the Mitrokhin report demonstrated the inherent merits of that Committee. That does not mean that we should never adopt the Select Committee path, but doing so is not as urgent as some once thought. I hope that that provides a helpful definition of what the Government meant by the word "now".

The work of the Committee has been strengthened by the appointment of an investigator to assist the Committee with its scrutiny. The investigator allows the Committee to pursue its inquiries in greater depth than would otherwise be possible and to follow up specific lines of inquiry in more detail. He operates within the same legal framework as the Committee, with the same level of access, but he also has the opportunity to discuss issues directly with the staff of the agencies.

The Government's response to the Committee's annual report welcomes the Committee's involvement in many of the areas covered. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I fully endorse its confirmation of the importance of continuing high-quality intelligence and security services for our country. Both to those involved and to the formulation of Government policy, reliable and timely intelligence will remain as important now as it has ever been.

The Government are taking an important step to update and improve the framework that regulates the use by the intelligence and security agencies—and others—of certain intelligence-gathering and investigative techniques. The Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill proposes an appropriate framework for when the Human Rights Act 1998 comes into force, one that is consistent with that Act. It contains provisions regulating the use of investigatory powers including the interception of communications, intrusive surveillance, directed surveillance and covert human intelligence sources. The Bill clearly sets out who can use each technique and for what purpose, levels of authorisation required, oversight of the use of the

[Mr. Straw]

techniques, and a complaints procedure. Members of the judiciary will act as commissioners overseeing the use of the powers, and a new tribunal will be established to provide a single point of contact for those who want to complain about the use of the powers. The nature of the agencies' accountability to Parliament has long been a matter of debate in this House. There is no need for me to explore that matter further.

Let me now go on to discuss some wider issues relating to the agencies' work.

Mr. Mates: The right hon. Gentleman says that the security services felt uncomfortable about the criticism expressed in the Mitrokhin report; no doubt that is true, but does he not agree that the report should be seen in context? Even though we are only extremely rarely able to report the agencies' successes, we know about them. Although in the Mitrokhin report we criticised the things that went wrong, the members of the Committee are well aware that things go right on many occasions, but that, because of the nature of the work, the outside world cannot be told.

Mr. Straw: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for those words, which carry the greater authority coming as they do from a member of the Committee. Those of us who work directly with the agencies day to day would agree strongly with him. It is true of any organisation that its mistakes are more often noticed than its successes celebrated, but it is all the more true of the agencies because of the secret environment in which they operate.

The unpredictability of the post-cold-war era has thrown up different challenges, such as the global concerns of terrorism, weapons proliferation and drugs. Keeping up with, and setting up a credible defence against, today's dynamically changing threats and targets is a tough challenge. The agencies have approached those new priorities with imagination and dedication.

The agencies have scored real successes. Their achievements include helping the law enforcement agencies target drug trades, frustrating the ambitions of those regimes that seek to acquire the technology for nuclear, chemical or biological weapons achievements and frustrating those with terrorist agendas, all of which have been significant and effective as well as crucial to saving lives.

The Security Service has demonstrated great flexibility in responding to existing threats to national security and adapting to new challenges. We must all be encouraged by developments in Northern Ireland, but the recent attack on Hammersmith bridge demonstrates that the threat from dissident republican elements intent on wrecking the peace process remains real. Countering that threat therefore continues to be a high priority for the service, which makes an essential contribution to frustrating the aims of such terrorist groups and other terrorist organisations that pose a threat to UK interests.

The Security Service is a key player in countering the threat to the critical national infrastructure posed by malicious electronic attack. The National Infrastructure Security Co-ordination Centre was established in December 1999 to provide a single point of access to the Government's arrangements for encouraging improved defences against electronic attack. I am confident that the Security Service is an effective organisation and that accountability and oversight of the service's activities are adequate. During the three years that I have held my office, I have come to admire greatly the many staff of the service whom I have met, and the leadership of its director general, Stephen Lander, who was knighted in the birthday honours.

It is appropriate at this point to take the opportunity to inform hon. Members that the Prime Minister and I have agreed with the Director General of the Security Service that his term of appointment be extended to October 2002. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am glad to receive the approbation of the House, and am sure that members of the ISC will commend this arrangement.

As the House knows, although I am responsible for the Security Service, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is directly responsible for the two other intelligence services, the Secret Intelligence Service and Government communications headquarters, Cheltenham. GCHQ has played an increasing, and increasingly effective, role in the war against organised crime, co-operating closely with the law enforcement agencies. It too has a prime role in safeguarding the critical national infrastructure that I mentioned earlier.

The SIS relies for its effectiveness on a world-leading reputation for secrecy and trust, as well as for great expertise and professionalism. That reputation is the service's most effective tool in convincing those who might help this country—sometimes at risk to their own lives, often at risk to their livelihoods and in dangerous situations—that their secrets and personal security are safeguarded. The SIS continues to make a special, and often vital, contribution to a range of international challenges faced by Government. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will, of course, speak at greater length about the work of the agencies for which he is responsible when he comes to wind up the debate.

I know that many hon. Members want to contribute to this important debate, and it is right that we have set aside parliamentary time for them to do so. I commend the work of the Intelligence and Security Committee to the House, and look forward to continuing to work with it to ensure that we draw the right balance between scrutiny and secrecy, which is essential to maintain the effectiveness of these unique and crucial national assets.

1.53 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I should like to add the agreement of the Opposition to the Home Secretary's tribute to the men and women who work in our intelligence and security services. As he rightly observed, the vast majority of them do so behind the scenes without public recognition. Their task is difficult and sometimes dangerous, yet, for reasons that we all appreciate, the full story is not told, and sometimes never can be. I also congratulate Stephen Lander on his honour, and on the extension of his contract.

The security services' work is of the utmost importance, and recent events have shown that we must remain vigilant. The murder of Brigadier Stephen Saunders in Athens was a dreadful reminder that terrorist organisations continue to flourish, even in the member states of the European Union. The Hammersmith bridge

bomb and yesterday's explosion in Belfast pointed to a possible resurgence in terrorist activity connected to Northern Ireland.

As the Intelligence and Security Committee's latest annual report states, the threat to this country and its armed forces from the proliferation of nuclear weapons, especially in the middle and far east, remains significant and is growing. The agencies also have important roles to play in the fight against drugs and organised crime, which, sadly, remain significant forces of evil in our society. That is the national and global context in which the services and their staff have to operate.

I also pay tribute to the work of the Intelligence and Security Committee and to its Chairman, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King). We are indeed fortunate to have such an accomplished and experienced person as my right hon. Friend serving in that position. It is particularly encouraging that the Committee has won, and retained, the confidence of the services themselves. No doubt my right hon. Friend, when taking up his post, did not envisage the high media profile that the job has brought him in recent days, and I shall now turn to the reason for that media interest in the security and intelligence services.

I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House are grateful to the Committee for the way in which it conducted the Mitrokhin inquiry, and I should also like to put on record the Opposition's heartfelt thanks to Vasili Mitrokhin, who undertook his work at tremendous risk. I wish to associate the Opposition with the Committee's conclusion that Mr. Mitrokhin

> is a man of remarkable commitment and courage, who risked imprisonment or death in his determination that the truth should be told.

It is to the credit of the Secret Intelligence Service that it realised the value of the material that Mr. Mitrokhin was offering, and brought him and his family to this country. However, the way in which his valuable intelligence material was subsequently handled by this country's security and intelligence services gives cause for concern. It is said that the US President may have known about that British intelligence coup before the then Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major).

There are lessons to be learned from the Mitrokhin inquiry report, and I personally find it regrettable that confessed traitors such as Melita Norwood will never be prosecuted for betraying their country. There were undoubtedly serious failings in the system, and we can all hope that those will not recur.

In a November 1998 debate, the Home Secretary refuted the assertion of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) that it was unusual for Whitehall Departments to work closely together. My right hon. Friend mentioned the Pinochet case in that respect, but his comments are borne out equally well, if not more so, by the Mitrokhin case, despite the Home Secretary's denial.

One of the most unfortunate aspects was that we had to learn about the whole affair through leaks to the media, and there are still a number of unanswered questions. Will the Home Secretary now—I shall give way to him when I have finished this point, as I do not think that he has answered it fully on previous occasions—tell the House why, despite the fact that he knew in December 1998 that details of the Norwood case would be published, he failed to make a statement to the House until those details had already been made public?

When I put that question to the Home Secretary on 26 October 1999, he argued that he could not have made a statement because he was waiting for the Attorney-General's decision on whether to prosecute Mrs. Norwood. He said that he was asked

> why I did not inform Parliament when I was first told of plans to publish the Mitrokhin archive. As I said, I was told that in December 1998.

He went on to say:

> before the Attorney-General and the prosecutors could decide, she—

that means me—

> was inviting me to announce that consideration of prosecution was in train. That . . . would have been wholly improper.—[*Official Report*, 26 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 830-31.]

However, the Attorney-General's decision, in so far as it was a decision, was made on 22 March 1999, so for six months we heard nothing whatever from the Home Secretary. The right hon. Gentleman—and, for that matter, the Foreign Secretary—must have known that the matter would shortly come into the public domain via the media, but publication was allowed to take place before a statement was made to the House. Indeed, the information was drip-fed to us by the press—as I put it at the time, we were practically having a spy a day—when the House could have been informed much earlier.

Does the Home Secretary think that the House and the country had a right to know about those matters from the Government before details of the Mitrokhin archive and the Melita Norwood case appeared in the newspapers? I ask that question not to make a partisan point, but to try to clarify the Home Secretary's view on the important issue of the procedure in such cases.

It is amazing that the Prime Minister, who, after all, has overall responsibility for those matters, was not even told about the Melita Norwood case until the day before the story broke in *The Times* last September. Whatever the Home Secretary may say, there appears to have been a complete lack of co-ordination. Why was the Foreign Secretary informed of the publication project in October 1997, the Prime Minister in December 1997, but the Home Secretary not until December 1998? Was there any co-ordination between their offices—or, indeed, between them personally?

It appears from paragraphs 22 and 56 of the Committee's report that the relevant chapters of the book were not cleared by the Home Secretary or the Attorney-General, so why did the Foreign Secretary approve the book for publication on 21 April last year? In doing so, did he seek the views of the Home Secretary or the Attorney-General, or was he misinformed that the passages had, in fact, been cleared? It is also a matter of concern that the publication criteria set down in 1996 by Sir Malcolm Rifkind, the then Foreign Secretary, were not followed. That was one of a number of significant failures in the Departments of State themselves.

[Miss Ann Widdecombe]

I find it hard to believe, as paragraphs 59 and 60 of the report state, that when it was realised last summer that the details would come out in the press, the

> media lines to take were being developed by the working group with support from the FCO and the Home Office. The Home Secretary saw the press lines in the week prior to the . . . story appearing in the Times. The Foreign Secretary did not see them.
>
> Once the story broke Ministers were unable to use the prepared press lines because they were inadequate.

That simply beggars belief. It is clear from the Committee's report, which is excellent and does it credit, that there were many serious failures—but we need not go further over the details.

It is doubly unfortunate that the failures involved sensitive, indeed unique, material such as that provided by Mr. Mitrokhin. Those failures have distracted attention from Mr. Mitrokhin's actions, which, as I have said, deserve the highest praise. In the light of the Committee's report, the Government have decided to put in place measures to try to rectify the deficiencies, and I can only hope that the situation that has been described to us will never recur. It did no one any credit.

Mr. Straw: I shall try to be as gentle with the right hon. Lady as I can, but the simple truth is that as soon as the matter broke, she reached conclusions about it. She says that they are correct, but they are not supported in any particular by the conclusions of the Intelligence and Security Committee. She concluded that there had been a major lapse by current serving Ministers. There had been lapses, but not by Ministers. If there had been lapses by Ministers, I would hope and expect that members of the Committee would have said so, and said so publicly. They did not.

It is a matter of record, and is stated in paragraph 64 of the report, that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary was told on 22 March 1999 that the

> Security Service are clearing the detail contained in those chapters . . . with the Home Secretary (who was briefed on the project in 1998, and is supportive) and the Attorney General.

That is what my right hon. Friend was told, and he had every reason to believe that it was correct. As it turns out, it was incorrect. That has been brought to the attention of the House and the Committee. Of course it has been accepted that there were failures. The Government have accepted in our response that there were failures in the Home Office, in other Departments and in the Security Service, but there was no failure, as the right hon. Lady implied that there was, by Ministers.

If there is a next time—we always learn from experience, but we cannot avoid such things—I suggest that the right hon. Lady does not make such intemperate statements as the one she published on 13 September, in which she stated that I must publish the legal advice that I claim makes a prosecution impossible and explain why I kept it secret from Parliament and the public for more than eight months.

If the right hon. Lady is suggesting that, as a matter of Opposition policy, she is now committed to publishing the legal advice available from the Law Officers in every case, or in any, she had better say so now, because a fundamental aspect of the work of the Law Officers is that their advice to Ministers is never published. Government could scarcely operate if it were.

Miss Widdecombe: That is a fascinating defence to accusations that I have not even made. I quoted direct from the Intelligence and Security Committee report. I am very sorry indeed that the right hon. Gentleman did not realise that, but I shall not weary the House by quoting it again. He will find that I quoted specific paragraphs about the utter failure of co-ordination between Departments. If he takes that personally, perhaps there are reasons. I do not know about that, but I do know that every criticism that I have just made has been made in a report praised by both sides of the House as an extremely thorough piece of work.

The right hon. Gentleman may also recall that the final announcement of the decision not to prosecute Melita Norwood was not made to the House, but leaked to the media half an hour before the answer was laid, for which an apology had to be made. Not for a moment can he try to pretend that the handling of this issue—by politicians, by officials or by the various services concerned—has been all that it might have been. Very generously, I noted that the Government have agreed to put in place measures to try to rectify the deficiencies, and hoped that those measures would be effective.

On another aspect of the work of the security services, there is widespread concern at the intention of the former director general, Dame Stella Rimington, to publish her memoirs. It is vital that the men and women who work for our security and intelligence services can feel utterly secure in the knowledge that they and their work will never be compromised by the publication of such books. I hope that the Government will take those concerns into consideration. In his winding-up speech, will the Foreign Secretary tell us more about the Government's intentions, and, perhaps, what stages have been reached in the clearance process?

We were all shocked, and, I believe, deeply disgusted, bearing in mind the origin of the tragedy, by the death of the 58 illegal immigrants in Dover on Monday. Both sides of the House condemn the organised criminal racketeers who feed off human misery and suffering. The introduction to the Committee's report covering 1998-99, which we are debating, stated that there had been "no improvement" in the fight against the traffic in illegal immigrants, and added:

> Rather the reverse has occurred . . .

In the light of recent events, that is certainly an issue to which the Government should turn their attention. I welcome the Home Secretary's indication on Monday that they will give the matter attention. It is crucial that the House is kept informed and that the issue is not neglected.

Another issue raised in the annual report, and one that the Government did not fully address in their response, was resources. The head of the Secret Intelligence Service and the Director General of the Security Service both voiced their concerns about the 2001-02 financial year, saying that the position would be challenging, and flagging up the possibility of being unable to maintain current service levels and meet new challenges.

The Committee observed:

> We believe that these concerns should be fully addressed as a matter of some urgency.

That must be especially true, given the Foreign Secretary's remark about the security services during the debate in 1998:

> If they are to do their job, they must have confidence that they will be resourced to fulfil the tasks that we place on them.—[*Official Report*, 2 November 1998, Vol. 318, c. 583.]

The Committee was also concerned about the level of resources being focused, along with Customs and Excise, on the fight against drugs. It observed:

> We are not convinced that enough effort is being focused at stopping the drugs reaching the UK.

All those matters are particularly worrying. Perhaps the Foreign Secretary can tell us what progress is being made in the areas that I have identified.

I cannot resist observing that I hope that the Government are taking seriously the problem of missing laptop computers, which has come to light in recent months. We have heard of instances of laptops belonging to members of the security and intelligence services going missing or being stolen in what can be described only as bizarre circumstances. We have had to listen to stories of tapas bars, taxis and train stations. I shall be grateful if the Government will clarify the truth of this when they respond, and tell us exactly how many laptops have been lost in recent months by members of the security and intelligence services, and, so far as they can tell us, in what circumstances.

Will the Government at least confirm that no classified or sensitive information has been lost as a result of the adventures with laptops? I hope that measures have been put in place across the services to prevent a recurrence of incidents that make the services look remarkably foolish.

Over the past year and a half, the Select Committees on Home Affairs and on Foreign Affairs have both produced reports that have made a valuable contribution to on-going debates. Several of my right hon. and hon. Friends will no doubt wish to refer to the Foreign Affairs Committee's report on the Sierra Leone affair in greater detail than I shall, but the cover-up climate that surrounds the issue means that questions will inevitably have to be asked, and it is only right that they should be.

For example, will the Foreign Secretary indicate, in more detail than hitherto, his reasons for refusing the Select Committee informal access to the head of the Secret Intelligence Service? How does that differ from the arrangements that the Home Secretary makes in respect of the security services, and why?

Will the Foreign Secretary also comment on the Committee's conclusion that his refusal to allow it access to the head of the SIS has inhibited its inquiry? Perhaps that is what the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), the Liberal Democrat spokesman, had in mind. What does the Foreign Secretary have to say about the personal criticism of Foreign Office policy, as opposed to the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence, that appears in paragraph 108 of the report?

That brings me to the issue of accountability, on which the Select Committee on Home Affairs has produced a report. As I have already said, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and the other members of the Intelligence and Security Committee do an excellent job. There is no greater testament to that than the thorough investigation into the Mitrokhin affair. In so far as one can draw such conclusions relatively early in its existence, the Committee is clearly doing its job supremely well.

The Government now see no reason to change the present arrangements. The Opposition agree with that view, as do the majority of the Committee. It is a unique Committee which scrutinises a unique and very sensitive area of the Executive. All sides of the debate agree that its establishment was a significant step forward.

The arrangements put in place by the previous Government are not yet even a decade old. I note the Home Secretary's comments in evidence to the Select Committee that the current arrangements should have time to bed down. When we are talking about institutions with histories much longer than that, I do not think that four or five years can possibly provide a proper evaluation of the new system.

The country's intelligence and security services do a vital job in safeguarding the nation during the increasingly uncertain and violent times in which we live. They, and men and women such as Vasili Mitrokhin, are all too often the unsung heros. Once again, I pay tribute to them, their good work and those who oversee them.

2.14 pm

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley): The House will know that I serve on the Intelligence and Security Committee. I shall refer briefly to two matters in the annual report that may be of some interest to Members and to the wider public, who, I hope, read our debates about the agencies.

First, there is the continuing interest that the Committee takes in international developments in intelligence oversight. Two members of the Committee, including me, went to a bi-annual inspector-generals conference in Canada in June 1999. Members of the Committee more senior than I had attended it previously. There were representatives from countries such as Australia, Belgium, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and the USA. It was good that South Africa was represented, because the Minister responsible was present, and the Committee that oversaw his Department, along with representatives of the agencies. Some good debates on oversight took place.

In the introduction to the report are set out the inward delegations that have come to this country, including officials and parliamentarians involved in intelligence and oversight. They have come from countries such as Australia, Canada, Germany, Hungary, South Korea, Romania, Poland and the Ukraine.

Having emerged from communism, many of those countries are referred to by the west as developing democracies. I hope that we influence them in talking about the way in which we in this country approach our work in overseeing agencies. They explain to us in great detail the roles that they play in that respect, and some of them have real reservations about the way in which their agencies operated in different guises many years ago. It is a fascinating debate in which to be involved. They see their agencies as operating more along the lines within which our agencies have operated over many years.

The second issue arising from the annual report is serious crime. The Committee was told about the growing importance of smuggling cigarettes into the United Kingdom. Customs and Excise estimates that about £1,500 million is lost to the Exchequer every year as a result of duty and tax avoidance. Some lorry containers can bring in smuggled cigarettes to the value of £1 million. We were told that the scale of the profits that

[Mr. Kevin Barron]

can be made from cigarette smuggling is comparable with the profits made from drug smuggling, and that criminals are turning to cigarette smuggling because the risks and penalties are lower than those that apply with drugs. We have emphasised the fact that we believe that any additional resources given to the agencies to allow them to work in this area could effectively be self-funding for the Exchequer through the recovery of duty and tax.

The Government's response was that they agreed about the loss of revenue to the Exchequer through smuggling, and that they would continue to keep under consideration the resources needed to combat it. Since the report was published, millions of extra pounds have gone into Customs and Excise to try to stop serious crime, including smuggling and the avoidance of duty.

We have not emphasised penalties. If I were found with half a million pounds worth of class A drugs in the back of a lorry, I would face a penalty of up to life imprisonment. However, if I was found with half a million pounds worth of smuggled cigarettes, the penalty would be much less. It is no wonder that people are moving into smuggling cigarettes and not dealing in class A drugs. Perhaps my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary could give us his views on that, or write to me. I understand why we did not highlight that part of the report, but we should consider the issue of penalties.

The major report that we are debating relates to the Mitrokhin inquiry. We concluded that there was serious failure on the part of the Security Service in that it did not consult the Law Officers about the case of Mrs. Norwood. We also noted that the action prevented her possible prosecution. Some of the headlines that followed the publication of the report seemed ridiculous, implying that we had suggested that she should have been prosecuted. The simple fact is that it was not up to us, just as we did not think that it was up to the Security Service, to take that decision. The report makes that clear.

The other issue relating to Melita Norwood was that she had slipped out of sight. We believe that was a further serious failure on the part of the Security Service over a number of years. We were advised that the systems covering prosecution referrals to the Law Officers and the monitoring of espionage cases within the Security Service have been changed to prevent similar serious failings occurring again. I emphasise that, because it took place during our inquiry. It was recognised that things had gone a little wrong, and procedures inside the agencies were changed.

We agreed that the establishment of an interdepartmental working group to oversee the publication of the Mitrokhin archive was a sound decision. However, we concluded that officials failed to keep Ministers fully informed and to ensure that the decisions of the working group were carried out. As a consequence of those failures, Ministers made decisions on the basis of incorrect information.

We also noted that the working group was not adequately constituted to develop the necessary media strategy and to ensure that Ministers were alerted in a timely manner and provided with appropriate and robust lines to take. We stated in our conclusions that

> misleading stories were allowed to receive wide circulation by a failure to anticipate the likely media focus and to have prepared and promulgated appropriate responses.

In the Government's response, they accepted that the preparations for the handling of the publicity surrounding the archive were ineffective, and officials recognised that there would be considerable public interest, and that the Government's normal and entirely proper refusal to comment on intelligence-related matters would not be adequate. The implications of non-prosecution of Mrs. Norwood were not sufficiently worked through. In consequence there was inadequate preparation of responses to the reaction and the interest aroused in the media and in Parliament.

I see quite clearly how the situation came about, but given that the Government acknowledge that officials recognised that there would be considerable public interest, and that Government's normal and entirely proper refusal to comment on intelligence-related matters would not be adequate, it is no longer normal or entirely proper to use the stock phrase that has been used for decades in this country—that the Government do not comment on matters of national security.

A debate must take place about the way in which Ministers and officials should speak to the media in such circumstances. Different terms are needed to replace the stock phrase that has been circulating in and around the agencies for many years. I do not claim to have the answer, but there seems to be a slight contradiction in the Government's conclusion about how they should operate at the public interface in future.

The Committee recommended that greater consideration was needed when briefing Ministers and senior officials on sensitive material, to ensure that accurate briefing is given on all the information.

Our greatest concern was that the mishandling of the publication of the Mitrokhin archive detracted from the major achievement of the SIS in exfiltrating Mr. Mitrokhin, his family and the material, together with the successful dissemination of the material to foreign liaison services. The information that we received sped around the world to foreign agencies, which most of us would argue was to the general good of counter-intelligence. It is a great pity that the handling of the publication of the archive detracted from that.

I put on record the bravery of Mr. Mitrokhin, who believed that the organisation for which he was working in his own country was betraying the people of his country.

Mistakes were made, and they were admitted. There was no hint at any time in our proceedings that anyone was trying to mislead us in any way. It is important to recognise that nothing happened to compromise national security, no one was put at risk, and there was no deliberate attempt to deceive Ministers or anyone else. No one tried to shirk responsibility.

If, after reading the report, one asks why a certain thing happened in such an organisation, the answer is that it was probably a result of the culture of the organisation. We all recognise the distinctive culture of Parliament or the culture of ministerial office.

It is to the credit of my right hon. Friends the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary that they asked our Committee—a Committee of parliamentarians who were either elected or, in one case, appointed to the other place—to look into all the details of the case and to report in such an open way. Little was taken out of the report made available to the public. We, and the public, should be grateful for that.

I hope that the confidence-building measures in which we, as the oversight Committee, are engaged with the agencies and with Government organisations, will continue in the future.

2.26 pm

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron), who is a valuable and respected member of the Intelligence and Security Committee.

I start by expressing my appreciation to the Home Secretary and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) for their kind personal comments. I welcome the debate on behalf of the Committee. This is the most important parliamentary occasion of the year for the Intelligence and Security Committee, and we appreciate the fact that it involves the presence of two of the most senior Cabinet Ministers. That is a proper recognition of the importance of the agencies for which they are directly and personally responsible.

It may be a little churlish to make an early criticism. I welcome the debate, and my goodness, we waited for it. The delay in holding the debate is quite unacceptable. The debate after our last annual report took place on 2 November 1998. We hope to produce our next annual report in six weeks.

The present debate is on the 1998–99 report, which was sent to the Government with a letter from me to the Prime Minister dated 6 August last year. The Government took six months to respond. Their response is dated 28 January this year, and now, on 22 June, five months later, we have the chance of a debate. I ask the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary, both of whom I am pleased to see in their place, to use their influence to ensure that the next debate is more timely.

As I said, we will submit our next annual report at the end of the summer Session. There should be a real determination for the Government response to be available by the time the House comes back in October, and that we should have the debate when the report is fresh and current. The debate on a previous report was held on 2 November, as I mentioned. I need to put that on the record. The Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary will understand why I am doing so, and the Whip on duty may report this to the business managers as well. It is unacceptable that there should be such a time lag.

If I had to choose a text to represent the year's work, it might be a quotation from the leader in *The Times* after the publication of our report on Mitrokhin. *The Times* was kind enough to refer to it as

> a strikingly successful example of public accountability.

We appreciate that comment.

Against that background, I pay my tribute to the members of the Committee, several of whom are in the Chamber, and to our staff, who support us so well. By the nature of their work, they will not be recognised by name, but their contribution will be recorded elsewhere—perhaps Upstairs, or in the future. We appreciate their work.

Let me comment on Select Committees and the alternative of a different style of Committee. I pay tribute to my colleagues' attendance at meetings of the Intelligence and Security Committee. I read the paper by the Liaison Committee that discusses new arrangements for improvements in Select Committees. It considers punitive measures that perhaps should be available for the Chairman to take against members who signally fail to turn up for Select Committee meetings and are regular absentees. I am glad to say that that has never been a problem for me in the six years that I have been Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee. That should be recognised.

I am speaking personally, although I will probably take the overwhelming majority of the Committee with me on the comments that I am about to make. "Overwhelming" may be an exaggeration; perhaps "significant" would be better. I am unimpressed by the suggestion that there is an urgent need for a change. *The Times* quotation suggests that we are doing something right, and breaking new ground in a way that was perhaps not apparent to the Liaison Committee or the Select Committee on Home Affairs when they prepared their reports.

The Intelligence and Security Committee is a parliamentary Committee; Parliament established us to do our job. There are differences between our Committee and Select Committees. On a previous occasion, the Home Secretary famously destroyed the illusion that because Parliament votes on the membership of Select Committees, they are the product of the free vote of an independent House of Parliament. The selection of some and the exclusion of others who might be less acceptable show that the forces that are at work are pretty close to Government.

It is acknowledged that the Intelligence and Security Committee is slightly different. The Home Affairs Committee's report recognises that we require special arrangements and that we could not be an ordinary Select Committee. If one visits the House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, and walks down the secure corridor towards the armed guards standing by the door, one realises that it is not an ordinary, free-standing Select Committee. We meet in secret and have secure premises, which are required for our work.

The report of the Select Committee on Home Affairs also recognises that the agencies, for which we have oversight and responsibility, answer to different Ministers and Departments. If one sought to replace the Committee, it would have to be with a single Select Committee. That is common ground between those who advocate a Select Committee. The report had integrity in that it acknowledged that the Intelligence and Security Committee was doing quite a good job. It also recognised that the Committee was evolving, developing and appointing an investigator.

That report was written before we broke new ground with the invitation from the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister to investigate the Mitrokhin affair, with full access to all relevant papers and advice to Ministers. The latter was important, and enabled my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald to ask some difficult questions because we had all the information whereby we were able to reconstruct the paper trail and some of the problems that had arisen.

The calibre of members of the Intelligence and Security Committee is as good as that of the members of any other Select Committee. It comprises many senior hon. Members. Other Select Committees, such as the Home

[Mr. Tom King]

Affairs Committee and the Liaison Committee, tend to write reports as if we were from another planet. Yet some of my colleagues on the Intelligence and Security Committee serve on other Select Committees. I was disappointed that the Liaison Committee, whose Chairman I had approached, did not invite me even to attend a meeting as an observer or to comment to the Committee before it further investigated some of its proposals.

There is much common ground between us. The Liaison Committee report complained about delay in Government responses and suggested that two months should be the norm. I agree; I have just complained about the delay of six months before we got our response. The report stresses the need for a debate on reports. I even found some common ground with its complaint about the inconsistency of Government replies. It stated that some were exemplary and others were superficial. I agree with that. Perhaps the Government will refer to it in their response to the debate.

I have been proud to chair the Intelligence and Security Committee since its inauguration and during its development and evolution, which continues. We need Government support and a proper understanding by them that the Committee is an important bulwark and safeguard for the intelligence agencies and public confidence in them. The fullest trust, confidence and openness by Government is necessary when appropriate to enable us to discharge our duties.

If the Liaison Committee wants to return to the matter—its report said that it might—a little consultation with parliamentary colleagues who serve on the Intelligence and Security Committee might be helpful. We might then be to help the Liaison Committee. I want to put that on record because I do not imagine that the Government have many empty slots in their legislative programme, and I do not therefore believe that the matter will be pursued with any urgency. That could not be justified.

I add the Committee's strong endorsement to the tribute of the Home Secretary and my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald to those who work in our intelligence agencies. The nature of their work means that it is impossible for people to know the challenges and dangers that they face and the very personal risks that they sometimes run. It is not known that sometimes they have to be moved very quickly, and arrangements have to be made to move them and their families because of imminent threats, perhaps after their identity has been betrayed by others. Those people are dedicated to the security and protection of our country and we owe them a great debt.

I want to put on record my admiration of the leadership that those people receive. I do not exclude from that Sir Richard Wilson, the Secretary of the Cabinet, whose interest in our Committee's work I appreciate. He has attached importance to our work. I also thank the Cabinet Office for its support. I add my personal recognition of Sir Stephen Lander, the Director General of the Security Service, whom I congratulate on his award.

Our appreciation of our relationship with the agencies, and their quality is part of the background against which we work. We require the fullest possible Government co-operation whenever we have to be involved and in whatever work we may have to undertake. We are grateful for the Prime Minister's endorsement and his assurance of that full co-operation in our work.

Our job is to scrutinise, to recognise and respect work that is well done, but not to develop the sort of cosy relationship in which we become apologists for the intelligence and security agencies. The best service that we can do them is at all times to be alert to mistakes and occasions when standards are not maintained and integrity is not protected, and to speak out without fear or favour.

Some hon. Members referred to my public profile. We began with almost total invisibility. The profile has grown, however. It is an important part of our work that the public know that we exist, and can have some confidence that a Committee independent of Government oversees the agencies.

In a recent article about Menwith Hill, one of the criticisms made by a certain newspaper was that it was an incredibly secret place, which no Minister or other Member of Parliament had ever visited. Let me put it on record that the Committee has made two visits, and that a number of our colleagues have made individual visits. Both the fact that such visits are made and the fact that it is known that there are not "secret places" that are off limits for the Committee are important, not just to satisfy us but in terms of the public confidence that they create.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will emphasise that it is he who speaks for the Committee. When journalists telephone its members, they should not be offended when we tell them—to put it bluntly—where to get off, because we simply do not talk. The Chairman talks on behalf of the Committee, and they should always approach the Chairman.

Mr. King: I thank the hon. Gentleman.

As was said earlier, the Committee seeks to maintain the seamlessness—the Government constantly strive to achieve a similarly seamless appearance—that enables it to speak with one voice. Difficult decisions, or judgments, must often be made on what can or cannot be said about certain issues. I am sure that the Home Secretary and others—such as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard)—who have held his post know that the problem is remembering what is public. I hope to take on that responsibility for the Committee when trying to make the necessary judgment, and I hope that we strike reasonable balances.

I have spoken of the contribution that the Committee can make. I am grateful for the support that the Government have given to the developments that we have achieved in the evolution of the system. We take considerable interest in the expenditure of the agencies. I am afraid that the number of asterisks that appear in our report representing the details of that expenditure must be pretty frustrating for the ordinary reader, but every asterisk represents information that we hold as a Committee. We have examined the expenditure involved, and have been able to identify it. For instance, one heading relating to the Secret Intelligence Service relates to the cost of running agents. That is the degree of detail that we examine.

We are grateful for the assistance of the National Audit Office, which was not originally envisaged in the legislation. It has already done valuable work, and I think

that its contribution will continue to grow. The investigator to whom the Home Secretary referred represents an addition to that valuable work. I pay tribute to another supporter of the Committee's work—the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, who has been very helpful in certain circumstances.

The most recent and obvious evolution of our work is represented by what we did in regard to Mitrokhin. I do not want to add a great deal to what I have already said about our report in press announcements: the hon. Member for Rother Valley has said a fair amount about it, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald drew attention to certain matters of concern. However, I want to stress the importance of putting the issue in context.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates) spoke of the need to recognise the successes of the agencies. This has been one of the few instances in which success has been manifest and public. The fact that there has been some confusion about publication, and the fact that there have been some failures in regard to prosecution and other matters, must not be allowed to detract from the overall understanding that this was a remarkable and outstanding intelligence success. I believe that the Federal Bureau of Investigation claimed that it was the largest pool of counter-intelligence material that it had ever received, and the Central Intelligence Agency paid similar tribute to the help that it had been given in the identification of people who had been betraying national interests in the United States and many other countries.

The tributes paid to the SIS's exfiltration of Mr. Mitrokhin, his family and his material, and the pursuit by the Security Service of a number of the leads that arose from it, mark important and praiseworthy achievements, but we must never forget Mr. Mitrokhin himself—an extraordinary man, whom the Committee had the privilege to meet and interview about his work, and about the remarkable archive that he produced. It has given us an unparalleled understanding of the nature of the KGB and its activities over the years. We believe that there is more material to be published, which will of course be of great interest to those concerned with the history of espionage and intelligence in other countries over recent years.

Nevertheless, the achievements of the Mitrokhin report should not blind us to the fact that mistakes were made in its handling. Lessons must be learned. Those are the principles that guided us. We appreciated the Government's early recognition that mistakes had been made once matters came to light, and we believe that the steps that were taken were appropriate to meet our initial criticisms.

There is one question that I am asked most often in interviews, and on more public occasions. There is a latent suspicion that we do not really need the agencies. Why do we spend nearly £1 billion on them? Did not this world of espionage pass with the end of the cold war?

In the foreword to our 1998-99 report, we referred to the various areas in which intelligence is critical. We referred, for instance, to the need for support for our military forces in actions overseas, and, in particular, to Kosovo. Since then we have seen the events in East Timor and, most recently, in Sierra Leone. We now consider the issues involved in weapons proliferation, and the increasing concern felt in Washington about national missile defence against the risk of missiles and weapons of mass destruction in the hands of rogue states. The importance of the agencies' task in trying to counter some of those challenges is all too real.

Only yesterday, I read a comment in a defence journal about Kazakhstan, whose Defence Minister has admitted that the country has not the slightest idea how many weapons it has. In earlier days, Kazakhstan had a certain relevance to Soviet missile and nuclear activities. It is now trying to conduct an inventory. The report that I read alleged that 40 Mig 21s had been smuggled to North Korea from Kazakhstan. Admittedly it is an elderly aeroplane, but it is not one that we would wish to become part of the currency of arms smuggling.

To those who say that we now live in a safer world, let me say that the truth is that, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and some of its controls, the availability of weapons and access to nuclear and other materials present a threatening and dangerous scenario, and it is vital to have the best possible intelligence to try to prevent proliferation.

So soon after the tragic assassination of Brigadier Saunders, there is no need for me to restate the reasons why international terrorism continues to pose a major threat. I understand that the French football team in the European cup is now having to have special security against a threatened international terrorist attack. It is a continuing threat. The Home Secretary reminded us of Hammersmith bridge and of our own domestic concerns. It is an area in which intelligence and security continue to be needed.

The Committee visited Dover a few months ago. I do not think a single member of the Committee was surprised by the tragic news that came from Dover, having seen the situation in that port and the pressures that exist. Our 1998–99 report emphasised the importance of enhancing intelligence capability against organised crime. We specifically mentioned immigrants as one of our areas of concern.

I touch on several other issues that are of concern to the Committee. I do not want to accuse the two senior Ministers here, the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary, of breach of the Trade Descriptions Act 1968, but there is a publication called "National Intelligence Machinery." It describes the role of Ministers and makes it clear that the Prime Minister has overall responsibility. It then draws attention to the Ministerial Committee on the Intelligence Services. It looks pretty good on paper. I do not think that it looks very good in practice. It might be a good idea if that committee met and had some actual physical presence. It would be a nice gesture, if no more, to the intelligence agencies.

It is not a party political point because the ministerial committee was not known for the frequency of its meetings during the term of office of the previous Government, either. It may interest members of the previous Government to know that the ministerial committee even existed, but it did.

If we are to have ministerial accountability, if it does make sense to have divided responsibility for the intelligence and security agencies, and if the structure is to be such that there is separate accountability, the argument for the ministerial committee meeting must be strong. It could be a valuable exercise. If it met, not necessarily frequently, but at least annually, that would be a significant improvement.

[Mr. King]

The Committee takes considerable interest in personnel practices in the agencies and in recruitment and retention. I must add one sharp criticism and one complaint about the Government response. Two reports ago, we made a proposal in response to a problem, which is well known, involving Mr. Tomlinson. He complained that he was dismissed from the Secret Intelligence Service and was denied any redress or access to an employment tribunal on the ground that it was impossible to hear the evidence which was said to be too secret to be available to an employment tribunal.

We came up with a fairly simple proposal: it should be possible to set up a special tribunal identical to the normal employment tribunal, but constructed in such a way that it could handle secret matters. The Government accepted that proposal. We have said some rude things in our report—I shall not rehearse them—about the shambles of the parliamentary handling of that. The Home Secretary need not look embarrassed because, as ever, another Department handled the Bill concerned—the proposal was tacked on to the Employment Relations Bill as an amendment.

Having made the proposal, the Committee was never consulted when the amendment actually went in. It never even came through the Commons; it was done in the Lords and came back. However, we were assured that we would be consulted on the regulations. What is pretty outrageous is the Government response:

> The Government is therefore disappointed at the reaction of the Committee to this prompt improvement in the rights of members of staff of the agencies.

That was written in January. There was supposed to have been a prompt improvement. It has not actually occurred yet. Regulations have not been introduced yet and there has been no consultation of the Committee. It is a proposal that we made two years ago, so I ask that it be dealt with promptly. The Government said that it was a wonderful idea. Unfortunately, they have not yet done it.

I have referred to areas of expenditure and the assistance of the NAO. We are seeking to give greater information about the cost of the individual agencies; we referred to that in our report. The Government were looking forward to a meeting with us to discuss those matters further. That meeting has now been held. I think that it was helpful. I hope that we will be able to make progress on that matter and that next year's report will be rather fuller in that respect than this year's. We await Ministers' response on that point.

The area of expenditure that we addressed that was of particular concern to us—we got agreement to the publication of NAO reports on the matter—was the cost of the new premises for the SIS and the Security Service, and the substantial over-runs in expenditure that were incurred on both occasions. Although they were past events, we quoted them because we recognised that the complexity and scale of the new accommodation project for GCHQ was far greater than either of those undertakings.

We gave the clearest warnings of our concern, in view of past experience, that the problems should not be repeated and that there would be the closest watch. We were grateful that the response in January says:

> During its planned move to new accommodation GCHQ is paying considerable attention to ensuring that degradation of its operating capability is kept to a minimum and that all essential services are maintained.

Later, in paragraph 17, the Government noted

> the Committee's endorsement of three guiding principles in the management of the GCHQ New Accommodation Project. GCHQ has sought to ensure that the maximum likely costs have been identified.

They added that GCHQ would

> continue to supplement its own project management experience and expertise by the use of contractors and expert advisers. GCHQ—

this was written in January—

> understands the need to control costs at all stages . . . Limits on spending will be set before work commences, and any need for subsequent adjustment will be carefully scrutinised.

The Committee is under no illusions about the challenge that is represented by the new GCHQ accommodation project and its importance. The Committee supports the project going forward, but it would be failing in its duty if it did not put on record its continuing great concern about the matter, of which the Foreign Secretary is aware. I shall not go further into the matter now, but we have continually sought to raise the matter and remain anxious as to whether its seriousness is yet fully recognised.

The two issues that our report says will lead to further work are files, on which we hope to have more to say in our next report—I shall not go into it in detail—and security procedures, which has been a constant theme of every report that the Committee has written. We are concerned about whether the agencies insist on constant vigilance on internal security. The recent events involving laptops are merely an illustration of the problem that we have been continually trying to draw to the attention of Ministers and heads of agencies. We have not had the worst experiences; other countries have suffered worse lapses of security recently. We can maintain that position only by constant attention to this tiresome, time-consuming but critically important role.

Finally, we attach great importance to security and secrecy. The Intelligence and Security Committee seeks to establish the highest standard in its own conduct in that respect. Against that background, let me express a personal view. Obviously, we have concerns about the actions of a former head of the Security Service. It is one thing to publish a book about one's early childhood experiences or happy holidays, but it is quite another to write a book that covers in any detail work or responsibility in this area. It is peculiarly critical in respect of somebody who has been the leader of an agency as it raises concern that other members of the agency might be tempted or attracted by financial reward to do the same. There is a heavy responsibility on a former director-general.

Sir Archie Hamilton (Epsom and Ewell): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we also have the unfortunate precedent of General de la Billiere's memoirs, which described what the SAS did during the Gulf war? It opened the door to a large number of other books by former members of the SAS.

Mr. King: My right hon. Friend, who was then Minister for the Armed Forces, will remember that well, and I do too. I entirely share his reservations on that point.

A letter to *The Times* by a former Member of Parliament completely distorted the position with regard to the book by Sir Percy Sillitoe, a former Director-General of the Security Service. The right

hon. C. R. Attlee PC, OM, CH, MP, who wrote the foreword to it, specifically said that it was unfortunate that, in the interests of secrecy, Sir Percy had had to leave out the most interesting parts of the book, which would have been of interest to the reader. The letter to *The Times* gave the impression that he had been allowed to put it all in, when the opposite was the case.

It would be wrong to talk about the work of the Intelligence and Security Committee or the agencies without recognising the importance of our allies in intelligence and security. We have the privilege to meet many of those who work with our agencies and with the oversight committees and we are familiar with those in Washington and other capitals who are part of the intelligence alliance and the parliamentarians in those countries who oversee them. We pay tribute to them, the work that they do and the relationship that we have with them.

In our report for 1998–99 we said:

> Our safety depends on good intelligence and security, and it is vital that these agencies are properly maintained and funded in a sustainable way. That is the responsibility of Ministers and those in charge of the Agencies. It is our responsibility as a committee to hold them to account.

Our report describe how we have sought to discharge that task and I commend it to the House.

3.3 pm

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): As the newest and most junior member of the Intelligence and Security Committee, having been appointed in January, I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in today's debate and to follow the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), the most senior member of the Committee, whose style of leadership—and, after all, he does have style—has helped it develop in a way that would not have been thought of at its inception. The right hon. Gentleman has managed to win the trust and respect of those in the agencies and of Ministers, and we should pay tribute to him for that.

I also thank my fellow Committee members on both sides of the House for their help and advice, and the staff who serve the Committee for all their hard work.

I confess that when I joined the Committee I was somewhat sceptical about the work of the intelligence and security agencies, which is a not uncommon reaction given that the agencies have traditionally been shrouded in secrecy. Until recently, it would have been unthinkable to have had this debate, given that until a few years ago the existence of the intelligence and security agencies was not even acknowledged.

As I have learned more about the work of the agencies and have come into contact with many of the people who work for them, I have come to recognise the role that they play in protecting our democracy and the dedicated and professional work that is carried out, often in extremely dangerous situations.

I know from my reaction to learning more about the work of the agencies how important increasing one's knowledge can be in increasing one's confidence in the agencies. Most people in the United Kingdom understand the need for the intelligence and security agencies to operate within a ring of secrecy, but they also want to know that Parliament is making sure that the agencies are not operating outside the law or in any way that undermines our democracy. People need that reassurance, not least because of suspicions that have developed about the activity of the agencies whether as a result of fiction, film, controversy around issues such as files, as referred to earlier, or of allegations by disaffected or former members of the agencies.

Of course, Ministers are responsible for the agencies, but as has been enshrined by the establishment of the Intelligence and Security Committee in 1994, it is now recognised that it is right for elected representatives to be involved in overseeing the work of the agencies. I believe that it is entirely proper to keep questioning the effectiveness of the oversight system that is being set up. As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said, in the light of experience we need to keep looking at whether the oversight that we have is adequate, and to be openminded about that.

Mr. Winnick: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and I am pleased that she has joined the Committee. Obviously, it goes without saying that there is an absolute need for all democracies—and certainly our own—to have security services to protect our freedom and our civil liberties. Does my hon. Friend agree that, had there been parliamentary oversight at the time, it is quite likely that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce would never have been targeted in the first place? The lack of oversight probably played a role in the dirty tricks campaign against Harold Wilson in the 1960s. It is all somewhat alarming and hopefully will end as a result of the introduction of parliamentary scrutiny.

Ms Winterton: Past suspicions about the agencies' activities led to the establishment of the Committee, to develop an oversight system that works. We must question whether oversight needs to go further, to ensure that such activities never happen again.

Sir Archie Hamilton: Does the hon. Lady accept that whether or not a file is kept on a Member of Parliament is an operational matter that does not come under the existing Committee's remit and probably would not in future?

Ms Winterton: I will address later the question of how much members of the Committee are told.

Openness and transparency within the constraints of national security are key to building confidence. The Committee should be looking at improving public faith in the system. That is doubly important as the agencies move into areas such as serious crime; drug trafficking; and smuggling—whether of alcohol, cigarettes or people. As the intelligence services work increasingly alongside law enforcement agencies such as the police and HM Customs and Excise and the contrast between them becomes clear, there will need to be even greater emphasis on the services' accountability.

Whether or not the Committee should become a Select Committee is discussed among its members. I believe that as demand for greater openness, transparency and accountability grows there will come a time when the public and Parliament will demand Select Committee status, albeit with the constraints already described. Whatever form the Committee takes, the key question is how much access its members have to information.

[Ms Winterton]

Members of comparable committees in other countries—notably the United States—do a different job, so are given more information. The American people have gained more confidence in the oversight of senate and congressional committees not just because those committees are responsible for allocating money to the intelligence agencies but because they know that their members are kept fully informed. They have more information about operational matters—that may cover some aspects mentioned by the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Sir A. Hamilton).

As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said, the Mitrokhin inquiry—my first encounter with the intelligence and security agencies—was an enormous step forward in proving that it was possible to give ISC members access to all the relevant information without compromising national security. I hope that experience will lead to greater trust between the Committee, agencies and Ministers.

This debate is an important part of building public confidence in the scrutiny process. I was not a member of the Committee when the report that is before the House today was delivered to the Government 10 months ago. It is a matter for concern that it has taken so long for the report to be published and for it and the Government's response to be debated. The last report was debated 19 months ago and the Committee is now on the verge of completing this year's report. Parliament might feel that the Committee is not reporting back in a timely fashion. It is important that our debates be relevant to topical issues, so I hope that it will be possible for the House to debate future reports more quickly.

The terms of reference of the ministerial committee to which the right hon. Member for Bridgwater referred are to keep under review policy on the security and intelligence services. That provides for some oversight but it may be tricky to achieve that if that committee does not meet often.

Other important reasons for oversight are efficiency and ensuring value for money. The Committee expressed concern about overspending, particularly on the agencies' accommodation. Parliament wants to be reassured that the agencies are using public money wisely. The work of the National Audit Office has been extremely valuable to the Committee.

Duplication should be avoided, however. Paragraph 37 of the annual report notes the appointment of an adviser to improve efficiency within the single intelligence vote and to review joint working and co-operation. As the agencies enter more into tackling organised crime, and in the light of technological developments, the need to avoid duplicating work and to ensure that it is undertaken efficiently will become even more important.

The Committee, with its overview of all three agencies, is in an ideal position to monitor this. The Committee requested access to the efficiency adviser's reports and I am pleased that the Committee has received the first of them, even though it was submitted to Ministers more than a year ago. I hope that future reports will be available more quickly.

Although I have some concerns, I firmly believe that over the years the Committee has been successful in pushing back the frontiers of security and oversight. That could not have happened without the co-operation of the agencies and Ministers. I hope that Parliament will recognise that achievement and will be assured that members of the Committee are always looking to see what more can be done to encourage transparency and openness from our intelligence and security services, without undermining the extremely important work that they do for our country.

3.20 pm

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): I am glad to follow the hon. Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), who has been a refreshing addition to the Intelligence and Security Committee. I have only one worry—it is a matter of record that every woman who has ever been appointed to our Committee has been made a Minister shortly afterwards. I do not wish to dampen the hon. Lady's promotion prospects, but it would be helpful if we could make use of her experience for slightly longer.

My right hon. and hon. Friends would wish me to place on the record their welcome for the work of the Committee, expressed in the reports. The reports are important, but the fact that a representative group of Members of Parliament is inside the ring of secrecy, watching and asking questions and maintaining accountability, is at least as important—and, I would suggest, much more important. We have been pressing for the Committee for 20 years and are delighted that it has been set up. As a party, we would prefer a Select Committee, but it would operate very differently from other Select Committees, and Select Committee status would not add to the Committee's ability to do its job. For that, we need to continue improving access to relevant and necessary information, which is a higher priority than changing the Committee's status.

I pay tribute to my colleagues on the Committee. It is a hard-working Committee and, as the Chairman pointed out, the attendance record is excellent. Ill-health is almost the only reason for any protracted absence from the Committee and we never have a problem with the Committee's quorum, as other Select Committees do. I also wish to pay to tribute to the staff, including the investigator recently added to the staff, and to those in the leadership of the agencies, who recognise the value and importance of the Committee's work.

On behalf of my right hon. and hon. Friends, I also wish to stress the importance and value of intelligence and the organisations that provide it. Their staff show remarkable skills, dedication and, in some cases, courage in very dangerous situations. Intelligence saves lives; it can prevent or help to end conflict; it affords protection to our forces on active service; it helps to track down organisers of large-scale crime; and it is a shield against threats to our financial system, our communications and information technology, and to democracy itself.

Intelligence gathering can also compromise civil liberties, and it therefore must be controlled by a strong legal framework. It is worth putting on record the fact that, whatever controversy surrounds some of its provisions on information technology, the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill will significantly strengthen the legal framework and restraint under which intelligence gathering takes place. That is why, in general terms, we have supported that legislation and wish to see the greater part of it on the statute book.

As well as a legal framework, monitoring and accountability—such as the Committee can provide—is important to the civil liberties safeguards alongside which intelligence and security services must operate. Ministers like intelligence. In my experience, a gleam comes into their eyes as they tell one how valuable a particular piece of intelligence has been. Therefore, there is always a risk that their appetite for intelligence will lead them to underestimate the political risks and the civil liberties downside to an action that they authorised. That is all the more reason why the Committee must exist to provide oversight. For that reason, it needs to be more fully informed than it has sometimes been about what is being done or is contemplated. The Committee is precluded from, and would not normally envisage, examining operational matters, but a decision to embark on an operation or kind of operation may have such important implications that the Committee should be kept informed and should be able to inform the judgment that Ministers make.

Sometimes agencies—I have in mind examples from around the world—have acted without authority, but the greater danger is usually that actions are covertly authorised by Ministers and Governments, safe in the knowledge that they can be disavowed. Many actions, for example, for which the CIA was criticised in earlier decades were not rogue actions by an uncontrolled agency, but covert actions authorised by US Presidents, who did not wish it to be known that they had authorised them. There may be a case for non-disclosure at the time, but such decisions should not be taken by an Executive free from an active monitoring process.

That point leads directly to an issue that arose in the Mitrokhin case. It will arise again in the Committee's work and I particularly wish to draw the Foreign Secretary's attention to it. The greatest difficulty the Committee has in obtaining information, and where intransigence is at its greatest, it arises not from the detail of agency work—when we have to ask about an operational matter that suddenly has wider implications—but from advice to Ministers. Nothing in the British system is more rigorously protected than advice to Ministers. It is sometimes protected more rigorously than operational details.

Without knowing what Ministers were told, and what they authorised, it is impossible for the Committee to give the House and the country the reassurance that they require. The Home Secretary recognised that when he asked us to look into the Mitrokhin case, and that is why the report is thorough and effective. It is only when one sees the original copy of the submission made to the Minister, with notes written on it in his own handwriting, that one can be sure what the Minister knew and what direction he sought to give to events. The Home Secretary's example should be followed in other cases where the central issue is who knew what, and when, and what they did about it.

There is such a blur surrounding the issue of what Ministers' private offices were told, and such uncertainty about whether Ministers were told everything that their private offices knew, that the Committee needs to see the documentation to give the House the reassurance—often readily available in the documents—that the Minister did not know, or did know and recommended appropriate action.

There is no question but that mistakes were made by the Security Service and the Home Office over the failure to consult properly in the Mitrokhin case about non-prosecution, and the handling and publication of the material. In the Melita Norwood case, it is difficult to stomach the idea that someone who sought, from the comfort of Britain, to help the most repressive and murderous regime on the face of the earth to build an atom bomb should escape any penalty for her actions. That explains why there is such widespread public indignation that mistakes made earlier precluded proper consideration of prosecution of that woman when it might still have been possible.

Those admitted errors have totally distracted attention from the most important point about Vasili Mitrokhin's archive. Its production and release was an act of supreme courage by a true patriot, who saw that the KGB was destroying his country and working against the interests of the Russian people, and against democracy and freedom all over the world. The extent of KGB penetration was far greater than was realised at the time in the west, and it was a further remarkable success for the Secret Intelligence Service to have obtained the archive and achieved the safe exit of Mitrokhin and his family from Russia. Those crucial aspects of the case should be brought back to mind, as they were by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), the Home Secretary and the Chairman of our Committee. They were the real messages of the Mitrokhin archive, not the mistakes that were made in handling some of the material—even the failure properly to address the question of prosecution. The significance of that archive is the courage of the man who produced it, and the competence and skill of our intelligence service in bringing that material to Britain and making it available for action at home and abroad.

I wish to touch briefly on one or two issues raised in the annual report. One is the employment tribunal issue, to which our Chairman, the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), referred. It was indeed the Committee that stressed the need for a dedicated employment tribunal for the staffs of security and intelligence agencies.

The Government say that they have acted promptly in the matter, but they did not introduce the amendment to the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill until it was on Report in the House of Lords. They got it wrong, as they had to admit when they amended the first version that they introduced. Added to that, the regulations have not been produced that would make the tribunal available, which makes the Government's interpretation of the word "prompt" seem ludicrous.

The Government have taken a strange position with regard to the Committee's suggestion that the procedures are pretty draconian. Under them, the applicant can be excluded from the whole inquiry, and may be represented only by a special advocate. In addition, he has permission to make a statement only before the inquiry starts. The exercise of those strict powers ought to be reviewed, and we suggested that the commissioners would be the appropriate body for that.

The Government have discouraged and resisted that option, saying that an applicant could go to judicial review. However, it is absurd to suggest that a possibly quite lowly member of staff would have the resources to go to judicial review to achieve what other people achieve

[Mr. A. J. Beith]

by going to an industrial tribunal. The proposal does not address the gap that the Committee was seeking to deal with.

In their response, the Government said that they would consider whether the operation of powers of exclusion would benefit from involvement by the commissioners. I welcome that, but the Government also said that they would consider the matter in the light of experience. I doubt that there will be much experience to draw on, and I sincerely hope that I am right. We do not expect the tribunal to be taking a case a fortnight. Such cases are supposed to be pretty rare, and we do not want two more to go badly awry before the Government say, "Oh dear, there is something wrong. We had better start again."

We want to get the procedure right now. If there are any more cases that might sow potential difficulties for the future, they must be handled properly and in a way that conforms as closely as possible with the normal approach, based on natural justice, of employment tribunals. That should be the case from the start.

One of the other issues on which the report focuses is the assistance that the agencies could give in dealing with international drug traffic. Some very good work has been done, sometimes in very dangerous conditions, to support the law enforcement bodies in that regard. However, the objective for the agencies in such work never seems very clear, and neither does the proper level of resources that should be devoted to the task.

That is an important matter. The drugs problem and the damage that it does to society are so serious that, if it were clear that a substantial addition of resources could make a great difference, there surely could be no hesitation about finding those resources. The matter would be given a very high priority indeed, but it has never been clear how much of the traffic in drugs could be stopped by the application of extra resources.

Obviously, there is more than one reason for tracking down the traffickers. Drug trafficking is a hydra-headed monster. We can never put all the people involved behind bars, but it is desirable in principle that at least some should be caught and very severely punished.

What quantity of drugs can be confiscated, and what effect can be produced? Will we stop enough trafficking only to raise the street price a bit, or can we stop enough to make a significant difference to the problems in our society? If the difference is to be great, substantial additional resources must be provided. However, I do not think that Ministers have thought enough about what the intelligence effort on drugs trafficking can achieve and whether it deserves considerable resources. I hope that that question will be more clearly addressed.

Similar questions arise with regard to matters such as illegal immigration rackets. Intelligence can play a role in identifying the racketeers responsible for the other day's appalling tragedy in Dover, but it is not the agencies' role to deal with asylum seekers or individual immigration issues. Other agencies handle those matters, and the intelligence agencies have different and more compelling responsibilities. There is potential for co-operative effort to deal with serious organised crime related to immigration rackets, but that potential is limited and the effort needs to be well targeted.

The report also deals with the funding of the National Criminal Intelligence Service. In their response, the Government have indicated that they are reconsidering that matter. The present arrangements slice funds from hard-pressed police forces around the country, and it seems to us that they will never achieve the level of funding that may be necessary for the national and co-ordinated criminal intelligence effort that NCIS must provide.

An issue that figures significantly in the report is the management of major capital projects. After the drastic overspend on Thames house at Vauxhall cross, the GCHQ's new accommodation project was an obvious cause for concern as it is on a much larger scale. Completing it on time, to cost and with no interruption to operating capabilities requires the highest levels of expertise. Clearly, however, the project will not be completed to cost. The Government have stated publicly that new financial arrangements have had to be made, and there must be some doubt about whether the work will be completed on time with no interruption to operational capabilities.

The work of GCHQ is vital. The facility's presence in Cheltenham is strongly supported by the local community, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones) regularly reminds me. It needed new accommodation, so the project was necessary. However, I am not satisfied that the project management skill and expertise given to GCHQ was equal to such a large task. It is the biggest-ever private finance initiative, and a huge undertaking.

We have not heard the end of the story yet. The project is of great importance to the effective operation of our intelligence services and involves very large sums of money. If we are not careful, I fear that it will be dealt with by fire fighting rather than by the application of management skills and expertise. The sophistication of those skills goes beyond anything GCHQ or almost any part of Government has had to supply before.

My final point is a general one. The Committee and the House must recognise the danger that management attention in the agencies can be consumed to too great an extent with past mistakes and history. Scarcely a Sunday goes by without newspaper allegations about the agencies, either in the recent past or the very distant past. It is part of the regular Sunday newspaper diet.

Most such allegations have to be investigated, if they are not already under investigation, but some go back a long way. Often there are lessons to be learned, and sometimes stones must be turned over that have not been turned over before. However, agency managers must be allowed to keep their eyes on the ball, and to concentrate their efforts on current and future threats. That is what they are paid for. Their work was recognised in the welcome honours list award to Stephen Lander, and in his reappointment as head of MI5. It has been recognised also in the praise from hon. Members of all parties today.

Past mistakes have to be examined, but the agencies' primary task is to deal with current and future threats to the people of this country, to our democracy and our civilisation. Occasionally, we have to remember that.

3.38 pm

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): I begin by wondering whether any of the defects and omissions in the way in which the security services handled the case

of Mrs. Norwood would have come to our knowledge if the Intelligence and Security Committee had not existed. The answer is pretty obvious: little or no such information would have come to Members of the House of Commons.

I say that because I well recall all the arguments endlessly repeated by successive Governments to explain why, given that the Security Service was accountable to the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister, it would be totally inappropriate to subject it to the scrutiny of a committee of parliamentarians. When I intervened on my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, I pointed that oversight came into existence thanks to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, West (Ms Hewitt), who is now Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce, and of my right hon. Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman). When they took their case to the European Court of Human Rights, it was felt that they would certainly win. As a result, the arrangements regarding oversight by the House of Commons were changed.

I may be considered to be a critic of the security services, but I have always accepted that all democracies need such services. Moreover, even if the terrorism of the past 30 years carried out by the IRA and loyalist groups had not existed, the need for the security agencies is nevertheless obvious. However, we should be under no illusions that all has been well. Peter Wright, for example, defends, or justifies, the state of near-lawlessness in which he operated as a senior MI5 agent, and the dirty tricks—targeted against the Labour Government of the time—for which he, although not only he, was responsible.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Winnick: In a moment. The way in which my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary was targeted because of his presidency of the National Union of Students could not be justified, and no Conservative Member would attempt to justify it—even the hon. Gentleman to whom I am about to give way.

Dr. Lewis: This must be the first time since I have been a Member of this House that I have agreed with the hon. Gentleman. However, he should set the record straight and point out that whereas Peter Wright said initially that large numbers of security services operatives were engaged in the sort of dirty tricks that he himself admitted to, subsequently he retracted that and admitted that if he had to put a real figure on it, that figure was one—namely, Mr. Peter Wright.

Mr. Winnick: Be that as it may, in my view, for what it is worth, Wright did not act alone—but I shall not pursue that point.

Paragraph 29 of the report shows that not only were senior Ministers not told about what had happened at the time, neither were the most senior members of the Security Service. If ever there was a case for parliamentary accountability, this is it. All the previous arguments put forward by Ministers fall to the ground. If the Intelligence and Security Committee had been in existence in the early 1990s, some of the non-disclosures would probably not have occurred.

As for Mrs. Norwood, I take the same view as other right hon. and hon. Members: it would have been far better if she had faced justice. I see from the report that there is some doubt about the seriousness of the information that she passed on to Russian agents. I am only a layman in these matters, but I was rather surprised that, given her position in the organisation, she could have passed on such serious information. However, one thing is certain—if Mrs. Norwood had had more important information, she would not have had the slightest hesitation in passing it on. She wanted to do as much as possible for the regime to which she was loyal—the one that ruled in Moscow.

It would have been much better if she could have been taken to court but, by the time her role was revealed, nearly half a century had elapsed and she was in her late 80s. In many respects, Mrs. Norwood's real punishment is that the cause that she served with such dedication all her adult life has not only collapsed in Europe but has been exposed as downright evil.

Dr. Lewis: The evil empire.

Mr. Winnick: We all recognised that it was evil long before the collapse of the Soviet Union and the other events in eastern Europe. Let us think for a moment about the cause that Mrs. Norwood was serving. It was responsible for mass murder, the gulags, the denial of all civil liberties and the secret police, and it had contempt for the rule of law and truth. That is what she dedicated her life to. So I suppose that it could be said that she has had her punishment, even if it was not the sort of punishment that she should have had for betraying her country.

The Shayler case has been in the news for nearly three years now. I am certainly not an apologist for what Shayler did, but I doubt whether there is much to be gained by pursuing the matter. The French court has refused extradition, and the affair continues; I do not know how much time and money is being spent on it. Some newspapers are involved and are in danger of being taken to court again. Whether Shayler was the right sort of person to have been recruited for MI5 in the first place is, to say the least, doubtful. Clearly he is eager to play the martyr, and my view—which is perhaps the minority view—is that the sooner this saga is ended, the better it will be for the security services.

One argument is that if Shayler gets away with it, others in the security services would spill the beans. It would be a poor state of affairs if there were other people like Shayler in the security services who needed to be discouraged. Let us hope that he is a one-off. Whether his motive is money or conviction—I suspect that it is money, but I could be wrong—I think that we should end this business.

Mr. Mates: The hon. Gentleman and I agree on one thing: we hope that Shayler is a one-off. However, the hon. Gentleman's contrast in logic is interesting. He says that Mrs. Norwood should have been punished for committing crimes betraying our nation, but that Shayler should not be dealt with for the alleged crimes betraying our nation with which we want to charge him.

Mr. Winnick: That is a point of a kind. If I may say so—what the hon. Gentleman said had occurred to me before his intervention—there is a difference between what Mrs. Norwood did and what Shayler did. How long

[Mr. Winnick]

will the Shayler saga continue? Will it go on until next year, and the year after that? As I said, I think that it should be ended soon, but obviously some disagree.

My final point is about accountability. The ISC has done a good job, although I had doubts at the beginning about whether it was the right kind of Committee, and about the people on it. Indeed, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) mentioned the fact that in a previous debate I had made the criticism that its members would all be made Privy Councillors. I had my suspicions, and I am pleased to say that I was wrong.

I do not want to give the impression that the ISC has not done a good job. It has, and I congratulate it on its activities as a Committee of parliamentarians. Nevertheless, I take the view—as does the Select Committee on Home Affairs, of which I am a member—that there should be a different form of parliamentary accountability. In its third report, which came out in June last year, the Committee said:

> In our view, it is inevitable that the intelligence services will one day become accountable to Parliament. That is the logical outcome of the process of reform embarked upon by the previous Government. The existing arrangements are merely transitional and are still evolving—witness the fact that the ISC itself is now demanding, and has been given, facilities that were undreamed of when it was established only five years ago. We hope that the Government will keep an open mind on this issue.

Some of the arguments against establishing a Select Committee were made in former times, when it was argued strongly that the intelligence services should have no parliamentary scrutiny. However, we are evolving. I think that some form of Select Committee will be established within the next 10 years or so. I may not be here by then, but I can imagine others pointing out all the criticisms that were made at the time of the idea of setting up such a Committee.

I accept that the ISC has shown independence, but we need to go further. We need a Committee that reports directly to the House. I do not believe that it is appropriate for the Committee to be set up by the Prime Minister and to report to the Prime Minister. Members of Parliament on such a Committee, like those on other Committees, should report directly to the House. That does not mean that any such Committee can operate like other Select Committees, but in the end there should be that form of parliamentary accountability, which means reporting here, rather than to the head of the Executive.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I am confident that this does not meet my hon. Friend's requirements, but I should like to point out to him that recently members of the Foreign Affairs Committee met a senior representative of the security agencies. As one who was there, I can say that it was a very useful meeting.

Mr. Winnick: I accept that entirely.

If the change recommended by the Home Affairs Committee came to pass at some time—obviously, that will not be now—it would send an important signal that the oversight process was totally independent of the Executive. That is not the present position. While I praise the work of the members of the ISC, there is not the feeling that they are totally independent of the Executive, not because they are not independent-minded Members of Parliament, but because of the manner in which the Committee is set up, which sends the wrong signals. That is no reflection on my colleagues or on the Opposition Members who serve on the Committee, and do so with great distinction.

Mr. Barron: My hon. Friend is effectively appointed to his position on the Select Committee on Home Affairs by the Government Whips office. Is that Committee independent of the Executive?

Mr. Winnick: Of course the way in which we get on to Committees is not independent of the Executive, but once a Committee is in existence and once we are on it, there is no doubt that we are independent of the Executive and report directly to the House. If it is argued that there is not really much difference in practice between the ISC and the sort of Select Committee that I would like to see created, that is all the more reason why further consideration should be given to setting up such a Committee.

Mr. Barron: Given that everyone would agree that if the Committee were a Select Committee of the House it would still have to work within the ring of secrecy, no doubt some of the evidence that it took could never be reported. My hon. Friend's Committee's report was published before our annual report, to which I referred in my speech. The asterisks in our annual report would also have been in any report by such a Select Committee. In view of all that, what is the practical difference, given that my hon. Friend's report took even longer than ours—a delay that we complained about—to be debated in the House?

Mr. Winnick: In the end it is a matter of whether the right signals are sent. The very fact that the ISC remains the subject of controversy because of the way in which it is set up is important. Select Committees are not set up in that way.

I tried time and time again, with others—I believe that my hon. Friend was not in the House at the time, or if he was he did not take part in our debates—to persuade the then Government to give some parliamentary oversight. Time and again I was told that that was not possible. Therefore, I speak with some experience on the matter.

The ISC has done a good job, and I am pleased with what is happening, but it is not likely that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary or my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will change the position in the near future. I have no doubt that at some stage there will be a Select Committee, and when it comes into existence it is extremely unlikely that my hon. Friend, or anyone else, will say that we should revert to the ISC as it stands now.

3.56 pm

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): It is always interesting to follow the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick). To adopt a phrase that that hon. Gentleman used, I thought that the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) had a point of a kind, and that it was a pity he did not acknowledge that.

I am grateful for the opportunity to make a relatively brief contribution to this important debate. I join with others who have recognised the significance of the

availability to the House of an opportunity to express its views on the workings of the security and intelligence agencies. The work that they do is vital for the well-being of our country, and I begin by paying tribute to the agencies and the way in which they perform their duties.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) and my hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates) said, reports, debates and press coverage inevitably tend to concentrate on those few occasions when things go wrong. There is much less coverage on the many more occasions when things go right, often spectacularly so, and as a result of resourceful, relentless and extremely diligent work that the agencies conduct on our behalf. We are greatly in their debt.

I do not believe that occasional lapses, even serious lapses, from the high standards that the agencies rightly set themselves should be allowed to obscure that important and central fact. In paying that tribute, I am happy to associate myself with the remarks of the Home Secretary and others about Sir Stephen Lander. I add my congratulations to those that have already been expressed, and warmly welcome the Home Secretary's announcement that his term of office is to be extended.

I also pay tribute to the Intelligence and Security Committee, which was set up by the previous Government. The present Chairman, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater, has been its Chairman from its inception. It has won universal respect, and that has a great deal to do with the way in which my right hon. Friend has chaired it. It has worked remarkably well, and I have no doubt that it will continue to do so for a long time to come.

I am also glad to have the opportunity to endorse the Home Secretary's tribute to Lord Nolan and Lord Justice Stuart-Smith for the oversight work for which they were the responsible commissioners. The right hon. Gentleman was right. I agree with everything that he said about the work that they have done.

I should like to say a few words about the Committee's report on Mitrokhin and then make some suggestions for the Committee's future programme. The fact that Mitrokhin confided in the Secret Intelligence Service, came to this country and provided such copious and vital information was, of course, a consequence of his personal bravery and courage, to which tribute has already rightly been paid, but it was also an outstanding coup for the Secret Intelligence Service. It was a remarkable operation, and none of the concerns that have arisen about subsequent events and the way in which certain information was handled should be allowed to cloud in any way the brilliance of that achievement.

As the Committee's report sets out, when I was Home Secretary I was not told about Mrs. Norwood. I think that I should have been told. Although the decision whether she should be prosecuted would have been for the Law Officers, I would have been entitled to be consulted about that decision. In the event, neither the Law Officers nor I were told. Clearly we should have been. I hope that lessons will be learned from that, and I am sure that they will.

I listened with interest to the earlier exchanges between my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and the Home Secretary. I would simply say—I am glad that the Home Secretary is in his place to hear me say it—that I think that he was absolutely right to draw the distinction that he did between the culpability of Ministers and the culpability of their Departments. I would simply add, as gently as I can, that he was not quite as ready to make that distinction when he was in Opposition. I shall say no more about it than that.

As for the future work of the Committee, I am delighted that it has set out in the annual report its

> intention to pursue the co-ordination between the Agencies and the law enforcement organisations in fighting serious organised crime, in particularly the Agencies work conducted overseas.

The involvement of the agencies in fighting serious organised crime began when I was Home Secretary, and I attached great importance to it. I have absolutely no doubt that the agencies have an enormous contribution to make.

I took particular steps to engage the agencies in proactive work, particularly in relation to the international traffic in drugs. It is well known that many drugs cartels are extremely sophisticated organisations, with resources that dwarf those available to many sovereign states and Governments. Only by the most determined employment of all means available can the countries whose populations suffer grievously from that evil trade hope to make an impact on it.

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) asked some thoughtful questions about whether we can make a big difference to the trade and why, if we can, we do not devote more resources to the fight. I believe that we can make a significant impact on the trade if we take our efforts seriously and devote the required resources. I hope that the Committee will pursue its inquiries into how action is working out in practice. I note from paragraph 68 of the report that the Committee is not at present confident that all that could be done is being done. I hope that the Committee will pursue that point and that the Government will take the report very seriously.

I hope that the Committee's interest in better co-ordination will not be limited to the work of the agencies in relation to serious organised crime. There is always a danger of duplication and a lack of co-ordination between the various agencies. It is essential that the utmost vigilance is exercised in order to minimise that danger. The Committee could have an important role in helping to achieve that.

Finally, I want to say a word about an aspect of the work of the agencies that seems to me to be of absolutely crucial significance. It is well known, although obviously there are constraints about what can be said in public on the matter, that the close co-operation that has taken place over the years between the intelligence agencies of the United Kingdom and those of other English-speaking countries—particularly those of the United States of America—has been of inestimable value to all concerned. Those have probably been among the most fruitful working relationships that have ever occurred between different countries.

Today is not the day for an extensive debate on all the implications of the Government's determination to press ahead with the European defence initiative. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition raised that matter

[Mr. Michael Howard]

yesterday, quoting the comments of the French Minister responsible for European affairs, who said last week in connection with defence policy:

> We don't agree with the "Americanisation" of the world . . . we are saying that together we can build a new superpower . . . and its name will be Europe.

That is just one of a number of recent statements by highly placed members of the French Government that have contained more than a tinge of anti-Americanism. If, instead of continuing to be a partner of the United States of America, Europe sets about becoming its rival, will that not place great strain on a relationship that has been of so much benefit to this country, to the United States, to Europe and to the world as a whole? Will not those strains be particularly severe in intelligence, in which, so far as this country is concerned, the relationship is perhaps even closer than in any other field?

The Government have consistently sought to brush off any such concerns, but I believe that real issues exist that merit the closest scrutiny. I hope that the Committee will feel able, within its remit, to pursue those matters to ensure that all the implications of the Government's actions are properly considered.

4.5 pm

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I shall not pursue the route taken by the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), but I remind him of a visit made to America by him, me and others last year, during which the matters that he just raised were discussed. If I recall correctly the conversations that took place, the Americans were not as concerned as he would have us understand them to be. Following the problems that arose during the war in the former Yugoslavia, the American view was that we needed to build a European pillar and to take on greater responsibilities. That is precisely what we are doing. The right hon. and learned Gentleman appeared to dismiss comments made to us on that visit.

Mr. Howard: I do not wish to turn the debate into a private argument of recollection about what was said during our visit to the United States. I am sure, however, that the hon. Gentleman will appreciate the discretion with which concerns expressed during that visit were put forward. Since that visit, more than a year ago, matters have proceeded apace on the development of a European defence initiative outside the framework of NATO. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would agree that it would be perfectly possible—indeed, desirable—for enhanced European co-operation on defence to occur, and for the pillar to which he referred to be set up, within NATO. That, however, is not what is being envisaged.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I note no detectable difference between the position today and that outlined last year. I do not want to go too far down that route now.

This will probably be my last opportunity to speak on this matter. For reasons of ill health, I shall retire next year, and, if the delay in holding the next debate is similar to that for this one, this will definitely be my last chance. For that reason, I wish to reflect on my experience on the Intelligence and Security Committee. I shall pay some tributes, but shall also make some slight criticism of the current structure. I concur with much of what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick).

The right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), the Chairman of the ISC, would agree that the Committee is among those best attended by parliamentarians. He may take the view that it would sometimes have been better if had not been so well attended. The Committee holds vigorous debates within its structure, and it is not all plain sailing with everyone agreeing. We vigorously debate issues relating to the services, and there are differences of opinion. We leave the Committee agreed, however, because a common strand unites us—our belief in the task that we have undertaken and in the excellent service provided by the agencies.

Before I speak about the structure, I pay my personal tribute to all the people whom I have met over the years who are involved in front-line activities. Yes, we do meet people in the services—although we do not know who they are, so that we are not compromised. We must pay great tribute to the bravery of many of those people.

We met Mitrokhin. He is a man of considerable courage. I believe that what he did was done for his country. He acted in the belief that people in the former Soviet Union should, at some time in the future, have the opportunity of reading what he said. He set out the truth as he saw it and, one day, will be one of the great figures in the new nation that is being created within the former Soviet Union.

I want to say a little about how the Committee works, because I am often asked "Does this structure work?". Yes, it works. It holds the system to account. There are problems, but the role of the Committee is changing. The process of accountability is constantly increasing and developing. The way that the Committee operates at the end of one year is very different from its operation at the end of the previous year. There are reasons for that.

Within the agencies, there is a recognition of the need for greater accountability. I am sure that our arguments in Parliament were just as vigorously pursued in the agencies when they considered the changes that took place in the early 1990s. The highly charged response of the media to the allegations of Shayler and Tomlinson have also exerted some pressure on the process of accountability.

There is a new generation of young people in the agencies. Perhaps their values are different from those of people who have been members of the agencies for many decades. When we meet such young people, I am very conscious that they are aware of the role of parliamentarians. They see the role of Parliament positively. In many ways, they see a partnership between the heads of the institutions that they represent and the membership of the Committee. The attitude of people in the agencies—especially young people—is extremely healthy and helpful.

The agencies are beginning to realise that it is better to have us on their side. At times, the arguments that they want to have—certainly on finance—are, in essence, political. The arguments are about priorities. The agencies will have noticed that some of the comments that they made to us about the need for additional resources—not generally, but in particular areas—were picked up in the report.

The report—unlike that of many Select Committees—is written in great part by members of the Committee. Often, Committee reports are written by the Committee clerk and subject to amendment by its members. We should be open about that fact. That is the reality for many Select Committees, although that does not detract from my general view as to the need for Select Committee status.

The agencies have learned to trust Members of Parliament. My colleagues and I have signed the Official Secrets Act—but it is more than that. When people in the agencies discuss their business with us, they need to know that our commitment is a little more than mere compliance with the legislation. They need to know that we believe that the ring of secrecy must be in place to safeguard their interests. I hope that, over the years, they have learned that the secrets of the state are just as safe with politicians as with people in the agencies.

There have been difficulties—they know that. If they have felt under pressure during questioning from the Committee, they should realise that we were only exercising our right to hold them to account. That is what the process is about; we are helping them in their task.

Dr. Julian Lewis: I agree with the general thrust of the hon. Gentleman's remarks. Surely, he is not saying that all politicians can be trusted with a blank cheque for access to all the secrets of the agencies. In the Mitrokhin archive itself, two now-deceased politicians—Tom Driberg and Raymond Fletcher—were named as agents of a foreign power. What would have happened if they had accidentally been appointed to an ISC? There must be some protection.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: There is protection. The Whips nominate and the Prime Minister appoints. Therein lies the protection for which the hon. Gentleman calls.

Another reason why change is going on and why the system is so important is that there is an international movement under way in terms of accountability—the right hon. Member for Bridgwater made some allusion to that. Our system is not unique. It exists in various forms in countries throughout the world. In America, it is extremely advanced, and less advanced in some parts of Europe. Without breaching the Official Secrets Act, I shall tell hon. Members of a particular incident that I shall always remember after I have left the House.

In a former eastern European satellite state, I attended a dinner with a committee that mirrored the British ISC. Around the table, monitoring their country's security services, were people who, during the dark years of east European and Russian fascism, had been imprisoned for five, 10 or 15 years. One man, who is now the chairman of his country's committee, spent 12 years in prison. The work that he is doing must have been unimaginable to him then. That is the sea change that is taking place internationally—as such committees are set up to carry out a vitally important task.

Those committees are all going down a single road—the British system. Within 20 years they will all arrive—they will have created a system that mirrors the American one. The American system is the best. We are told that it leaks, but when one talks to people who work in those committees or who monitor them—certainly in Congress and in the Senate—they say that the system is leak-proof.

None the less, people in the congressional and senatorial system have access to almost every secret of the state and are made aware, in advance and in great detail, of operations carried out by their intelligence services. That is unimaginable in the United Kingdom. If we raise such ideas in our Committee, there is great resistance to them in the services themselves. However, I say to people in the services that that system will come here and that it will work. It works in America, so that agenda is inevitable.

The march of history will, I am sure, underwrite precisely what I have said today. The arguments about whether the ISC is a Select Committee will simply be cast aside by history. The process is inevitable; it will happen. My hon. Friend the Minister may resist a little today, but the word "now" in the Government's response was fought over and it indicates the way in which we are going. I say to hon. Members, "Just watch this space." and I say to members of the agencies, "Please do not resist."

Although the ISC reports to the House to account for itself, it is essentially a system of extra-parliamentary accountability, and I do not accept that such a system is fully credible. Yes, it is credible, but not fully credible.

I read with interest the report of the Select Committee on Home Affairs. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) and the other members of the Committee on that excellent report. It addressed all the issues that I have addressed over the years. I also pay tribute to those friends on the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs who support the view that I have expressed today. However, they have not yet decided to produce a report to set out their views, because, as I understand it, they are in a minority at present.

I also pay tribute to the work of the highly important Liaison Committee for its excellent report. It is the most senior Committee of parliamentarians, which comprises all the Chairmen of the Select Committees. It drew up a resolution that states that it believes that the issue of a Select Committee will not go away. Its report says that it will return to it. That agenda will not disappear.

Dr. Godman: My hon. Friend referred to the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs. I remind him that its report on the Sierra Leone affair recommends that the Foreign Office should show a mature attitude

> towards controlled access for the Foreign Affairs Committee to appropriate intelligence material and to witnesses from the Secret Intelligence Service.

Needless to say, the Foreign Office's response rejected that sensible recommendation.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I understand my hon. Friend's concern. I do not want to show any disloyalty to my Committee but, in the structure that I want established, it would not be necessary for the Foreign Affairs Committee to carry out investigations in the way that he suggests. A parliamentary Committee—the Intelligence and Security Committee—would carry out such inquiries and it would be able to transfer information across the parliamentary Select Committee system to other Committees provided that it had the approval of the Prime Minister and resolutions gave it permission to do so.

The reasons for Select Committee status were set out in—if I may say so—my modest contribution to a debate at column 617 on 2 November 1998 in which I outlined

[Mr. Campbell-Savours]

the mechanics of my proposed system. I hope that those with an academic interest in the subject will take the opportunity of referring to that modest contribution. My speech centred on the ability to refer matters to other Select Committees; the power of Parliament to call for persons and papers, an issue on which I am not able to go into detail today; the power to take evidence on oath, a power that Parliamentary Committees have and that the Standards and Privileges Committee exercises occasionally; the power to offer the defence of privilege to statements given by our witnesses, a matter that has still not been satisfactorily resolved; and the greatest power of all, which is the power to hold witnesses in contempt if they mislead Members of Parliament when giving evidence.

The latter is the ultimate power. I do not believe that we are being misled, but we should have the power to hold people in contempt if we are misled. That would signal to the outside world that we will not be misled, because members of the agencies will know that they will be held in contempt if what they say is subsequently found to be untrue. I do not question what the witnesses say, but we must have such a failsafe arrangement.

We have been told—we have heard it again today—that legislation would be required to implement my proposal. Let me make it absolutely clear. That is nonsense. Legislation is not required; all that is required is a resolution of the House of Commons. That is not my view, but that of the Clerks when I approached them two years ago to check my analysis of the changes that would be required.

Safeguards would be needed, and I know that hon. Members have expressed their concerns. Some argue that no way can be found to restructure the practices and procedures of the Select Committee so as to ensure Executive influence for reasons of national security over material that it may seek to publish. That is simply untrue. A resolution of the House could require that the Committee sought the approval of the appropriate agency before reporting to the House. The resolution could further provide that in the event that a dispute arose between the agency and the Committee over the publication of information or evidence in a report to the House, the matter of the dispute could be referred to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for his decision and the Committee could be required to comply with his decision.

If, in unforseen circumstances, the Committee or any member of it were to threaten to breach the Committee's rules of procedure as approved by the House, it would always be open to the Leader of the House, on the instruction of the Prime Minister, to dissolve the entire Committee or remove any member of it on a resolution tabled on one day and that took effect the next.

We are told that such a Committee could not be prevented from taking evidence in public session if that were the wish of the Committee. A resolution of the House could introduce a general prohibition on the Select Committee taking evidence in public session. A resolution of the House could introduce a general prohibition on the Select Committee publishing reports, and it could further place a requirement on the Committee to seek the permission of the appropriate agency, and the Prime Minister in conditions of dispute, if it wished to publish a report.

There is no reason that the resolution of the House should not stipulate the procedure to be used in the publication of reports. It could require the Committee to publish its reports subject to sidelining by the Prime Minister for reasons of national security, as currently happens.

Mr. Mates: I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, because I wish to make my own remarks on this subject. However, all the exceptions that he has just listed would turn his brand new Select Committee back into the Prime Minister's ISC.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: The hon. Gentleman obviously did not hear me when I said that hon. Members should read my modest contribution of 2 November 1998. In it, he will see the answer to the question that he has just asked.

I have referred to some of the changes and some of the differences, but there are many powers that the ISC does not have which would rest with a new Select Committee.

Mr. Winnick: With respect to the Opposition Members who are present now and who were around at the time of the original debate, I cannot recall any of them advocating any sort of parliamentary oversight for the security services. The hon. Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates) points at himself, so perhaps he did so, but that makes him the exception. Almost no Conservative Member that I can recall stood up and advocated such oversight.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: In fact, we do have support on the Opposition Benches—there are some Conservative Members who feel strongly about these matters, but they are not present in the Chamber today.

As I said, my last speech on this subject before my retirement gives me my only chance to raise certain controversial issues, one of which is the general principle of the treatment of whistleblowers. Every organisation has aggrieved people—we even have them here in the House of Commons. Wherever people congregate to work, there will be some who have problems and grievances. In most organisations, there are established routes for dealing with those grievances and I wish to explore those available within the services for which we have some monitoring responsibility.

If a person within the services generally has a grievance, he can go to his trade union or staff association, depending on which service he works in. He can go to line management within the organisation at progressively more senior levels, depending on the response he receives. In the services, he can go to his staff counsellor, who has been given the powers to deal with certain problems that might arise. I suppose, in extreme circumstances, if that individual still feels that his argument is not being heeded, he can go to the Cabinet Secretary and argue the case there. There is also a system of employment tribunals that has been recommended by the Committee. We await the details, in the absence of the regulations mentioned by the right hon. Member for Bridgwater; we have expressed our concerns about the delay, but the new structure is being set up.

What happens if, even at that stage, having gone through all those processes, a person who is grieving feels that he is not being listened to? Recent experience has drawn our attention to the fact that people in those circumstances tend to move abroad, even though, in doing so, they apparently break the law. They feel that their voice can be heard only from outside the United Kingdom. The problem that then arises is that when people say that they should not be prosecuted, they misunderstand the response that the state must make in such circumstances: the idea that the services can ignore the breaking of the law is preposterous; the state has to respond in one way or another, depending on the circumstances.

In such conditions, can complainants who remain dissatisfied seek redress by some other route? I cannot say that the ISC should receive and deal with complaints, as that is not within our remit as currently defined and set down in the law. It is clear that the ISC is not a vehicle to be used as a receptacle for complaints. The question remains, therefore, what can complainants do if all else fails?

I wonder whether they can approach a Member of Parliament to find a solution to their problem. As we all know, there are Members of Parliament who specialise in such matters. It may well be that a whistleblower will choose to go to his Member of Parliament and set out his case—hopefully, without breaching the Official Secrets Acts, which he should avoid doing at all costs. Even if he did breach the Acts during the course of the conversation, if it could be shown that he did so without malevolence and not in a deliberate attempt to bring matters into the public domain, it strikes me as improbable that the prosecuting authorities would want to prosecute—although that is a matter for their judgment.

I would never invite people to go to their Member of Parliament and break the law by spilling the beans, even as a last resort. None the less, people who feel such a strong grievance that they are impelled to act in a way that I personally would regard as thoroughly irresponsible might consider going to their Member of Parliament before acting.

It has been an honour for me to serve on the Intelligence and Security Committee. I always used to say that my most enjoyable experience was serving on the Public Accounts Committee for 11 years, but the ISC has proved a wonderful experience. The comradeship among the membership, despite our minor disputes, has been first class and we have worked together extremely well. To those outside who wonder about the structure, I repeat: the structure needs reforms, but it does work—it does work.

4.37 pm

Mr. Michael Mates (East Hampshire): I am glad to follow the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours). I strongly agree that our shared experiences of the past six years are far better than the membership of any Select Committee could have been, and I am glad that he has become a convert.

My colleagues on the Intelligence and Security Committee have picked most of the plums out of the reports that we have debated, so I shall content myself with addressing two issues. In connection with both, I shall draw on my experience as a member of the Select Committee on Defence for 12 years; for six of those years, I had the honour of being its Chairman.

The first issue is financial oversight. The Chairman of the ISC, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), and the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) have said that our Committee is in the process of overseeing some extremely expensive projects. That is always a difficult task for parliamentarians, because, by and large, we are not involved in making the decisions that set the projects in train. My experience on the Defence Committee related to the Trident project—an enormous project, 10 times larger than the GCHQ project, which is itself large. The Defence Committee examined that project every year for 11 years, and I can state that such constant and repeated scrutiny makes a difference to the way in which Ministers and officials make decisions on long-term projects.

I can speak only for myself, but I believe that my colleagues on the ISC will agree that, during the coming four or five years of the GCHQ project, it must be made absolutely clear to officials at GCHQ, the Foreign Office and the Treasury—and anywhere else that that large project touches—that we shall be watching, we shall return to it again and again, and we shall report on it as often as we feel necessary. A fundamental part of any oversight Committee's duty is to ensure that taxpayers' money is spent effectively and well.

We must also ensure that the services involved in the project are able to maintain their vital efficiency during transition periods resulting from huge advances in technology. The speed of that technological advance is one of the most difficult problems that they have to cope with. One can start to put in place a proposed IT system but, six months later, someone will have thought of something better, so it will be out of date. If one is on a fixed-price contract, it will cost more to change the system. We accept that and, no doubt, allowances must be made for it.

I do not want to go into details as we are not ready to report, but I am sure that the Minister will not be surprised to learn that the matter will be a major feature of the Committee's annual report this year. Things have already gone wrong as a result of lack of skill in managing a project of that size, and that needs to be taken into account. Lessons must be learned very fast indeed to ensure that a bad situation—which, I believe, we are in at the moment—does not become worse.

Until this afternoon, I thought that I carried with me all members of the Committee bar one. Now, however, I shall have to do a little more work before saying that again. Consequently, I speak entirely for myself on the question of a Select Committee. I was a member of one Select Committee for 12 years and know the limitations of such a Committee. I was also a member of a Select Committee that dealt with extremely sensitive matters. Indeed, those matters were probably more sensitive than those handled by any other Select Committee, as we were right into the nuclear business, the deterrent business and some of the most secret weapons development business. We had a constant battle to be told what we needed to know. Neither of those who advocates establishing a Select Committee has mentioned that.

It is not a question of being in a position to know everything. Indeed, it is quite wrong that anybody should be in such a position. However, one needs to know about secret, delicate and confidential matters before one is told about them. The hon. Member for Workington

[Mr. Michael Mates]

(Mr. Campbell-Savours) advocated the American system. However, the Americans know far more than they need to, which is why they have leaks.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: What leaks?

Mr. Mates: Leaks from members. A member of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence in the House of Representatives, for example, was thrown off it for leaking. That has not happened in the Intelligence and Security Committee, and I pray that it never will. We are in a position in which we are told everything that we need to know. We sometimes have to struggle to get that information, but that is part of the constructive tension which, in fact, is getting much better, as we are becoming more and more trusted as a result of not leaking.

If, to be dogmatic, we were to say that the Committee should not be different from any other in the House of Commons and should be a Select Committee—with all the reservations mentioned by the hon. Member for Workington which, in fact, is why the Intelligence and Security Committee is different—would we be able to oversee the intelligence services better? Frankly, I do not believe that we would. Such a Committee would be less good, as we would have to rebuild the whole system of trust and there would be Committee members who were immune to removal, except by a vote in the House of Commons. The hon. Member for Workington knows perfectly well how difficult it would be to obtain that.

At the moment, there is a sanction on us: if I say something out of place—perhaps not here, but certainly outside—the Prime Minister can fire me tomorrow. That is right, as I am in a privileged position within a ring of secrecy in which some very important matters are discussed. The hon. Member for Workington said that dismissal from a Select Committee can take place the next day. However, that would not happen. I remind him of what happened when an attempt was made to remove a member of a Select Committee at the beginning of a Parliament. The matter was delayed until, eventually, it had to be debated.

That is the nature of this place, and it is the nature of troublemakers to make sure that such things happen. While I am on the subject of troublemakers, let me say that if people feel that the Committee is less independent than a Select Committee of the House of Commons, they should look at the hon. Member for Workington, who is on it. I was surprised when he was appointed.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I bet you were.

Mr. Mates: I have been extremely happy to work with the hon. Gentleman over the past three years and am glad to pay tribute to him for his work, which has been conscientious and keen, with the exception of one or two bees buzzing around his bonnet that we have to keep swatting. However, the suggestion that a parliamentary Committee of which the hon. Gentleman is a member is the Executive's poodle does not bear close examination.

It has been acknowledged all round that the Committee is successful. The case for turning a Committee that is working well into a Select Committee is non-existent.

Mr. Tom King: As my hon. Friend knows, the Committee has drawn on international experience and visited other countries. The problem that he has just described is precisely what happened in Australia. When the Australians first conceived the idea of an oversight committee, it was introduced in the federal Parliament. As a result of inadvertence or the Whips looking around quickly to see who was interested in intelligence, all those with such an interest were appointed to the Committee. However, they were what my right hon. Friend would call the bother squad. His point about trust is critical to this, as the Committee was frozen out of the process completely and the agencies made a point of telling it as little as they could about anything. In the event, the Parliament realised that the whole thing was a failure, and the committee collapsed and had to be reconstituted.

Mr. Mates: My right hon. Friend makes the point very adequately.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: That is my point.

Mr. Mates: Yes, but what my right hon. Friend described has not happened to us because we have been properly constituted. If we were in a Select Committee, we would not be in the same position.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: What is the difference? In each case, the Whips select the Committee members.

Mr. Mates: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman is trying to make his point or my point. His point is that, because the Intelligence and Security Committee is not a Select Committee, it is not independent. My point is that that makes no difference to selection, although there is some consultation.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: It is the power that counts.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. We cannot have sedentary conversations.

Mr. Mates: I am not sedentary, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I would rather this were not a conversation.

Dr. Godman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for showing his characteristic courtesy in giving way as he is winding up.

Conservative and Labour members of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs are united in the view that there are occasions on which it might be appropriate to cross-examine witnesses from the intelligence agencies.

Mr. Mates: I fully accept that the Foreign Affairs Committee would like to do that. When I was Chairman of the Defence Committee, I would have liked to cross-examine the defence intelligence services. Of course, we all want to do that. However, is it right? I am firmly of the view that the existence of the Intelligence and Security Committee means that there is no need to do that, unless one wishes to argue that the Committee is not doing its job properly.

Of course, it would be nice for the Select Committee on Home Affairs to make such a cross-examination. Members of that Committee all have their own agendas. Indeed, the report on the ISC was cooked up three years ago by three hon. Members who are very proud of what

they have done. I, however, think that they are greatly mistaken. Writing and producing a report with an agenda means that one ends up saying some rather silly things. For example, the third report of the Home Affairs Committee states:

the scrutiny committee—

meaning the Intelligence and Security Committee—

should be . . . clearly seen to be independent of the executive.

For the past half hour, the hon. Member for Workington has shown how independent he is of the Executive. The report concludes:

it is inevitable that the intelligence services will one day become accountable to Parliament.

They are. That accountability is here now, today. With my colleagues, I am proud to be part of that excellent accountability process.

4.48 pm

Sir Archie Hamilton (Epsom and Ewell): I should like to join hon. Members on both sides of the House in paying the highest tribute to people who work in the Secret Intelligence Service and the Security Service, who do a fantastic job for the country and risk their lives in doing it. I should also like to pay tribute to the Intelligence and Security Committee, on which I had the privilege of sitting in the last Parliament. Indeed, that was a great job, which I enjoyed enormously. The report on Mitrokhin is first class and a good extension of the Committee's activities.

I should like to talk about the structure and accountability of our security and intelligence services. Whatever we make of the Mitrokhin case—it must be said that the archive was an enormous wealth of intelligence—it raises serious concerns about the accountability of the services. The fact that the possible prosecution of Melita Norwood was never referred to Ministers and that the Law Officers were never consulted about whether she should be prosecuted should concern us all very much. We cannot second-guess the decision about whether Mrs. Norwood should have been prosecuted, and that is not the question, but that should have been a ministerial decision. We should be concerned that Ministers were not involved at key moments and learned of her existence only when it was probably too late to do anything. Those worries were also expressed by the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron).

My concerns go further. One of the problems with the two main agencies and GCHQ is that they answer to two of the busiest Secretaries of State in any Government this country has had. I do not believe that the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary have the time to go into the detail needed to make sure that the agencies are held to account, and the fact that the Prime Minister is inevitably involved in the agencies does not mean that they are being held to account. Those are the most pressurised Ministers in the Cabinet of any Government.

Much has been made of what might happen to the Intelligence and Security Committee, and whether it might be beefed up in some way. I shall not get involved in the issue of a Select Committee, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates). It is immaterial what parliamentary Committee oversees the services. The Intelligence and Security Committee is doing a first-class job, and I can see no reason to believe that a Select Committee could do a better one. The problem, however, is that there are, inevitably, limits to what can be done by any parliamentary Committee.

That problem always comes down to operational matters. Are we to have a parliamentary Committee that gets involved in knowledge of operational matters in the agencies? I do not believe that that will ever happen. The people who want it to happen do not help their case by quoting the United States. The experiences of the United States have been somewhat bruising, and that makes it much less likely that Members of this House will be made privy to operational matters in the Secret Intelligence Service and the Security Service.

We need a new sense of accountability within Government. Since the days when I was on the Committee, I have advocated that we should have a Minister who is responsible for the two agencies and GCHQ. He should be at the level of Minister of State, operate within the Cabinet Office and answer directly to the Prime Minister. We would then have somebody in a unique position to judge value for money. That Minister would be completely in the ring of secrecy and would know precisely what the agencies were up to. He would be in a stronger position to make sure that resources were deployed in the right directions. He would be able to demonstrate to the Government as a whole whether they were getting value for money, and they would then be able to alter priorities.

There has been talk on both sides of the House about co-ordinating the activities of the two agencies. That could more easily be done if one Minister were responsible for them and able to bring them together. It might mean that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) would get a quicker response from the Government to his Committee's reports, and we might even have got an earlier debate.

That would only be the first step. The problems of the agencies are historical, and we can understand why we have ended up as we have. Before Christopher Andrew wrote about the Mitrokhin archives, he wrote an excellent book about the security services. He spelled out how the Security Service had been established and how the Secret Intelligence Service had its origins in naval intelligence, and so forth. We understand how we have arrived at our present position, but we have two agencies that we would not choose to set up if we started with a clean sheet of paper now.

It was understandable that we should have a home-based service and one based, and operating, abroad. However, we are continually saying that we live in a global marketplace, and communications have changed dramatically. The problems that the agencies are dealing with are international. Trade now works across the globe, and illicit trade is exactly the same. In the prosecution of the drugs trade it is now rather artificial to draw a line between people who operate in Bolivia, where the drugs are grown, or Colombia, where they are processed, and other people who deal with the drugs when they arrive in the United Kingdom and are distributed.

I am keen on the idea of a drugs tsar, but he should be somebody who emerges from one of the secret agencies and he should have total responsibility for pursuing drugs wherever they are and for being involved in the whole chain—from the growth of cocaine, for example, to its

[Sir Archie Hamilton]

distribution in this country. If we had such a person, we would cut down on duplication and allay the concerns of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) and the hon. Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), who is worried about the degree of co-ordination and about duplication.

Espionage and counter-espionage are among the many other activities that are undertaken by the agencies, and there is not as great a division between those activities as people might imagine; indeed there are tremendous crossovers between them. As a result of the activities of the Secret Intelligence Service, Gordievsky and Mitrokhin produced a mass of information that enabled the Security Service to prosecute people in this country. Many people are recruited as agents when they are in this country. We draw an artificial line between espionage and counter-espionage, and I would like the two activities brought together under a single agency.

There is no line to be drawn between the agencies in dealing with terrorism because, almost invariably, terrorist acts executed in cities in this country are planned abroad. I should like to see a single agency dealing with terrorism. We must be careful not to continue the artificial division between home and abroad, when there is a web linking activities abroad to those in this country.

In 1994, under the previous Government, there was a great discussion of whether special branch or the Security Service should be responsible for dealing with terrorism in Great Britain. I confess that it did not worry me terribly who took control, as long as somebody did. As we now know, the Security Service came out on top, and we have seen a measurable improvement in our activities against Irish terrorism in this country. We can attribute an awful lot of that to the fact that those activities have been pulled together.

The tragedy is that, in an earlier period when Northern Ireland was more peaceful, we thought that it was a good idea to introduce police primacy, so the Royal Ulster Constabulary has a responsibility for intelligence in Northern Ireland. It would have been much better if Northern Ireland intelligence activities had been brought together under the Security Service.

We should seriously consider bringing both agencies and GCHQ together in a single service, underneath which people could be responsible for the main areas of activity. That would avoid duplication and we could hold someone responsible, which is extremely difficult to do now, for the subsidiaries that would emerge under a single service. I totally accept that enormous political problems would be involved. Normally, in any Cabinet, the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary are quite big beasts—I am not sure how much that applies to the current ones—and vested interests would argue against such a change, but it should be seriously considered.

Those views were shared when I served on the Intelligence and Security Committee, certainly by Lord Gilbert. When he was persuaded to give up his seat—Dudley—and take a seat in the House of Lords, he was offered a ministerial position if Labour were elected in 1997. He was keen that his job should be as a Minister of State in the Cabinet Office, responsible for the security and intelligence services, but something went wrong. I envisage an episode of "Yes, Prime Minister" and Lord Butler, as he now is, saying, "Very brave, Prime Minister." Lord Gilbert subsequently became Minister for Defence Procurement—a job that he had done 17 years earlier.

If the Security Service and the Secret Intelligence Service were reorganised, we should find that they operated much better. No business would be operated with such artificial divisions between home and abroad. We should carefully consider bringing the services together, and a start would be to have a Minister of State with responsibility for such matters in the Cabinet Office. If we went down that road, all our worries about duplication and overlap would disappear and we would have a much more efficient service in the areas that matter so much for the security and long-term strength of this country.

5.2 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I begin with an apology for missing a small part of the Back-Bench contributions at the start of the debate for a reason which I cleared with Madam Speaker's Office in advance, but I apologise nevertheless. I think it almost presumptuous to intrude on a debate that has been dominated, from the Conservative Benches at least, by a raft of Privy Councillors and former Ministers; none the less, I shall give it my best shot.

This is one of those occasions when I think I perhaps made my most useful contribution before making my speech. To my surprise, I managed to secure from the Home Secretary a frank and unequivocal undertaking that, if and when the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), does what he said he would do, as stated in *The Sunday Times* on 11 June, and asks

> to see his MI5 file after discovering that the security service kept records on his case for 25 years

he will be sent away with a flea in his ear. That is in a sense the second undertaking in a row, because, as some hon. Members might recall, my previous campaign was provoked by the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), now the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, demanding a couple of years ago that all old MI5 files, including the one held on him, should be destroyed. After initiating a special debate on the subject, I secured the Home Secretary's agreement that the Public Record Office would be properly brought into the process. A satisfactory outcome has now been reached, whereby files of historical value will be preserved on a much greater scale.

The hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), who is sadly not in his place, paid eloquent tribute to Vasili Mitrokhin for what he did. Indeed, as we are talking about an intelligence triumph of which this huge book is only the tip, it must surely be recognised that 90 per cent. of the credit should go to Mr. Mitrokhin. The other 10 per cent.—an essential 10 per cent.—should be divided between MI6 and MI5 for getting him and his material safely out of Russia, processing and distributing it, and safeguarding its security so that the leads that it gave could be followed up as effectively around the world as has evidently been the case.

However, I am sure that the Security Service, in particular, did not like one aspect of the Mitrokhin affair—the emphasis that Mr. Mitrokhin rightly put on publication. I understand that Mr. Mitrokhin insisted that

if he were to allow the use of his material—and it remains his material—for intelligence purposes, it must be published to the world, for which I give him three hearty cheers, more hearty even than the plaudits that he has already rightly received during the debate. I have told the House on previous occasions of my concern about what I regard as the unnecessary cover-up culture involved in dealing with historical events on which the Security Service could easily afford to lift the curtain.

In the previous debate on the subject on 2 November 1998, I referred to the fact that Mosley's British Union of Fascists was funded by Mussolini. We now know that, as early as 1935, special branch and MI5 had verified that that was happening on a large scale. It should not have taken until late 1983 for the historical record to be set straight and for confirmation to be forthcoming from the Security Service archives.

Similarly, we know that the British Communist party—despite all its vehement denials year in, year out—was in the pay of the KGB and was funded at least from 1958 until at least 1979 by cash payments to Reuben Falber in this country from his KGB contact. Sums of up to £100,000 a year were involved—heaven knows what that would be worth today. We know that only because of the discoveries made in the archives in Moscow. If MI5 knew about it—I bet it did—it hung on to that secret material for a long time.

It is important to destroy that cover-up culture on historical matters because such dilemmas, debates and controversies often repeat themselves. When fighting front organisations for the communists in the post-war period, it would have been helpful to cite the example of front organisations for the fascists in the pre-war period having been funded in that way. It is also important as a deterrent. As Professor Christopher Andrew has said—although I am unsure whether it has been referred to in the debate—perhaps Mitrokhin's greatest achievement is the fact that no one who has ever been in contact with the KGB can be sure that sooner or later such deplorable behaviour will not come to light. That is a devastating blow to the Russian intelligence agency's reputation, which it will take decades to overcome, if it ever can.

Having said all that, I was a little disappointed—I should not be surprised if Mr. Mitrokhin himself was a little disappointed also—that this thick volume did not contain a larger number of revelations about spies in Britain. Indeed, when it was to be published, it was not intended to reveal the identity of Melita Norwood. She was identified only as Agent Hola or, as had been known for many years from the Venona transcripts, Agent Tina. Her identity became known only because of the sleuthing of David Rose, the BBC journalist who put together the film series "The Spying Game", of which more in a moment.

The problem is that the Security Service seems to take the view that unless and until a person is convicted in a court of law—no matter how guilty that person is of treachery, spying or acting as an agent of influence for a foreign and hostile power—that person's name must never be revealed, even if there are no security implications. I believe that if the evidence is strong enough, such an approach is fundamentally wrong and unjust. People in public life are often accused of all sorts of wrongdoing without being convicted in a court of law. The burden is on the accuser to prove his or her case, and the remedy of taking a libel action is there for the accused if the accusation is false. I do not like the way decisions to conceal identities are made—sometimes for security reasons or as a bargain, but sometimes just to cover up embarrassment and so as not to rock the boat—because all too often people guilty of gross misconduct and treachery do not suffer even the punishment of having their deeds exposed to the contempt of their fellow countrymen.

I refer again to the excellent series "The Spying Game", and congratulate the BBC on that fine example of public service broadcasting. However, it had a slightly unfortunate aspect as it ran the exposure of a number of spies from different sources into a single collection. For example, Dr. Robin Pearson, the Hull lecturer, was exposed not by the Mitrokhin archive but by the Berlin Stasi archive, which has been available for some considerable time and was excellently researched by Dr. Anthony Glees, the academic who was the principal researcher for the relevant episodes of that series. Similarly, the identity of Professor Vic Allen, CND executive member, a Stasi agent in regular contact with East German intelligence who reported and spied on the anti-nuclear movement in order to make it even more helpful to Soviet foreign policy and military objectives than it was of its own volition, came out into the open only because of the revelations in the Stasi archive.

Some documents in that archive were not handwritten notes, valuable though those are, as in the case of Mitrokhin, but original documents such as receipts for the blood money that Dr. Pearson took from the East German intelligence agencies for his treachery, signed in his own hand. There should be no question of covering up the identities of those people, even if, for one technical or security reason or another, they are not to be prosecuted.

Eventually, I managed to secure a debate on the Berlin Stasi archive. However, I remain concerned that no proper examination of it was made until Dr. Glees went out there and made those discoveries for himself. Security Service operatives had been out there for a couple of days and took photographs of each other sitting on the toilet of Erich Mielke, the former intelligence boss. That was it, although there had been a Mitrokhin operative in reverse—Operation Rosewood—a few years earlier. The Americans succeeded in purchasing a vast quantity of Stasi material, which they made available to the British, just as we made the Mitrokhin material available to them. Nevertheless, there was no guarantee that everybody awaiting discovery in the original Berlin archive had been picked up in the archive sold to the Americans and passed on to us.

I want to cover two more points. The Home Secretary made a remark earlier, and I hope that no enthusiastic representative of his checking his contribution for *Hansard* will be tempted to alter it. He mentioned the threat from the Soviet Union then and the former Soviet Union now. He was right to make that remark, and I hope that it appears in the record tomorrow. There is still a threat from the former Soviet Union. This morning, I checked with the Clerk of the Defence Committee, on which I have the privilege to serve, whether it would be in order to refer to something that happened in a meeting yesterday between ourselves and representatives of the Russian Duma. He confirmed that the meeting was not held under Chatham house rules or off the record, but I shall not be too specific.

[Dr. Julian Lewis]

I was perturbed by the presentation given by a number of members of the delegation, with whom I shall enjoy sitting down for dinner this evening at the invitation of Madam Speaker, for which I am grateful. I hope that it is not withdrawn in the next hour and a half. One of the delegation's observations can be summarised only as a crude attempt to divide the United Kingdom from the United States by suggesting that we should all be terribly concerned about the way in which the United States tries to promote its own security interests at the cost of those of Europe and the United Kingdom. There were also appeals to the fact that we had fought on the same side against the Nazis. That was true from 1941–45; I am not sure that it would bear scrutiny for 1939–41.

There were attempts to balance the enormously restrained NATO military attacks in the Kosovo crisis with the sheer barbarism in Chechnya. Incidentally, who believes that the bomb explosions in Moscow were caused by Chechen terrorists, conveniently giving the Putin regime the excuse that they needed to go in and devastate their homeland? Many Kremlinologists of repute in this country do not believe that it was anything other than a provocation and a pretext for both electoral and tactical military reasons by the Russian special services.

There have been worrying developments. There has been a noted rise in anti-semitic attacks in Russia. There has been an attempt by President Putin to displace the rabbi who serves the Russian-Jewish community with an extreme fundamentalist rabbi, who would be unrepresentative. There has been the arrest of Vladimir Gusinsky, which means the silencing of an independent voice that is critical of the regime, and this also carries overtones of anti-semitism.

During the election campaign, the one person, Grigori Yavlinski, who might have made it necessary for President Putin to go into a run-off ballot, was attacked on official television for being supported by "foreigners, Jews and homosexuals". The one thing that can be said about the situation in Russia is that although the Putin project is to recreate the power structures of the communists, it is to do it without Marxist ideology. The aim is to restore a powerful state and eventually to build a new version of the former USSR where there is political and military dominance, without the economic burdens of direct administration. That is an advantage because it does not involve the ideology that carries the appeal into other countries that communism used to have.

If the Home Secretary now recognises that there is still a threat from Russia, which we hope to get along with much better in the future than we did in the past, it is only right for him to reverse a decision, which I have been asking him repeatedly to do, to dismantle what was for many years the most important branch of the Security Service, namely F branch, which dealt with subversion. According to the third edition of the glossy booklet entitled "MI5 The Security Service", the

> Security Service currently has no investigations in this area—

that is, the area of subversion. It continues:

> During the financial year 1997/1998 only 0.3 per cent. of the Service's resources were allocated to the remnants of this work, predominantly to pay the pensions of retired agents.

It is not satisfactory that a country that still faces threats and that could still be subject to subversion should have dismantled the section of its Security Service that deals with subversion. I have been grateful to the Home Secretary for what he has done in preserving files. I have been grateful to him also for what he has said today about preserving the ability of the Security Service not to have Members demanding access to their own files. I would be even more grateful to him if he would restore the one missing element of the jigsaw, which is the anti-subversion apparatus of MI5.

5.22 pm

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): First, I apologise to the House for not being present for the opening speeches, for a reason that I conveyed to Madam Speaker yesterday. It involved significant constituency activities, with a visit from leading French politicians and the signing of an accord in relation to the Newhaven port, which is of key importance to my constituents.

I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I have listened with considerable interest to Members' speeches. I listened with, I hope, a learning mode in place. In many instances, those who have spoken are members of the Intelligence and Security Committee. They have an insight which I do not.

I hope to bring an outside view to the debate—that is, one from outside the Committee—and perhaps in one sense a more mainstream view of Members of this place than the privileged view which others have expressed this afternoon. I have that much in common, if perhaps nothing much else, with the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), other than an interest in these matters.

There is a need to strike a balance between the proper secrecy procedures that are in place within our security services and the need for democratic accountability. The key question is how that balance is struck. In an answer to me, the Home Secretary said:

> I accept that there should be . . . openness in the work of the Security Service, provided it does not endanger national security in any way.—[*Official Report*, 30 March 1998; Vol. 309, c. 894.]

That seems to be a fair and proper description of how the Government should be approaching these matters.

I shall argue that perhaps we can go a little further a little faster in tilting the balance towards accountability without endangering national security in any way. I pay tribute to the steps that were taken by the previous Government under the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) and that have been taken by the present Government to move slowly—sometimes painfully slowly—towards a more open and accountable system, which in my view has not endangered national security. Perhaps the lesson to be learned is that further steps can be taken without endangering national security.

Not long ago, we were not even told that MI5 and MI6 existed. We started that far back. Now we have operations put on a legislative footing. We have the Intelligence and Security Committee and, as someone outside that Committee, I have formed the opinion that it does a good job.

I have confidence in the capabilities and the integrity of the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), who chairs that Committee. I have absolute confidence, of course, in my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), who has been in the House since 1973, and in other hon. Members, such as the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours).

They bring not only experience but a commitment to democracy and civil liberties, which are important in examining the work of the intelligence and security services.

I pay tribute to the steps that have been taken, as the hon. Member for New Forest, East noted, by the Home Secretary in small ways to open matters up, and by the Foreign Secretary, who was kind enough to publish the Zinoviev letters in response to a written question of mine. We now have the annual debate in Parliament. Those are all worthwhile steps, but we can go further.

I shall deal first with the subject of files, to which the hon. Member for New Forest, East referred. It is right that there is now independent scrutiny by officials of the Public Record Office. I called for that in November 1998. However, we are told in paragraph 79 of the Committee's annual report that 3,000 files were destroyed in the time between the decision to involve independent scrutiny being taken, and that scrutiny kicking in.

One wonders what was in those files. It must have been a fast operation to destroy them before the scrutiny process began. A fair-minded person must suppose that the files contained information that might cause embarrassment to the security services and that they might, with hindsight, regret compiling them.

I entirely concur with the future programme of work set out in the report with regard to files. I refer to paragraph 89 on page 36, which refers to three issues relating to personal files. The first is

> whether individuals should have rights in connection with the destruction or otherwise of any file held on them and protections against having inaccurate information gathered, stored and used against individuals' interests.

That is a crucial issue for the Committee to pursue. It is a principle on which both the present Government and the previous one acted by introducing data protection in other respects. That seems consistent and should apply to material held by the security services.

There was speculation in the newspapers a while ago that a file was held on the Home Secretary and the then Minister without Portfolio, the present Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. It is difficult to imagine anyone who is less of a security risk than the Home Secretary—*[Interruption.]* From where I am standing, the right hon. Gentleman seems to be a fully paid-up member of the establishment. If files are held on such people, perhaps the security services have been a little over-enthusiastic in their information-gathering activities.

It is right that if a file has been held on the Home Secretary, or anyone else, which the security services deem it no longer operationally necessary to retain—that is a proper consideration—why should not that person have access to the file and know what was written about him or her? Otherwise, something that may have been written by a very junior official a long time ago could stay on someone's record for ever, which seems wrong. The record may be destroyed, but the memory remains.

People must have the right to challenge that information when the security services consider that the file no longer needs to be kept for operational reasons. I hope that the Committee will press for that.

The second issue in the Committee's future programme of work is

> the position under future/current data protection legislation,

which is clearly linked to the first issue and to the third, which is

> implications of the European Convention on Human Rights.

I commend the Committee for that programme of work on files, and I hope that progress is made.

On 29 July 1998 the Home Secretary, who I am pleased to see has returned to the Chamber, made a long, full and helpful statement about personal files. He said that there were 13,000 active files on United Kingdom citizens, and it would be interesting to know whether there is an up-to-date figure. Perhaps the Foreign Secretary will be able to tell us; if not, I would be happy to table a question after the debate. The Home Secretary also said that 110,000 files were destroyed or earmarked for destruction. It is important to establish whether those earmarked for destruction have been destroyed, or whether they are lying around somewhere.

I refer Ministers to paragraph 47 of the 1997–98 report of the Intelligence and Security Committee, which expressed anxiety about the age cut-off point. On the 110,000 files, it states:

> We note however that reviewing in this respect is currently restricted to files on individuals who are over 55 years old. This means that there may be files on individuals under the age of 55 because they joined an organisation which was categorised as subversive possibly 20 years ago and these files may still be used for vetting and other purposes. However, no such files would be open on someone who joined the same organisation today.

It also says that the Committee will consider that further. I do not know whether the Committee has done that, but it is an important point.

Since being elected to Parliament, I have tabled several written questions on the interception of communications. I note with interest and perhaps a little anxiety that the number of warrants issued each year has continued to increase. In July 1998, Lord Nolan said:

> I am satisfied that the substantial increase in interception is due to the continuing incidence of large-scale crime coupled with the greater interception facilities available to the various agencies.

That clearly explains why the number of interceptions has increased.

I want to consider Lord Nolan's second reason: the greater interception facilities available. That means that technology is progressing apace and that it is now possible to intercept more accurately and perhaps more speedily than hitherto. There is therefore a greater tendency—or, at least, temptation—for the security agencies, including the police, to use interception facilities. That may be useful in detecting large-scale crime. I am sure that we are all grateful if the use of the facilities has facilitated the detection of large-scale crime and the arrest and prosecution of those responsible.

Mr. Mates: The advance of technology is double edged. It makes intercepting old technology easier, but it is much harder to intercept digital technology, which an increasing number of criminals and terrorists use. Any increase in numbers is related not to the ease of interception, which is in many ways more difficult, but to the urgency of the cases. Criminals are now so sophisticated; for example, they use mobile telephones and satellite phones to do their deadly deeds. We must pick them up.

Mr. Baker: I am grateful for that intervention and I accept the hon. Gentleman's point. It poses a problem for

[Mr. Baker]

those of us who are committed to accountability and democracy. There is a difficult balance to strike between ensuring that our security services are given the opportunity to detect crime, and maintaining proper civil liberties. I do not have the answer, but the question concerns me as an ordinary Member of Parliament.

In the spirit of my initial remarks to the effect that more information could be made available without endangering national security, I ask the Home Secretary whether more information could be provided on interceptions for which warrants have been granted. We are given information about the number of warrants, but not about the number of individuals or telephone lines that may be subject to interception. That extra information would not endanger national security, and it might help Members of Parliament and others to build up a picture of the activities of the security services. Could the provision of such information, which is not person-specific, be considered as part of the Government's review of the need to make the security services more accountable to Parliament and to the population generally?

Especially in the light of the increasing number of warrants that are being issued, or for which permission has been granted, I am worried about the level of authorisation required for the issuing of such warrants, and in particular, the powers that are winding their way through Parliament under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill. When a body or person wishes to interfere with the liberty or privacy of another person, it is important for there to be some external check on the process; otherwise there is surely potential for corruption.

Hitherto, the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary have signed warrants. That is entirely right. The Home Secretary has assured me in written parliamentary answers that he takes the matter very seriously and has considered it properly before doing so, and I am sure that that is true. However, I am worried about what may happen if senior officials have, in some respects, authority that has previously been exercised by elected Members. I understand that that may happen under the Bill. As the Home Secretary probably knows, my party has proposed a greater use of circuit judges rather than a reliance on senior officials.

Mr. Straw: I can entirely refute the possibility, or even the idea, that in the context of the legal regime senior officials will act corruptly, as the hon. Gentleman suggests. I see no prospect of that. The senior officials who deal with warrants do so with the utmost integrity. They, too, scrutinise applications with enormous care. The circumstances in which a senior official, rather than the Secretary of State, could authorise a warrant are significant, and can be circumscribed under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill. Principally, they will arise only when a Secretary of State has already made a decision to intercept in respect of that target.

Mr. Baker: Let me make it clear that I have no evidence of any corruption on the part of any official. I do not impugn any official, nor have I any reason to do so. I am making the entirely philosophical point that if an organisation is controlling and monitoring itself, there is a potential for something to go wrong. I am always interested in any aspect of our work here involving intrusion on someone's liberty or privacy, and I feel that there is a good reason for there to be an external check. That is the only point that I am making, but it was helpful to hear the Home Secretary's comments.

I am worried about the fact that, on occasion, information that conveys details about an individual, perhaps to a large degree, is not even subject to the warrant-seeking process. I understand that it is possible for information to be gleaned about telephone calls made by an individual without any requirement for warrants—for example, information about the number of calls made, the telephone numbers to which they are made, and how long the calls last. Such information can build up a picture of an individual's activities, even if the words spoken are not recorded. I understand that the same will shortly be possible with e-mails and other electronic communication; it will be possible to establish the sites visited, for how long they have been visited, and so on.

As I am not a member of the Committee, I hope that Ministers will allow me to raise the issue of the Government's policy on interceptions or monitoring of Members of Parliament—elected Members. This is really a constitutional issue. On 30 October 1997, a parliamentary answer given to the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick), who is no longer present, confirmed that the Government's policy on the interception of Members' communications was as stated in 1966 by the then Prime Minister, Harold Wilson. Nothing had changed. The answer was that no interception would take place.

I ask, in a genuine spirit of seeking information from the Government, how that squares with the various reports that appear to point in the contrary direction—reports that have appeared intermittently, almost regularly, in our national newspapers, often in respected national newspapers.

The Sunday Times of 15 November 1998 said that, allegedly, MI5 warned the Prime Minister about the activities of the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone). *The Guardian* reported in a front-page story on 22 October 1998:

> Potential cabinet Ministers and other members of the Government were vetted by MI5 at the last two general elections, it was officially admitted yesterday.
>
> The names of individuals who the intelligence agency considers security risks were passed to the Prime Minister.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Quite right, too.

Mr. Baker: Perhaps it is quite right. I am not making the point that that should never occur. The point that I am making is that it appears to be inconsistent with the information given in parliamentary written answers.

Mr. Mates: I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman again, but it is important that we get this right. Vetting means positively looking at someone's security classification. The loose terminology of the newspaper simply means that the Security Service—probably the head of the Security Service—reported to the Prime Minister on any Members upon whom it had information of anything untoward. That does not mean that the Member's communications had been interfered with. It means that the Member had come to the notice of the Security Service. That is quite a different matter from vetting.

Mr. Baker: I understand that point entirely, but I was making a wider point. An article in *The Mirror* alleged—

I have no evidence for this; I quote just because of a desire for knowledge—that MI5 phone taps and checks were ordered on a particular Member of Parliament who was branded a blackmail risk.

I do not know whether that occurs or not, but it would be helpful to know to what extent there is interception of any communications, surveillance, vetting or anything else involving Members. What general rules apply? What parameters apply in those respects? That is the question that I am asking the Foreign Secretary to address in his winding-up speech. What are the parameters and limits to which gathering information about Members of Parliament can extend? I ask no more than that.

Also on accountability, another area in which there could be greater openness is the finances of the security services. On 15 December 1998, I asked the Prime Minister to publish the National Audit Office report into the new headquarters for MI5 and MI6, a matter that my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed referred to earlier. The answer from the Prime Minister was that disclosure would harm national security or defence.

That is contrary to paragraph 43 of the Intelligence and Security Committee report, which states:

> We were surprised that the reports had not been previously published, and the Committee believe that these NAO reports should be published. We believe that publication would not in any way prejudice national security or compromise commercial confidentialities.

That is a conclusion with which I entirely agree. This is not about national security; it is about value for money and proper use of public funds—that is all. Whether there is a roof garden, or trees costing three times as much as they should, is not a matter of national security. It is a matter simply of whether the bill has been paid properly and whether there is proper accountability for funds.

The record shows that the budget for those buildings was about three and a half times overspent. Had there been more involvement and more openness about those issues, and perhaps more involvement by the Intelligence and Security Committee, that might not have happened. Further to that, what steps are being taken, and how open are the Government being in ensuring that the GCHQ building does not fall into the same trap as Thames house and Vauxhall cross?

As for openness about finances, I fail to see why the Government insist that they cannot publish a separate budget head for MI5, MI6 and GCHQ. There is a separate budget head for MI5; it is in some of the booklets. It may look as if it is a secret, but it is in there somewhere. It is also included in the single intelligence vote.

What on earth is wrong with our knowing the total amount spent on MI6 or GCHQ, and even perhaps, without endangering national security, some sort of crude breakdown within that figure? In my view, the attitude is a throwback to the era of obsessive secrecy which should be over. I hope that the Government will look again at that in the months ahead.

I am not asking for radical change. I am grateful, in so far as I am aware of it, for the work that the security services do to protect us all. I am also grateful for the work of the Security and Intelligence Committee on behalf of parliamentarians, in so far as I can ascertain what it does from its reports and elsewhere, and I have confidence in its work. I believe that it has shown that it can deal with security matters in a responsible way, and that Parliament and the security services can be more open about the work that they undertake without in any way endangering national security.

That may require a Select Committee, as hon. Members have argued this afternoon, or it may require rejigging the existing Committee. It will certainly involve more access to information from the Committee and more openness about advice to Ministers and the availability of such advice to members of the Committee. This is a relatively modest shopping list, but I hope that it is a sensible one and that the Government will respond accordingly when the Foreign Secretary replies to the debate.

5.47 pm

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): As one would expect, we have had a very good debate. It has been serious, thoughtful, well-informed and devoid of the spirit of partisanship that sometimes prevails in this place. I have been in the Chamber for most of the debate, and much of it has been not so much about the exercise of the accountability which these relatively new arrangements still amount to, but about how we might extend that accountability. I shall say a little about that, but it is proper that at this stage we should devote our attention to exercising accountability rather than seeking constantly to extend it.

All the speeches have been well informed and serious and the House will have appreciated that. The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) spoke with sanity and in a considered way. Let me also say that we all felt deeply for him in his recent sadness. We are very glad to have him here and to hear his sane voice.

I should also mention the speech by the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours). I am sorry that he is not in his place, but he has been here throughout nearly all the debate. He spoke of this being his last opportunity to speak in a debate on this topic, which suggests that he may know rather more about the date of the election than the Home Secretary or the Foreign Secretary.

Mr. Straw: Some time before May 2002.

Mr. Maude: I am grateful to have confirmation that the constitutional arrangements remain unchanged.

The hon. Member for Workington has been a remarkable parliamentarian—although not always a comfortable one from the point of view of those of us who served as Ministers under the previous Administration, or even current Ministers. However, as we undertake our task of holding the Executive to account, being comfortable is not always what we seek. We seek high principle, dedication, public service and acuity. The hon. Gentleman has all those qualities and I am glad to pay tribute to him. It is clear from the speeches of Committee members that there is an extraordinary degree of cohesion and friendship among them, which is important to the Committee's work.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), who speaks with such authority on the subject, has undertaken a remarkable and important task as the Committee's first Chairman. It is one of unusual delicacy and sensitivity, in creating what must be almost by definition a unique form of scrutiny—something

[Mr. Maude]

accepted even by those who argue for change. Trust in the way in which that form of scrutiny and accountability operates is of the utmost importance. The personal authority, high integrity, wide experience and judgment that my right hon. Friend brings to leading that process—together with his ability to command real respect from all parts of the House—is crucial. I pay tribute to him for the way in which he has discharged an important and serious task.

There was a fascinating and somewhat theological discussion about whether the current arrangements should be changed, and the Committee transmute over time to some form of Select Committee. Everyone agrees that the current arrangements work extraordinarily well for something that is so new in—this cannot be repeated too often—an area of great delicacy and sensitivity. As the procedures continue to bed in, it is important that the public, the House and those within the agencies have confidence in their operation. I strongly support the view taken by my hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates) and others that we should not consider a Select Committee structure. The existing system is good and we should concentrate on making it work well in exercising the accountability that comes with it rather than seeking, at this stage, to extend it.

The extraordinary process since the late 1980s of bringing the security and intelligence agencies, with their lack of public recognition, out of the darkness has been important in reassuring people of the essentially benign role that those agencies play. Creatures that exist totally in the dark can easily excite disproportionate fear and anxiety. Of course it is right for us to be vigilant about the agencies' role but we should exercise such vigilance against the background of our understanding that the agencies exist and operate as the servants of liberty, not its enemy.

Even before the existing arrangement, all the agencies were accountable to Ministers who were themselves democratically accountable. My right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Sir A. Hamilton) made an interesting suggestion about changing part of that accountability in future, which I am sure we will want to think about carefully. However, we should never forget that the security and intelligence agencies have always operated within some framework of accountability—albeit more limited than that which operates today.

All who have contributed to the debate have spoken about the work of the agencies themselves, and I endorse all that has been said, especially about the work of the Secret Intelligence Service and GCHQ, which are the agencies that fall within the portfolio that I shadow. We should recognise that the excellence of the SIS's work, and the height of its reputation, is not least among that unique set of international assets which gives Britain global reach and which should give Britain disproportionate influence in the world. I remember from my own close contact with the SIS, when I was a Foreign Office Minister 10 years ago, that we were not allowed to call it the SIS—we had to refer to it in a dark and mysterious way as "the friends across the river." That contact gave me a profound admiration for the men and women who comprise the service, and who demonstrate dedication, public service, resourcefulness and—as many hon. Members have pointed out today—simple, raw courage.

Part of what those agencies provide for this country is the ability to help other friendly countries with intelligence input that they would otherwise lack. That gives this country greater influence which other, comparable countries simply do not have. To achieve that, the agencies need proper resources and commitment to their capability. They need continuity, which is crucial: after all, they operate in a world that is not notably safer since the end of the cold war. The cold war, born, as it was, out of oppression and totalitarianism, provided a dreadful stability for the most awful of reasons, and it is unequivocally good news that that has ended. However, it has not led to the world becoming more stable. It is, if anything, less stable and predictable, and more turbulent. The new world today holds greater opportunities for prosperity and peace, but there are myriad threats and risks.

A peace dividend has not been available in the sphere of intelligence, and rightly so. The big reduction in the need for intelligence in relation to the former Soviet Union has more than been taken up by the need to counter threats that are more immediate to civil society. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) talked about the need to counter organised crime, especially drug trafficking and illegal immigration—which has had dreadful effects, as we have seen this week. That is a crucial area of activity and it is right that a greater part of the resources of the agencies should be devoted to activities to counter proliferation and terrorism, and action to disrupt and investigate international crime.

The Mitrokhin affair has rightly been the subject of much discussion in this debate. I take this opportunity to applaud the work of the agencies in that case, especially that of the SIS. It is always the case that it is the things that go wrong that get the publicity and attention, but much goes right that is unapplauded. In the Mitrokhin case, however, we were able to see what was, by any standard, a remarkable piece of intelligence work with a huge dividend for this country and for our allies. I place on record the plaudits of the Opposition for the work that was done.

My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) mentioned that we should give credit not only to the agencies: much of the credit must go to Mr. Mitrokhin himself, who was extraordinarily brave in standing up for what he believed. He performed a great service for his country and our country, and for humanity generally.

The Committee has made some sensible and moderate recommendations. Of course there were faults in the subsequent handling of the Mitrokhin operation, and they have been highlighted, but it would be a shame if they were to mar an otherwise exemplary operation. I do not want to harp on about the failures, although it is clear that some were serious. Views may differ about whether Mrs. Norwood should have been brought to book for her betrayal, but it is unsatisfactory that, in effect, the decision was taken by default.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe spoke also about the effect of the current proposals for European security and defence

identity in respect of intelligence operations. I shall introduce a minor point of partisan difference at this point, although I see that that upsets the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane).

European defence will require intelligence sharing, yet there are clear differences of allegiance. It did not need the apparent leak by French intelligence officers of target details during the Kosovo operation to show that. It would be useful if the Foreign Secretary would explain how he expects liaison within the European Union defence framework to work.

The natural and important links between Britain and the Echelon group are based on a long period of continuity and trust and exist for the purpose of sharing intelligence. Is there not a risk that those links would be endangered by an arrangement that would necessarily involve sharing intelligence with countries that have different perspectives and aims?

From my own experience, I know that foreign policy decisions are coloured by intelligence information. It is hard to see how there can be a complete common foreign and security policy without complete intelligence sharing. That is even more true of military operations, which depend crucially on intelligence.

In that context, it was disturbing to read an article in this month's edition of *Prospect* magazine. Written by a French official, it argues that the British would not be able to play a leading role in the EU unless they jettisoned their special intelligence links with the United States. The official states:

> Britain must choose Europe or betray it.

That is an unsatisfactory thing to read.

Mr. MacShane: What is his name?

Mr. Maude: He is unnamed, for perfectly understandable reasons. It would have been very odd if he had been named. It is disturbing that such sentiments can be uttered for publication, and it bears out the sort of concerns raised by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe.

Mr. Howard: Is it not astonishing that Labour Members should demand the name of the source of that remark? It is entirely consistent with named, sourced and published emanations in recent weeks from the highest elements in the French Government.

Mr. Maude: My right hon. and learned Friend is right, and the concern about the matter is real. No one is saying that under no circumstances can these potential conflicts be resolved, but we know that intelligence sharing is founded on continuity, trust and mutual confidence, which can be built up only through a long period of co-operation.

The Government are engaged in a frogmarch towards the European security and defence identity, and the Foreign Secretary must tell the House whether there is any risk that that might endanger intelligence sharing through the Echelon group, which is a crucial element of our intelligence capability. If the intelligence-sharing that we enjoy were lost, we would suffer by denying ourselves access to the product of others' intelligence capabilities.

On the question of trust and confidence, I want to say a word about Dame Stella Rimington and her famous book, which is being considered by Government officials. I suspect that I am not alone in believing that one of the obligations that members of all agencies accept is a self-denying ordinance on writing about the work of the agencies. That is not some quaint, old-fashioned relic of the dark days of absolute secrecy—I believe it to be crucial for operational effectiveness.

As I said earlier, trust is essential at all levels. It is especially essential between agents in the field and the service that they help. The Secret Intelligence Service, in particular, has been extraordinarily successful in creating that sense of complete trustworthiness. After all, it often asks people to place themselves in positions of extreme risk for what they believe in. Such people may be at high risk for many years afterwards. People need to be confident that events will not be written about in such a way that might enable them to be identified subsequently, however well disguised in the writing they may be, by detective work carried out by journalists and others. After all, Mrs. Norwood was publicly identified by a journalist carrying out just such detective work.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Is there not another particularly objectionable aspect to this? What makes the sale of memoirs about MI5 and MI6 so lucrative are the risks run by the agents, who often receive very little financial reward. What does it look like to them to see the desk warriors, who do not run any significant risks, getting £1 million for a book?

Mr. Maude: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. From everything that I have heard, seen and read, it is hard to over-state the distress and outrage that is felt about this by people in all the agencies. I take this opportunity to say to Ministers that we believe that it is quite wrong that Dame Stella should seek to publish such a book. The Government would have our wholehearted support in preventing such publication.

Mr. Winnick: It may well be wrong for Stella Rimington to publish the book. Presumably a lot will be deleted. However, I should like to get this quite clear. Is the right hon. Gentleman suggesting that the Government should prevent the publication of the book, even if they have the powers to do so? I hope not.

Mr. Maude: Yes, I think that the Government should prevent its publication. It has been argued that it would be perfectly appropriate for Dame Stella to publish memories of her early childhood and a study of the psychological stress involved such an operation. That would be interesting and probably uncontroversial. However, to write about the service that she has led would be quite wrong. She should make the honourable decision not to pursue the book's publication, but if she persists in seeking to write about her life in the service, the Government should prevent the book's publication. They would certainly have our support in doing so, and I hope that they would have the support of the whole House.

I want to say a word about the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, which is in another place. It is mentioned in the report of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater, and it is important in this context, because of a clear conflict of objectives. Perhaps the Government have done their best to reconcile those objectives, but we believe that they have not yet successfully done so.

[Mr. Maude]

The emergence and startling growth of new media require some ability for the authorities to have specific access to communications for limited and specific purposes, but two conflicting public goods are at risk here. The first is a general entitlement; we are all entitled to feel that we should have privacy for our communications. The second is a matter of wider importance: the Government's own declared objective, which we strongly support, of making the United Kingdom the prime centre for e-commerce and network development.

I should perhaps declare an interest, as I am a director of a start-up internet company. I am aware of the real concern within the sector about the effect of the perceptions of the Bill. There is massive concern about the effect of the Bill on the sector's development and on the prospects for the UK of becoming a serious base for this kind of business. It is, after all, a very mobile business, able to relocate in other parts of the world literally within hours.

Plenty has been said about the effects. The London Investment Banking Association said recently:

> the legislation also needs to avoid casting doubt on the efficacy of encryption as a means of legitimately protecting the confidentiality of commercial information.

It believes that the Bill does not currently provide that reassurance. The Director of Cyber-Rights and Cyber-Liberties (UK) describes the Bill in its current form as

> creating an intimidating environment for the legitimate use of encryption products by UK citizens.

He says:

> Such legislation would no longer be compatible with the Government's policy to make Britain the best place for e-commerce and network development.

Those are serious concerns.

We understand the countervailing objective for the agencies to have the ability to intercept communications. No one contests that that is a desirable end and that a serious public good is served by it. It was mildly frustrating when looking for details of what the agencies said about it to find in the report of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater, in the section on commercial encryption,

> GCHQ stated in their evidence that

followed by five lines of asterisks;

> The Security Service told us that

followed by three lines of asterisks; and

> The SIS stated

followed by four lines of asterisks. That was not very illuminating. One understands why it appeared in that way, but it did not help the argument very much.

One of the problems is that the UK is the first country to proceed down this path. There is some credit in trying to be first, but we should not always seek to match every development in technology, in the market and in communications with equivalent regulation. Such legislation can look, and can even be, unreasonably draconian. It can prove simply inappropriate in view of the rapid development of such media. Therefore, I take this opportunity to ask the Government to look again at how the legislation will work and to introduce some serious amendments to it.

In conclusion, I should like again to pay tribute to all those in the agencies for the work that they do. The country owes them a big debt of gratitude for their dedication, service, knowledge, resourcefulness and courage. I pay great tribute to my right hon. Friend and his Committee for the way in which they have embraced the important, serious, high task of bringing accountability—of bringing into the light an area that has always remained largely in the dark—and for giving reassurance to the public that these are agencies that serve the cause of liberty and are not its enemies.

6.14 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): The debate has had a select attendance, but in my quarter century as a Member of Parliament, I have rarely attended a debate so well informed and so serious in tackling the issues before the House. I have also rarely attended a debate in which the addressing of serious issues has been so little diverted by party points. All hon. Members who have spoken today may take some pride in having demonstrated the Chamber's role of scrutiny in a responsible and non-partisan manner.

The tone for the debate, and for the annual report before us, owes a great deal to the diligence and character of the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King). His deep experience of government has admirably equipped him for the role of Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee. I wish him well on his forthcoming retirement; he will leave a gap that the House will be challenged to fill.

The right hon. Gentleman took proper pride in the high attendance at the ISC. As a regular witness there, I can testify to the unusually high attendance, and, following my recent visit, to its unusual unity, at a level not often found in Select Committees. He was right to point out that the Committee's work is shared by all its members, and many of those who have spoken today may take pleasure in their contribution to it.

I may be able to help the right hon. Gentleman and the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) on their point about regulations for special employment tribunals for members of the agencies. I am advised by my colleagues at the Department of Trade and Industry that they intend to consult the ISC next month on draft regulations, and I hope that that will enable us to make progress. I cannot promise that all my responses today will be so expeditious or so welcome.

The right hon. Members for Bridgwater and for Horsham (Mr. Maude) raised the subject of the proposed memoirs of Stella Rimington. The text has been submitted to the agencies for scrutiny and Stella Rimington has agreed that nothing should be published that would undermine national security. She has not yet submitted the text to a publisher, so there is time for her to reflect on whether it would be right to do so. I am sure that she will wish to bear in mind the comments made here today as she comes to a judgment on whether to proceed.

Mr. Winnick: On the basis that nothing should be published that will undermine national security, and if Stella Rimington decides to go ahead with publication, will the Government take no action to stop her?

Mr. Cook: I cannot say anything as definitive as my hon. Friend advises me to. Discussions continue and it

would not necessarily be helpful if we took too clear a view. While the book may contain nothing that would directly compromise national security, I detect from many of the speeches today that Members would wish Stella Rimington to reflect on the example that she would set and on whether it would be wise to proceed.

Rare partisan points were made by the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) and the right hon. Member for Horsham, who both managed to introduce Europe. Given how high Europe ranks in Conservative thinking, we should probably be grateful that it did not play a more prominent part in the debate. As the right hon. and learned Gentleman and the right hon. Gentleman pressed me on the matter, I can say that we agreed, only this week at the Feira European Council, to four working groups with NATO to consider the interface between the European security and defence policy and NATO. Intelligence is obviously part of that interface, and I can think of no one better to oversee the work than Javier Solana, until recently the Secretary General of NATO and now overseeing European security as the High Representative of the European Council.

I will not undertake to see nothing in the proposals. Nor would we agree to anything that would put at risk our special relationship in intelligence with the United States. I do not entirely follow the logic of those who are concerned that we will not be able, because we are entering into a security arrangement with several of the countries of Europe, to continue with our special relationship on intelligence. We have maintained that relationship for 50 years with exactly the same countries as members of NATO.

Nor am I particularly impressed by threats from an anonymous French man that the security initiative would compromise Britain's national intelligence gathering; I am absolutely confident that the French have not the slightest intention of allowing it to compromise their own national intelligence gathering. I do not, therefore, feel an active threat from that quarter.

Mr. Howard: Is not the Foreign Secretary missing the point? I referred to the quotation from the French Minister for Europe in which he made it perfectly plain that he wanted to see Europe as a rival to the USA—there are those who regard that as an honourable and legitimate objective. If that is the type of Europe that is being envisaged by at least some of those who are behind the initiative, is it not inevitable that the Americans will have concerns about continuing to share their intelligence with those who want to set up a rival to them in the world?

Mr. Cook: The United States shares intelligence with us as members of an alliance that includes France. As to US anxiety, I can only refer the right hon. and learned Gentleman to the comments made by the President of the USA in Germany earlier this month. Referring to European security, he said:

> There is no contradiction between a strong Europe and a strong transatlantic relationship.

It is not incumbent on Opposition Members to try to be more pro-American than the American President.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) inquired as to whether security had been compromised by the disappearance of the laptops in the ownership of the agencies. I advise the House that we are confident that security has not been compromised. Nevertheless, it is plainly vital that we address that important security aspect. I welcome the fact that the ISC investigator is carrying out a review of the matter. We look forward to the report and will ensure that any conclusions or findings of the Committee are fully fed into our response to those events.

That matter underlines the fact that the ISC does not act as a means of scrutiny only on behalf of Parliament. The Committee is a valuable partner for the Government in ensuring that we maintain proper accountability and rigour over the security agencies.

It is in exactly that spirit that the ISC undertook the Mitrokhin study; we are grateful to it for having done so. The members of the Committee addressed that duty with diligence, conscientiousness and discretion. Their report is welcome, as the debate has demonstrated, because it restores a sense of balance to the Mitrokhin issue. Mistakes were made under both Administrations, but it is important that we apply ourselves to the lessons that should be learned for the future.

As the right hon. Member for Bridgwater pointed out, the great value of the report is that it underscored what a major achievement it was for SIS to get Mr. Mitrokhin out of Russia with his information. It was an outstanding piece of intelligence work, as the Committee recorded. It provided more leads for counter-espionage work than any other counter-espionage operation. We owe a major debt to the agencies for having made that possible and to the immense courage of Mr. Mitrokhin during the long years when he accumulated the information that has been of such value to those of us who want to expose the threat to our values and our societies.

I agree with the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) at least in that we cannot learn the lessons of the past if we do not know the facts of the past. In that, Mr. Mitrokhin has been of extreme value to us. The hon. Gentleman referred to a long list of issues on which we had had to wait for too long to find the truth. I add to that list the fact that we had to wait until last year to discover that the Zinoviev letter was a forgery. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) for having prompted us to undertake that project so as to put those facts into the public domain.

Mr. Straw: It was too late for the 1924 general election.

Mr. Cook: Indeed. Nevertheless, it is important that the matter be put in the public arena. I can give an undertaking to the House that, wherever it is safe to do so, we shall share historical facts that the public are entitled to know and that we should have no fear of sharing with them.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Lewes is not a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee. Given the volume of parliamentary questions that he tables on the topic, he qualifies at least for associate membership of the Committee. He made several detailed proposals for enhanced scrutiny. However, in the 30 minutes since he sat down, it has not been possible for the Government to take a collective view on them. We will, of course, reflect on those interesting ideas as we expand the operation of scrutiny and make sure that we maintain the oversight of the work of the agencies.

[Mr. Cook]

I now come to a central theme of the debate which was picked up, in particular, by my hon. Friends the Members for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton) and for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick). That is the wide-ranging oversight that we now have over all the agencies. I referred earlier to the fact that I have been a Member of the House for a quarter of a century. When in the 1970s I started an annual Adjournment debate on the activities of special branch, it was seen as a rather daring innovation in accountability.

At that time in the 1970s, if anybody had suggested that we would have a six or seven-hour debate in prime time on the work of the three agencies on the basis of a report conducted by Members of the House, who had interviewed and taken evidence from all the agencies, he would have been regarded as an unrealistic visionary or perhaps, even worse, as a subversive who should attract the attention of the hon. Member for New Forest, East. On that point, I carry the hon. Gentleman with me.

The change has been of value and importance not only to Parliament in improving our ability to carry out scrutiny, but to the agencies, many of which have widely welcomed the progress that has been made. My hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) has done sterling service on these issues as a member of the ISC and as a Member of the House. I agree with his observation that the new generation at the top of the agencies take a more open approach than was possible or encouraged during the cold war. This new generation regards accountability as an asset to an agency, not as an irritation.

I firmly believe that the discussion that the heads of the agencies and others within the agencies have had with senior Members of the House and the Committee and the debates that we have had in the House on the Committee's report have all been of great assistance in ensuring that the priorities and objectives of the agencies reflect the concerns of elected Members of Parliament. They also mean that there is a broader consensus on the national interests and the risks that the agencies should focus on to protect those interests.

There is one dramatic measure of how far forward we have moved over the past 20 years in involving the agencies in the public debate. It took place yesterday when all three agencies appeared before the human rights taskforce of the Home Office. It brings together non-governmental organisations active in human rights, which are able to discuss between them how the agencies will shape their operations and their methods to make sure that they are entirely compatible with the European convention on human rights, which we are importing into British law. Such an encounter would have been unimaginable two decades ago, but it is entirely healthy and valuable for both sides of the debate.

It is right that Parliament and the public should have the opportunity to hold all public institutions to account and the security agencies should be no exception. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I are accountable to Parliament and, through Parliament, to the public for the actions of the agencies. We are responsible for ensuring that they act in accordance with the law, and we take those duties seriously. As Secretary of State, I have the right to know what is done under my authority and I am responsible for scrutinising applications and for signing warrants. My right hon. Friend and I are also responsible for ensuring that the agencies have the resources that they need to carry out their important work. We are both accountable to Parliament.

There are robust processes for ensuring that we are both kept informed about important things that we need to know or which we may need to know for future. I have bilateral meetings with the chief of the SIS and with Francis Richards, the director of GCHQ. I have officials at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office dedicated solely to the job of understanding what the agencies are doing and guiding them on our policy.

Dr. Godman: Along those lines, I have a question about the Government response to the Foreign Affairs Committee report on Sierra Leone. Is my right hon. Friend in a position to confirm that which is stated in paragraphs 21 and 22 on page 3 of that response, that the modernisation of arrangements for liaison with the intelligence services and the handling of intelligence has been carried out, and that he is satisfied with the new arrangements? He promised modernisation and updating of procedures; has the programme been completed?

Mr. Cook: I would not say that the programme has been completed, the matter is one that requires constant updating and review, but I can tell my hon. Friend that we have made major changes in those procedures and in the structure of the Foreign Office to ensure that we are better able to liaise with the agencies, oversee their work and ensure that the appropriate intelligence is properly handled and disseminated. I would not say that there is nothing further to be done—indeed, I would be open to criticism were I to do so—but I can say that I am robustly confident that we have made a big improvement on the situation of two years ago.

As a further safeguard to the work done by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department and me, our actions are subject to independent scrutiny, not only by Parliament, but by the commissioners set up by the Acts. Each officer of each agency has a duty under the law to provide those commissioners with the information that they need to do their job. To sum up: the heads of the agencies are accountable to my right hon. Friend and me, we are accountable to Parliament and, as the Secretaries of State concerned, we have to come to the Chamber today to account for the actions of the three agencies and to confirm that they have acted within the law and will continue to do so.

Before I turn to the two agencies that are specifically accountable to me and for which I have to account to Parliament, I should enter one word of balance. It is important that we make sure that oversight by Parliament and accountability to Parliament works well and openly. However, I am sure that the members of the ISC will agree that it is equally important that we preserve the secrecy of the agencies' operation. Good human intelligence depends on individuals around the world who are prepared to trust the ability of the SIS to protect their identity; protecting those identities means protecting their livelihoods and, often, their lives. Protecting the scale of GCHQ's capability is also important to ensuring that it is able to carry out its work of interception. All intelligence collection needs the protection of secrecy for its methods if it is to remain effective.

I am responsible for two agencies: GCHQ and the SIS. Before talking about them, I should like to stress that the work of both is of greatest value when seen together. The collection of signals intelligence and of human intelligence often bears its greatest fruit and best results when the two are put together. Both agencies deserve credit for their achievements in matters of profound importance to the safety and security of the nation.

Let me give two examples. Together, the agencies can ring the alarms on attempts to acquire the technology of weapons of mass destruction. That used to be of concern only in connection with nuclear technology, but it is now of concern also in relation to biological and chemical weapons, which can be acquired more cheaply and with a lower technical threshold. The information that the agencies collect gives us as a Government the opportunity to attempt to persuade those who are developing such programmes of the real cost to them of pursuing a capability in weapons of mass destruction, and of the benefits of abandoning that ambition. The agencies also keep a close watch on the readiness of some countries or individuals within them to sell the technology for weapons of mass destruction. That, in turn, enables us to try to influence the countries in which such individuals may reside about the importance of adhering to the non-proliferation regimes.

The other example that I will share with the House is the agencies' work on narcotics and illegal drugs, to which the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe referred. I entirely endorse his observation about the value of their work in that field. In the fight against drugs, the provision of intelligence to law enforcement agencies, not only in the UK but in a range of other countries, is vital to disrupting drug trafficking—a pernicious trade that continues to destroy the lives of people here in the UK. Action by the UK security and intelligence agencies has made a real contribution to our anti-drugs strategy and to achieving the aim of stifling the supply of drugs to our streets.

In my time as Foreign Secretary, I have attended a number of international meetings at which we have had a wholly sterile debate as to whether the prime objective should be to reduce the demand for drugs in the countries that consume them, or to reduce the supply of drugs from the countries that produce them. That is a pointless debate—we need to do both. The work of SIS and GCHQ is immensely valuable to us in making sure that we can disrupt and deter the drugs trade along points in the chain before it reaches the United Kingdom.

GCHQ carries out activities that meet all three of the functions set out in the Interception of Communications Act 1985. It provides assistance on national security, serious crime and economic well-being. In the recent past, it has produced intelligence to help to safeguard the security of British troops in Bosnia and Kosovo. It assists the law enforcement agencies in the war against organised crime.

GCHQ also defends our economic well-being against modern, and more unconventional, threats. Britain's essential infrastructure, such as water, power and transport services, is increasingly managed by information technology. A computer-based attack on those services could cripple the nation just as effectively as a military attack. GCHQ's information security specialists help the Government and industry to protect themselves from vulnerability to such attacks.

Of course, GCHQ now faces a very wide range of technical challenges that are increasing with every passing year. Chief among those is the growth and rate of change in global telecommunications and the spread of the internet, which is changing the way in which so many organisations communicate. A second challenge is the growth of global telephone systems. Organised crime can now operate on the basis of buying a phone in one country, using it in a second country to call a third, and paying, or failing to pay, the bill in a fourth. Keeping up with the globalisation of communications technology requires commitment and a deep understanding of complex technical issues.

A third challenge to GCHQ is the growth of encryption, which can be a valuable safeguard for honest people doing honest business over the net. However, it can also be a potent weapon in the hands of those who wish to avoid their legal obligations. I listened with respect to what the right hon. Member for Horsham said on that matter. He would not expect me to say what lay behind the asterisks in the report, and members of the Committee, having struck those words out of their report, would be rather astonished if I did.

I can sum up the expression of all three agencies by saying that they all firmly support the work that the Government are doing on that matter. We have to make a choice here, even if it is a difficult one. We cannot ask the agencies to be more effective on serious crime, drug trafficking and the traffic in human beings if we do not listen to them when they tell us their technical and legal requirements for continuing to do that work.

If GCHQ is to keep pace with technical change, it needs the building and the equipment to do so. That is why we have begun the new accommodation programme for GCHQ to provide it with the facilities that it needs to guarantee its capability well into the future. I congratulate the current director, Francis Richards, who has quickly come to terms with that immense project. He is motivating the staff through the process of change and has quickly and honestly squared up to early problems.

GCHQ's new accommodation is to be purpose built for the modern IT environment and will provide the basis on which GCHQ can handle large quantities of complex information quickly and intelligently. It is our responsibility to ensure that GCHQ stays a jump ahead of the field, and the new programme will give it the ability to do that. The right hon. Member for Bridgwater wisely said that the scale and complexity of the project is almost unrivalled: it is not only a building, but the relocation of probably the most complex IT operation in Britain.

The right hon. Gentleman knows that we are taking steps to improve the management of that programme, but I agree with him and the hon. Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates) on the importance of monitoring the project's development. I can therefore inform the House that I have asked for regular reports on the progress of the programme, the development of its management, the containment of the costs and the avoidance of unacceptable disruption of service to the clients.

I stress that the SIS makes a valuable contribution through human intelligence to all those objectives—against proliferation, the drugs trade and terrorism. I echo what has been said by a number of hon. Members about the courage of those who work in the field. By definition, working to tackle the drugs trade or proliferation or

[Mr. Cook]

terrorism means operating in countries that can be unstable and can present dangers to everybody—including, of course, those who work there on behalf of our intelligence services. The whole House will want to support the commitment and the courage that they show in performing services of great value to the nation and also to us, as the Government and the representatives of the people.

I want to highlight another two aspects of the SIS. First, there are areas of the world where British interests are engaged and where the relationships of power are, to put it kindly, not always transparent. The SIS provides a unique perspective on key regional and national developments in those areas. At its best, SIS intelligence from human sources can and does forewarn the Government of when things will go wrong and contributes to our options for steering them in the right direction. Secondly, SIS deployment worldwide provides unique added value when local flashpoints arise and a surge of diplomatic and sometimes military effort is needed.

I echo a point made by a number of hon. Members. Sometimes we are hampered in getting the value of the agencies across to the public because we cannot talk about their successes. Those successes can be spectacular. I want to try to put that right by sharing with the House a recent SIS success. Hon. Members will know that I have recently visited Sierra Leone, where we have seen a recurrence of an appalling civil war with grave civilian casualties. In relation to that, I want to put on record the great success that we have had in obtaining intelligence, particularly through the SIS. I can tell the House that the intelligence agencies have successfully shown the degree of Liberian involvement in the conflict in Sierra Leone and the contacts with the rebels in Sierra Leone.

At last week's General Affairs Council in Brussels, I was able to use that intelligence through the Minister of State—my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz)—to convince our European partners that we should take a tougher line with Liberia. As a result, they agreed to step up pressure on the Government of Liberia and to be willing to use our own aid as a lever on them. We would not have been able to do that without good-quality intelligence and the effort of those in the field who provided it. In that way, the agencies contributed to our promotion of democracy and human rights in Africa. They helped to secure our aim of stability in the region and thereby protected our national interest. That is a good example of a success story achieved by the agencies and how good intelligence used by the policy makers can make a real difference.

Most of those present throughout the debate have been members of the Intelligence and Security Committee. For those who are not members of it, I would commend the foreword to the annual report as an excellent summary of why we need the agencies in an unstable and dangerous world. The growth of heroin in central Asia is a threat to security on the streets of Britain. Terrorist bombings in east Africa can be a threat to our trade and to our citizens in east Africa. Efforts to acquire chemical and biological weapons anywhere in the middle east can be a threat to our own people. Our dependence on information technology is vulnerable to being disrupted by any point around the globe with access to global communications.

I entirely echo the conclusion of the foreword that our safety depends on good intelligence. I congratulate the ISC on having provided us with a sound basis for the debate. I believe that the debate has established both the value of our intelligence and security agencies, and at the same time has demonstrated the health of their accountability to Parliament.

Mr. Greg Pope (Hyndburn): I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.

NORTHERN IRELAND GRAND COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That

(1) the matter of devolution in Northern Ireland, being a matter relating exclusively to Northern Ireland, be referred to the Northern Ireland Grand Committee;

(2) the Committee shall meet at Westminster on Wednesday 5th July at 10.30 a.m., when it shall take questions for oral answer and shall then consider the matter of devolution in Northern Ireland, referred to it under paragraph (1);

(3) notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 88 (Meetings of Standing Committees), at that meeting the Chairman shall interrupt the proceedings under paragraph (2) at half-past One o'clock; and

(4) at the conclusion of the proceedings under paragraph (2), a motion for the adjournment of the Committee may be moved by a Minister of the Crown pursuant to Standing Order No. 116(5) (Northern Ireland Grand Committee (sittings)).—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Local Authority Housing Revenue

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

6.46 pm

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): My topic for this evening's Adjournment debate would appear to be as dry as dust and as unappetising as shards of broken glass. It is a subject of which today's issue of *The Guardian* stated:

> It is about as riveting as the Schleswig-Holstein question.

Palmerston said that those who sought to understand it went mad.

My topic specifically is reformed local government finance as it applies to a specific group, that of new towns which are debt free and have a negative housing subsidy. Negative subsidy means that they are in the black, in credit.

Debt-free sounds good, even privileged. However, we should remind ourselves that many of those who sleep on the embankment are debt-free. That does not mean that they have no need of resources.

The fact that the local authority for the area which I represent—it is called Dacorum— is debt-free means that it is being asked, as current policy is drafted, to take savage cuts of no less than 41 per cent. of its budget. The citizens of the area are faced with an unprecedented and catastrophic decline in the quality of service that they have received from their local authority, particularly recently.

I present this topic as a supporter of a Government whom I believe to be one of the best that this country has ever had. There has been a magnificent commitment to tackling educational failure, child poverty, pensioner misery, pain caused by alleviable medical conditions and the scourge of unemployment. The achievements do not quite match the commitment yet because many problems had to be tackled from a base of neglect for decades. However, there is strong evidence that the new Government's initiatives have addressed many of the problems that were left neglected.

I am proud of the Government to whom I commit my support in Parliament. However, I am still independent-minded enough to reflect on where there are sometimes failings, and to ask myself which issues need drastic attention. Local government finance is just such a topic. Over a period when the Government have introduced many special initiatives, and have often asked local government to be a partner in them, there has sometimes been a singular lack of understanding of the reality that local authorities have had their resources stretched to the point at which systems of service delivery are breaking. Yet we know that to be true. If schools have done well under the Government, why are there still threats of library closures? If those who wish to train for jobs have done well under the Government, why is it so difficult to get a decent level of support from council social services departments?

The answer is that when the Government commit themselves to expenditure in one area, they often commit themselves at the same time to a freeze or, at best, a very gradual upturn in another. As they were working from the very low base left to us by the previous Government in the provision of so many services, even a standstill budget will drive some services into the buffers.

The topic of local government finance is not quite as dry as some might think. It affects the quality of people's lives. A woman in my constituency whose mobility is less than it was requires a small ramp at the rear of her house. The council recently stated that no such work could be carried out now, because of uncertainty about continuing funding for the Government. That is the case in service after service.

Faced with a 41 per cent. cut, what funds can the council commit to such cases? A woman needs new bathing arrangements because of her recent disability. The social services may help, but for years that department has been starved of the resources that would allow it to be proactive in the provision of such facilities. Dacorum borough has often helped in similar cases, but now it cannot.

My hon. Friend the Minister knows that I have a specific complaint about the effect of the new system of resource accounting on my constituency. The change to the new system is for the general good, but it needs to be implemented with considerable care in the labyrinth of local government finance.

The local government authority in my area, Dacorum, is an excellent example of its kind. A Labour administration from 1995 introduced a series of measures designed to tackle poverty and to initiate what we would now call a new deal. It pioneered many such beneficial initiatives, including a close relationship with local police, pre-dating the Government, which has resulted in an area of low crime and recent record falls in crime rates.

Dacorum is debt-free. That is one of the reasons why it could be proactive and support so many of the services not taken up by Hertfordshire county council. Voluntary services seem to be making up for many of the deficiencies of a social services system that is stretched to breaking point. One such organisation is the local Council for Voluntary Service, under the inspirational leadership of Mrs. June Street, who was recognised by Her Majesty for the quality of the work that she has done for the people of Dacorum.

If the local authority faced extraordinary resource difficulties, as Hertfordshire did, at least we had a voluntary service system supported by Dacorum borough and free of some of the impediments faced by many borough councils. That made a huge difference to the quality of life of many of the most needy people in my area.

For years, Dacorum has not asked permission from the Government to borrow. Inevitably, its housing stock decreased markedly under the right-to-buy proposals, but it remains strongly the landlord of choice for the many people who cannot afford to buy, even at discounted prices. Rents in the area are 6 per cent. lower than in Stevenage, and if a large-scale voluntary transfer of the stock were proposed, residents of Dacorum would say, "No way!" The council supports a number of housing initiatives outside the housing revenue account, including a women's refuge and a centre that supports those with mental health difficulties.

The net effect of the moves was that Dacorum, through selling houses and the contentious sale of a large playing field, which was technically a housing asset, was able to liberate itself from governmental spending constraints. It was able to use the interest on capital receipts and the receipts themselves to tackle poverty, deprivation, desperation and social malfunction, especially when it was led by a Labour councillor, Julia Coleman,

[Mr. Tony McWalter]

between 1995–99. In my view, in its use of resources, Dacorum borough council operated as a council should. It does not operate in that way now.

In its finances, the council faces the equivalent of planning blight, even catastrophe. It is tempting to be party political and say that the reason is that, since May 1999, it has been run by a minority Conservative administration. However, that accusation would be unfair. The Government have established a new system of organising local government finance that could be massively prejudiced against Dacorum and significantly damaging to other new towns, including Bracknell, Harlow and Crawley.

What is the origin of the blight, which means that my pensioner constituent will not receive help to get her bath, and that pensioners who enjoy a game of bowls at an economical price will be denied it? What threatens the budgets of dozens of voluntary organisations, which deliver services to the elderly, the mentally handicapped, the homeless, the mentally ill and those who need supported employment? The origin of the misery is that Dacorum has what is called "negative housing subsidy", and assets that exceed its liabilities. That makes it technically debt-free. It has debts, but they are covered by its assets.

Since an Act of Parliament in 1989, Dacorum has not received any borrowing authority to build or improve its houses, which number about 12,000. It had a negative housing subsidy, which it was required by law to put into its general rate fund. That meant that, this year, £8 million "profit" on the council housing budget subsidised general rate activities. In addition, the council is regarded as having what is technically called a mid-year subsidy credit ceiling, which is also negative—about £36 million. That mid-year subsidy credit ceiling, which is negative subsidy, is deemed an asset on which it can make interest.

Negative subsidy is a funny term. The whole system is built around the idea that councils are up to their ears in debt and that they want to borrow. A council that has managed its affairs well, whose policies anticipated many of the Government's policies and which is not in debt and is delivering a high-quality product to its people is somehow deemed an affront to the system. Hence the ridiculous language of negative subsidy. The mid-year subsidy credit ceiling system is deemed to deliver the council interest of £2 million on its assets. The sum is the item 8 credit that appears in the title of the debate on the Order Paper.

The £8 million in the council's general rate fund, which is 41 per cent. of the council's revenue, is threatened because the Government want no transfers from housing funds to the general rates. The straight implication is that Dacorum would have to slash its annual revenue budget by £8 million. Hundreds of local organisations would close their doors for ever. A council that does so much good will, alas, no longer be able to do that.

What did the Minister for Housing have to say about that? On 23 May he said—

It being Seven o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Mr. McWalter: I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I thought that I had temporarily got lost, in terms of the procedure. I hope that the debate will not last too much longer, so that we can get away a bit early.

On 23 May, the Minister for Housing and Planning said:

> The majority of respondents agreed that it was right to regard local authority housing as a national programme and that assumed surpluses in authorities' housing accounts should be retained within housing and redistributed through a pooling mechanism.—[*Official Report*, 23 May 2000; c. 437W.]

It can be said in words of one syllable that £8 million is to be lost by my local authority to authorities that are deemed more needful.

I have little doubt that—to quote Tony—those who say that they will rob Peter to pay Paul will have the support of Paul. In this case, the Pauls are in a strong majority; but it might be sensible to consider the implications for Peter before seizing his assets. So far, the Government have suggested a 10-year phasing in of the change—that is, the removal of the negative housing subsidy of £8 million. I thank the Minister for that, but it still represents a considerable year-on-year reduction. I value the work of my council, and I passionately value the welfare of my constituents. I thank the Minister for what he has done, as far as it goes, but I want a better outcome.

A second line of attack was recently offered by the technical advisory group to the Department. The group notes that for a decade local authorities that have been borrowers have been required to put aside money to cover their debts. That generated a resource that the Government could use for a national housing initiative. Debt-free authorities, however, did not make such provision. They did not put aside money to cover their debts, because they had no debts. They spent capital receipts, as they were fully entitled to do; or they saved them, and ploughed the interest into improving the quality of life of their citizens. That is certainly what Dacorum did. New rules for resource accounting now assume that they did not spend the money, and effectively require such authorities to pass the interest to the Department even if they no longer have the interest-earning capital.

I make the point because it has particular significance for other new towns. They regard this as retrospective legislation with a vengeance. Fortunately for Dacorum and for Hemel Hempstead—the same does not apply to some other new towns—at least Dacorum still has the money. It is still receiving interest, and it could meet the bill. The only misery—in fact, a major series of pieces of misery—that the item 8 transfer could cause would lie in the fact that Dacorum might then have no capital programme. After all, it has money, so it has no need to borrow—but look! It must not spend its money, or it will not be able to make its £2 million deemed interest payments to the Department.

The item 8 transfer would also mean that Dacorum would lose £2 million from its general rate fund, as part of the overall £8 million lost. It would never be able to get a capital programme going, because—this is a crucial point—new towns lack the land assets that older councils have.

Some might think this series of penalties rather steep for a new town that makes its contribution to the £160 million a year that is raised by such towns for

the Treasury through what used to be the Commission for New Towns, and is now English Partnerships. Some might consider such a penalty an absolute injustice to an authority that has made far fewer demands than others on Treasury resources, and that has made no contribution to the public sector borrowing requirement for a decade. Some will say, "If this is what happens when things are managed well, what is the point of managing well?".

The technical advisory group suggested that authorities that are debt-free should be asked not to make item 8 payments from the time of their freedom from debt. Freedom from debt does not mean that there are not major problems—including housing problems, which in my constituency are not covered by the housing revenue account.

In my constituency, the price of houses is too high to be managed on the salary of a teacher or nurse, so we have a brain drain to those parts of the country that have accommodation at more reasonable prices. We need affordable housing, but we will not get it through that other mechanism. We need support for housing, some of which will be outside the housing revenue account. A sensible Government would recognise the contribution by authorities that are not in debt and organise things appropriately.

I saw on the internet last night that Hilary Chipping from the Minister's Department has written to all local authority finance officers. She talked about the item 8 credit and said that the Department would

> write to you in October with any proposals for changes.

I am glad that there is a commitment to review item 8 arrangements, but it means that blight continues until October. I urge the Minister to recognise that the issue is more urgent than that. We need action now. Special action for new towns needs to be taken ahead of that universal consultation. I speak for colleagues who are also implicated in this business.

Hilary Chipping said in the letter to chief finance officers:

> There will be transitional arrangements.

I am grateful for that, but again, she will write later in the year. In the meantime, the authority is looking at what happens to that £6 million.

What do I want from the debate? First, I want an assurance that the Minister understands the gravity of the situation afflicting Dacorum and other authorities that are in negative housing subsidy. Secondly, I want an assurance that, whatever happens, he will ensure that there will not be a catastrophic cut in the council's budget over whatever period. I need that assurance now, so that rational planning of services can restart. Thirdly, I want him to press for the mid-year subsidy credit ceilings to be set at zero, as his own advisory group has suggested, rather than be deemed negative. That would allow assets to be used for the good of the community that generated them. It would permit a continuing capital programme and set item 8 credits at zero.

I hope that the Minister recognises the passion with which I have dealt with the matter, which looks on the surface rather cold and technical. These are real people; these are my constituents. Dacorum is an excellent council delivering on Labour's agenda for improvement in the quality of life of our citizens. I cannot bear to see it threatened, as it is at the moment.

7.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) for setting out the issue so clearly. It is to his credit that he made simple some fairly complex problems. I hope that he will find my response as clear.

I acknowledge the problem and the effect on my hon. Friend's local authority in particular, and on some others. I think that he knows that the Government take the matter seriously. He will recall that I have met two delegations on the issue: one of local authority leaders and one of Members of Parliament, including my hon. Friend.

The debate is timely. We are considering the detailed arrangements for the new financial framework for local authority housing next year, and looking closely at the position of negative subsidy authorities. We have already announced that there will be transitional arrangements from April next year to assist them. We shall shortly consult on those proposals.

Perhaps I should say a few words about the system of local authority housing finance and what we will do to improve it. There is general agreement that the present finance system is difficult to understand. It fails to provide the right framework for maintaining a valuable national asset and for taking forward the important changes that we are introducing, which are designed to ensure the best use of housing, best value in the provision of services and more effective tenant participation.

The housing revenue account must change. It will move to a resource accounting basis, making more transparent the cost of capital tied up in assets and providing additional resources to maintain it over the longer term. In due course, subject to Parliament's approving the necessary legislation, we propose that it should once again become a pure landlord account, no longer confusing housing activities with the personal support given to individual tenants through rent rebates.

In tonight's short debate, I shall not explain the intricacies of the existing system or our proposed changes. They can be found in the speech made by the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes), on 8 February in a debate which I believe that my hon. Friend attended.

As my hon. Friend will appreciate, under the existing system, resources are lost to housing at a time when there is a continuing need for them. That will all change with the introduction of the new financial framework. First, when we introduce the major repairs allowance next year, there is likely to be a substantial change in the amount of subsidy paid to authorities. That is essential in order to provide the revenue resources that authorities need to maintain their stock. As a result, authorities that are in negative subsidy—such as Three Rivers, which is in or near my hon. Friend's constituency—could go out of negative subsidy altogether and again be entitled to receive subsidy. Others, such as Dacorum, may remain in negative subsidy but at a lower level, with more rental income retained within the housing revenue account to spend on their stock. In either case, there will be consequences for the general fund.

The system will change again when we are able to take rent rebates out of the housing revenue account. When that happens, we propose to capture all assumed

[Mr. Chris Mullin]

surpluses, including all those that are offset against rent rebates. We have recently confirmed our intention to introduce the pooling of those surpluses. They will then be redistributed to authorities in deficit. When that change is introduced, negative subsidy authorities will no longer be able to transfer resources to their general fund. Along with all other surplus authorities, they will be required to pay their overall surpluses into the pool for redistribution to other housing authorities. That will ensure the most effective use of scarce resources. It will mean that housing resources are retained within housing.

We recognise that, for negative subsidy authorities, the changes may cause difficulties elsewhere. That is why we have said that we shall introduce measures to enable them to make the transition to the new system. Those measures will operate from next April. My hon. Friend pointed out that his local authority was attributing some of the cuts or the inability to provide services this year to the impending changes. I can say only that so far there is no basis for that as the changes do not come into effect until next April.

We are also reviewing the assumed investment rules to see whether there are any grounds for amending them next year. The local authority associations are fully involved in that review, and I understand they are keeping negative subsidy authorities informed of progress. I have already confirmed that we believe that the rules are generally sound in principle. However it may be justified to make some changes for debt-free authorities, which I understand would include most of those in negative subsidy. That could go a long way towards reducing the difficulties that they face as they move to the new system.

My hon. Friend asked three questions. The first was whether I understood the gravity of the situation. As I have explained, I do and have done for some time, thanks to his eloquence and that of others who represent the local authorities that are affected. That is why we are putting in place the transitional measures. We are aware that they must be finalised by December, to enable local authorities to make plans for the subsequent financial year.

My hon. Friend asked me for an assurance that there will be no catastrophic cuts and I can give him that assurance—but I cannot assure him that there will be no cuts. My hon. Friend asked also if I would press for the mid-year subsidy credit ceiling to be set at zero. I cannot do so, but we will be consulting on the way forward and that is one of the issues we shall be considering.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising a topic of considerable importance for a number of authorities, especially the one that my hon. Friend represents. I hope that I have reassured him, at least to some extent, that his concerns and those of his local authority have not fallen on stony ground. Equally, I hope that he accepts that the changes we are making to the housing revenue account system are long overdue.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at fifteen minutes past Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 23 June 2000

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Policing (London)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

9.33 am

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): It is a real delight to open today's debate on the policing of London. As I do, I should make to the House an apology that has already been communicated to the Opposition, which is that I shall leave after the Opposition Front Bencher has spoken. I hope that the House will accept in mitigation the fact that my attendance in the House has been fairly regular—in fact, this is the fifth occasion on which I have spoken from the Dispatch Box this week. [HON. MEMBERS: "More—not enough."] I thank my hon. Friends, but it is quite enough for me.

The debate comes at a pivotal moment in the history of London's policing, for, on Monday, the Metropolitan Police Authority is to be launched and the following week, on 3 July, the authority will formally assume its legal responsibilities. That will, in a sense, complete the first 171-year chapter in the history of the Metropolitan police. The change comes at a time of other fundamental reforms amounting to the biggest programme of change in the history of the Metropolitan police service. The focus of those reforms is improved performance and service delivery, especially in crime reduction. The new Commissioner, Sir John Stevens, has pledged to make London the safest major city in the world.

Such a goal is realistic today only because of the Met's long and distinguished history. The Metropolitan Police Act 1829 provided for the setting up of the Met—the nation's first police force. That Act set in train legislation soon afterwards to empower and later require local government elsewhere to establish police forces throughout the country. The most distinguished of my predecessors as Home Secretary, Robert Peel, showed great foresight in setting up the Metropolitan police service, but that was not immediately appreciated at the time. Known because of the colour of their uniforms as "raw lobsters" or "blue devils", one historian has noted that hostility to the new London police was "immediate and universal". They were the butt of endless abuse from the public and the press and bitterly criticised for their alleged infringement of people's freedoms. None the less, by the end of the 1850s, they had gained the public's affection and, in the latter half of the 19th century, they proved instrumental in the steady fall in the capital's crime rates.

I shall deal later with matters of pay and recruitment in today's Metropolitan police service, but disputes over such matters are not new. In 1872, 180 officers mutinied over pay, and pay and appalling living quarters were major causes of the 1918 and 1919 police strikes, in which more than 1,000 striking officers were dismissed. The collapse of the 1919 strike led to the outlawing of industrial action by the police and the formation of the Police Federation, better to represent police officers. Throughout its history until now, the Met has been the responsibility of the Home Secretary, who has acted as its police authority. That arrangement ends on 2 July.

Over the past year, the Met has continued its record of operational success. The millennium night celebrations saw the successful policing of an event involving more than 3 million people. At the May day demonstrations, the police defused a potentially explosive situation and kept disruption and damage—unacceptable though any such behaviour was—to a minimum. Meanwhile the Met has continued to improve its use of resources, for example, through cutting sickness absence, which has resulted in absence falling from an annual average of 14 and a half days per officer in 1997-98 to nine and a half days now. That is lower than the average across England and Wales and equivalent to putting almost 200 officers back on duty each day during 1999-2000.

The previous Commissioner, Sir Paul Condon, was, of course, responsible for the millennium policing. I paid tribute to Sir Paul's outstanding record of achievement during last July's debate on the policing of London, and I do so again today. I am sure that the whole House joins me in congratulating his successor, Sir John Stevens, and his officers and staff, on their further successes and in thanking them for their continued dedication to duty.

In the past year, the Metropolitan police have made considerable progress in implementing the action plan on the recommendations of the inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence. In particular, the Met has concentrated on improving its approach to diversity. Through its establishment of the racial and violent crime taskforce, the service has made great strides in combating racist and hate crimes. It is a huge compliment to the work of Assistant Commissioner John Grieve and his colleagues that, in the space of two years, the Met has developed such a reputation for the investigation of such crimes that people outside London now call for John Grieve's force to be brought in, the better to investigate such crimes—indeed, that demand was made during a recent demonstration in difficult circumstances. That is a real compliment to the service.

The Met has taken active steps in adapting its use of stop-and-search powers, in line with recommendation 61 of the Lawrence inquiry. The Government wholeheartedly support the use of stop and search, as did the Lawrence inquiry. Those powers are plainly important for the detection and prevention of crime. There has been a drop in the numbers of searches made in the past year, and there have been some ill-informed claims that the rise in street crime in London is attributable to officers not using stop-and-search powers for fear of being accused of racism. However, the research evidence shows that those claims do not stand up. It is simplistic and statistically unsustainable to make a direct connection between the falling number of stops and the rising number of crimes.

We have put in place an extensive programme of research with the Met to improve our understanding of stop and search and better to inform decisions about its fairness and effectiveness. Everyone wants to see fewer stops that do not reveal evidence of crime, and more stops

[Mr. Jack Straw]

that result in the arrest and conviction of those who prey on law-abiding citizens, but everyone needs to recognise that police officers are faced with difficult and near-instantaneous decisions. They are not clairvoyant and they are bound, by definition, sometimes to stop people who are entirely innocent and sometimes to make mistakes. Where those mistakes come within a reasonable range, we should support the police and not be overly critical of them.

Over the past 10 years, crime has fallen in London. Between 1992-93 and 1999-2000, discounting the changes in counting rules, crime fell by 8.6 per cent., but it has risen by about 11 per cent. in the past year. There is a mixed picture across the country. Crime fell in 23 of the 43 forces, according to the figures made available about six months ago. A similar pattern is emerging from the figures that are due to be published in mid-July.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I accept what the Home Secretary said a moment ago about the need for research into the effects of stop and search, but does he concede that there is at least a prima facie possibility that the backwash of Lawrence and what has flowed from that, and the change in the pattern of police behaviour, may well have contributed to the increase in crime in London that he has just outlined? If that is the case, or even if it were possibly the case, can the Home Secretary give an undertaking that the research will be completed quickly, so that we can resolve the matter and give the police the freedoms that they require?

Mr. Straw: The research is being conducted as quickly as possible. Like all research, once it has been properly evaluated—not by Ministers, but by independent peer reviewers—it will be made publicly available. Of course we should draw whatever lessons are to be drawn from it. I understand—it would be idle to pretend otherwise—that the Lawrence inquiry process and the report's conclusions were traumatic for many police officers in the Metropolitan police service, particularly those who felt that they had been doing a decent and impartial job. I understand that.

Also I am wholly unapologetic for the fact that I felt it necessary to establish the Lawrence inquiry. There may be those who feel otherwise, but I do not believe that they are very many. I ask people to think for a moment what would have happened if that incredible resentment, not just of the Lawrence family but of the entire black and Asian community, had continued without any proper and legal focus.

There has been some increase in street crime in other metropolitan areas, so the phenomenon is not confined to London. We must identify the causes and above all—this is what the Commissioner is doing—implement Lawrence, put behind us the temporary trauma of the Metropolitan police and support the Commissioner in his determination to get street crime down.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: I will of course give way to the hon. Gentleman, but first I want to make a little progress.

Over the past year in London there has been a significant rise in robbery especially, which is up by 36 per cent. for the period April 1999 to March 2000, compared with the previous year. Thefts of mobile telephones have been a major factor in this increase. They account for up to a third of robberies in some boroughs, many of them committed by schoolchildren against other schoolchildren.

The increase in robbery is disappointing after three successive years of falling figures. The bulk of the increase was contributed by "hot spots" in eight boroughs, mainly in inner London. I shall return to two important steps that we should take with respect to robbery.

We should keep London's crime rate in perspective. London is still a remarkably safe city by international standards. Murder is one of the most reliable offences with which to make international comparisons and a good indicator of the general level of violence in society. London's homicide rate is roughly one fifth of New York's, a little over a quarter of Amsterdam's, and lower than that of most European capitals, including Madrid, Paris, Helsinki, Berlin, Dublin, Lisbon, Budapest and Prague.

Stemming the increase in street crime is a high priority in the coming year. Under our crime reduction strategy, the Met has set challenging crime reduction targets for the next five financial years, including a 15 per cent. reduction on the 1999-2000 levels of street crime. The targets also foresee a 10 per cent. reduction in domestic burglaries, and a 31 per cent. reduction in vehicle crime—that is, 7,500 fewer domestic burglaries and 50,000 fewer vehicle crimes.

To bear down on street crime, the Commissioner has launched the safer streets initiative, which began last month in Lambeth and will roll out progressively to other boroughs. It is an initiative led by individual borough commanders, who will liaise with partners and communities to develop street crime intervention plans, tailored to meet local needs. Boroughs will have access to specialist support in key areas such as intelligence gathering and analysis, surveillance and the investigation of offences. It is still early days for the operation in Lambeth, but the initial results are encouraging.

The Government are particularly keen to help the Met in its fight against robbery, which everyone understands is one of the most distressing of crimes for its victims. Last week—

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Straw: In a moment, but I shall give way first to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes).

Last week we announced an extra £20 million of funding to help the police fight robbery in the five big cities where it is on the increase, and £9 million of that will go to the Met.

Mr. Hughes: I do not dissent at all from the Home Secretary's proposition that London is much safer in terms of serious crime than many other cities, and the objective should be to make it safer still. Will he report on two matters? First, what is happening to the attempt to increase the clear-up of serious crime, particularly

murder? There have been a number of murders over the years that have not been cleared up and the Met was going to make a particular effort to do so.

Secondly, will the Home Secretary think again about crimes that have not been solved, about which there is a feeling of great injustice in parts of the community, geographical or otherwise? Many people would welcome an independent examination of how those crimes were investigated, as in the Lawrence case.

Mr. Straw: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, following the Lawrence inquiry the previous Commissioner and the present Commissioner allocated hundreds of officers to the investigation of serious crimes. I believe the figure is 350, but if I am wrong, I will correct it during my speech.

On the second point, if there are specific crimes that have not been cleared up and about which the hon. Gentleman wishes to write to me, I shall follow the matter up. However, I do not believe that a full-blown judicial inquiry of the kind that I established into the death of Stephen Lawrence is a mechanism that should be used other than very sparingly, for the most obvious of reasons, but there are occasions when other investigations need to take place. For the longer term, we are committed to establishing a much more rigorously independent complaints system, with an independent team of investigators, for the investigation of serious complaints.

Mr. Davies: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. First, does he know that in Croydon we have the largest population of 10 to 17-year-olds, and there has been a large growth in the incidence of thefts of mobile phones, Pokémon cards and so on in that age group? Will he factor that into resourcing and strategies? Secondly, I have written to my right hon. Friend about considering stop and search in respect of people carrying spray cans, in view of the massive increase in graffiti. Has he reflected on that?

Mr. Straw: As my hon. Friend knows, the allocation of resources in the Met is a matter for the Commissioner. I have no doubt that the new authority will also take a close interest in it. It is inevitable that there will be arguments between areas; it was ever thus, and that will continue, whoever is Home Secretary. I understand the anxieties in Croydon and I am delighted to know about several initiatives there, not least the Croydon against shop theft initiative which was launched recently.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North–East Hertfordshire): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: May I finish the point first? The second point that my hon. Friend made was about spray cans. I have already replied to him; I took a lot of trouble over the reply. My hon. Friend asked whether paint spray cans could be placed in the same category as glue, which is prohibited from sale to over-18s—

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): Under-18s.

Mr. Straw: Sorry, under-18s. Lord Patten and I and other hon. Members worked together in the early 1980s and were instrumental in introducing the change about the sale of glue. My hon. Friend will understand that, given the wider lawful use of spray cans, it is much more difficult to prohibit their sale to under-18s. I said that in my reply to him. However, as ever, we keep those matters under review.

Mr. Heald: There is anxiety about the acceleration of the increase in crime. Is the Home Secretary right to say that the rate of increase in crime in London is 11 per cent.? In an answer on 15 May the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), said that the figure was 12.6 per cent. Has the Home Secretary given us good news—that the figure has fallen—or is his figure wrong?

Mr. Straw: Both the figure that I gave and that which my hon. Friend provided are correct, but in different ways. *[Interruption.]* There is a straightforward explanation for that. Early on in my post as Home Secretary, I agreed with recommendations from the police and statisticians that we should change the counting rules to increase the total number of recorded crimes. It was not a self-serving change; indeed, it was the reverse because the change in the counting rules is one of the reasons for the significant increase in the number of recorded crimes of fraud and forgery.

In the past, the theft of a cheque book counted as one theft. Now the use of the cheques in the book amounts to 15 or 20 thefts. If an individual broke into a secure car park and broke into 15 vehicles in the car park, it counted as one offence. Under the new rules it counts—in my view, rightly—as 15 offences. However, the figures for robbery have risen because robberies have increased, and some crimes, such as burglary, have been unaffected by the change in the rules.

The statisticians have made comparisons between the figures that did not take account of the rule change and those that did. The figure that my hon. Friend the Minister of State gave—12.6 per cent.—took no account of the effect of the rule change and is correct; my figure—11.2 per cent.—is also correct and took account of the change. I hope that that is a satisfactory explanation.

Let us revert to the issue of robbery. We want to send a clear message to violent criminals that they can expect the stiffest penalties if they commit robberies or other street crimes. In recent years, the general response of the courts, especially to violent crime, has been to send greater numbers of offenders to prison, for longer periods. For example, the custody rate for offences such as wounding with intent to do grievous bodily harm increased from 76 per cent. to 90 per cent. between 1992 and 1999, with average sentence lengths increasing from 36.5 months to 46 months. The trend is similar for other violent and sexual offences.

The one exception appears to be robbery. While custody rates for robbery offenders of all ages have remained static, average sentence lengths, especially for adults, decreased by 9 per cent. between 1999 and 1999. They have decreased from more than 39 months seven years ago to 35.7 months. There has been an increase in life sentences for robbery, possibly as a result of the mandatory life sentence on conviction for a second serious offence, which we implemented in 1997. However, for the vast bulk of robbery offenders there seems to have been a decline in the length of the prison term to which they are sentenced.

[Mr. Straw]

I see no obvious justification for that. More to the point, neither does the Court of Appeal. In a series of appeals before it by the Attorney-General against unduly lenient sentences for robbery, the Court of Appeal significantly increased the sentence of the original court. On Monday, Lord Justice Rose increased from six months to three years the sentence for two defendants—Mullins and Edwards—who had robbed a student in Bristol city centre. So far this year, the Court of Appeal has increased the sentences in each of the nine unduly lenient robbery appeals it heard.

Robbery is a serious offence and extremely distressing to its victims. I am sure that that view is shared by every Crown court sentencer. However, it is important that they take full account of the clear guidance now emanating from the Court of Appeal that sentences should be severe. When courts are tempted to impose a lenient sentence, they should recognise that the Attorney-General is prepared to appeal those sentences and that the Court of Appeal has usually accepted those appeals.

I hope that the courts will also take into account the need to take serious and prolific offenders out of circulation while they await trial. There is nothing more disheartening for the police than to spend weeks tracking down prolific street robbers or burglars, many of them addicted to drugs, and some with 20 or more offences to be taken into consideration, only to see them walk straight out of the courtroom door on bail. There is a serious problem in several metropolitan magistrates courts which do not take proper account of police and prosecution representations on granting bail. The number of cases that I see from time to time of people who have committed offences on bail beggars belief.

I hope that the courts will begin to take the representations into account and recognise that it is distressing to the victims, and deeply demoralising to the police officers if they go to a lot of trouble to apprehend a prolific offender only for that person to walk out of court. Everybody knows, except, apparently, the court, that such offenders will commit more offences until they are convicted.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Does my right hon. Friend agree that not only previous victims and the police are frustrated and incredulous, but subsequent victims who, when they discover what has happened, ask, "Why on earth were these people let back out into the community to perpetrate an offence on me?"

Mr. Straw: I agree entirely. If such cases are brought to the attention of hon. Members of all parties, I hope that they will write personally to me about them. The more detail they can provide, the better. I shall raise them with my noble Friend the Lord Chancellor. We have asked the courts to get a serious grip on the problem. Ensuring that persistent offenders are remanded in custody, when there is every possibility of their committing further offences if they are released, will make a significant difference to the instances of crime, especially street crime and burglary, in our capital.

Let us consider resources for the Met.

Mr. Heald: Is it not right that more and more youngsters get involved in robbery because they feel an increasing confidence in doing so, while the police are hamstrung by more targets? Those are the views of Deputy Assistant Commissioner Andy Trotter.

Mr. Straw: The purpose of the targets, which the Metropolitan police service agreed, is to try to tackle some of the serious crimes, including robbery. I have great respect for Deputy Assistant Commissioner Andy Trotter, but, without knowing more about the context, I cannot say that I wholly share his view. We have agreed a robbery target, among others, with the Met to get robbery down. Officers in the Met fully support it and we are backing the target with money.

Until the early 1990s, the Met was the beneficiary of its history when it came to setting budgets, because each year's allocation between forces was largely based on what they had got the year before. However, a series of tight financial settlements in the 1990s and the new specific police grant based on a needs formula led to a tight squeeze on the Met and a reduction in officer numbers of some 1,800 between 1992-93 and 1997-98.

From the first budget that I set in 1998-99, I have endeavoured to ensure that sufficient funds are available at least to maintain existing strength. In the event, that has not proved possible. Despite a 4.1 per cent. budget increase in 1998-99, there was a reduction of 144 officers in that year, and there have been further reductions since then. In general, that has not been for want of funds, but principally because of recruiting difficulties.

The Metropolitan police budget for 2000-01 has been set at £1.842 billion. That includes a significant increase of 40 per cent. in the so-called special payments since 1997-98 to £182 million, which recognises the special demands of policing the capital and seeks to redress some of the anomalies inherent in the needs formula. The Commissioner intends to maintain overall police numbers at around 25,600 throughout the financial year 2000-01.

I am taking action in two ways to address the issue of police numbers in London. First, the crime fighting fund provides a guarantee that the police in England and Wales will have the resources to recruit 5,000 more police officers than they would otherwise have recruited over the next two years. The Met's allocation is sufficient to fund 1,113 additional front-line officers over the next two years.

Secondly, and perhaps even more important, there is no doubt that officers recruited to the Metropolitan police service since 1994 have been hit hardest of all by the double whammy of the loss of housing allowance, which followed the Sheehy report in 1994, and more recently by the rising housing costs in London.

I am therefore pleased to announce to the House today that the pay of all officers in the Metropolitan police service who joined on or after 1 September 1994 and who receive no housing allowance will increase from 1 July—next week—by £3,327, or £64 a week. That is a significant increase in their pay, and they deserve it. It means that post-1994 recruits and officers in the Met will be paid significantly more than other comparable public sector workers.

The £3,300 increase in pay for officers recruited on or after September 1994 will bring the starting salary of a constable up to £22,635. With five years' service, he or she will get £27,609. There is also sometimes substantial

overtime, which on average amounts to between £4,000 and £5,000 a year for London constables, although that can vary between one constable and another.

The £22,600 starting pay for new constables in London compares well with the starting pay for a good honours graduate teaching in inner London, of £18,366. After a period of years, such teachers can earn a maximum of £26,374 and then be eligible for performance bonus.

This is a good pay package, which, I am pleased to say, has been warmly welcomed in a statement this morning by the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis. He said:

I believe this award recognises the loyal service of officers already working in London and will help both to increase recruitment and to prevent officers leaving the Metropolitan Police Service.

The tribunal decision, which I have accepted and on which this award is based, makes it very clear that there appears to be a worsening situation among post-Sheehy officers, but that there is

no real problem at the present time in the pre-Sheehy group

who, before the award that I have just announced, had a differential in their pay of, on average, £5,500.

The award will take the total London lead over officers outside London to £6,000 per year—£120 a week. It will substantially bridge the gap between them and those officers doing the same job who joined before 1 September 1994.

Mr. Edward Davey: May I welcome the Home Secretary's announcement, which restores to post-Sheehy London police officers the housing allowance which the Tories effectively abolished? However, may I ask him to keep this matter under review, because housing costs are a major factor for all public sector workers in London, particularly the police? Will the extra reward be funded with additional funds to the Metropolitan police service or will it have to come out of existing budgets?

Mr. Straw: We keep these matters under review, and there is a proper negotiating process for them. It is unlikely that I shall be able to persuade my colleagues in the Treasury to find an increase of another £3,300 very quickly. It shows the importance that we place on the work of London police officers that the starting pay of London police officers is now substantially more than, for example, another important group—I say this as a governor of a London school—namely, teachers in inner London.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Although the increase will be welcomed by Metropolitan police officers, what assurance can the Home Secretary give about the effect on recruitment and retention of officers in other forces, such as that in Surrey where my constituency is?

Mr. Straw: I have just been reminded that I have not answered the second point made by the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey). Most of the additional cost, which is, from memory, £24 million in a full year, will be paid by funds from money that was announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his Budget on 21 March. A small proportion will come from the existing resources of the Metropolitan police service, but the Commissioner is satisfied that the additional moneys can be found—it amounts to £2 million or £3 million out of a budget of £1,800 million.

The hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) asked me about the effect of the pay rise on recruitment in Surrey. We cannot say for certain; there is a continuing debate about the effect of higher—in this case, significantly higher—pay in London on public services in outer London. The Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), has already met chief constables from the home counties forces. If good evidence is put before us of serious recruitment problems in those forces, we will take that into account and look at it. Discussions are continuing.

Mr. Heald *rose—*

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster) *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I shall give way first to the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke).

Mr. Brooke: I am most grateful to the Home Secretary.

As the discussion about numbers and resources will continue, despite the announcement that the Home Secretary has made today, which of course I welcome, can he say whether the figure of £25,600—the target figure—is post-realignment of the boundaries?

Mr. Straw: It is post-realignment. Some 100 officers have been transferred to forces in the home counties.

Mr. Heald: The Home Secretary must know that we are well below that target, with the latest figure being £25,480. Will he comment on Sir John's comments yesterday? He said that although he welcomed the reinstatement of a form of housing allowance recommended a couple of days ago,

quite honestly, I do not believe this will be enough to attract the quality applicants we need.

Has something changed since yesterday, as this seems to be the package that the Home Secretary has just announced?

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman would have to ask the Commissioner, rather than me. What has changed is that I have made the announcement, which I had not done yesterday. I believe, on any basis whatever, that this increase £3,500—£64 a week—is bound to make a difference to the attractiveness of the police service in London. It should be welcomed, and was unequivocally welcomed this morning by the Commissioner.

I am not announcing a pay rise that might happen some time in the future; this increase will be earned by officers from 1 July—next week—and those officers have welcomed it very much indeed. The Met's problem has been not in getting sufficient interest in recruitment—the number of people who express interest in recruitment has remained stable at about 40,000 to 45,000—but in closing the sale and getting those who express an interest into the recruiting schools. This award is bound to make a difference, along with other changes introduced by the Metropolitan police service.

[Mr. Straw]

I shall now make progress because many other right hon. and hon. Members wish to speak. Of course we want to increase numbers in the Metropolitan police service, and I have announced the ways in which we are seeking to do that. However, as we know from other public services, numbers are by no means everything. Each of us has had experience of good schools and less good schools, good hospitals and less good hospitals, which get the same resources for the same kinds of people and problems, but do remarkably different things. The same is true in London.

It happens that London enjoyed its sharpest fall in crime when the Met suffered its sharpest fall in numbers. I do not say that a reductio ad absurdum is involved; I simply make the point that the relationships between police numbers, overall resources and effectiveness are complicated. We are committed to increasing Met numbers, but we are also committed to ensuring that the police right across London work to the level of the best divisions and police officers.

I shall briefly deal with the restructuring of the Met. Sir Robert Peel showed extraordinary foresight in 1829 by establishing geographical boundaries for the Met that were far greater than those of the then metropolitan city. They were still three times the area of the city administered by the London county council on its establishment in 1888, and even extended well beyond the boundaries of the Greater London council in 1964. At least a third of Surrey and significant parts of Hertfordshire and Essex were, until the beginning of April this year, policed by Met officers.

Following representations from hon. Members for those areas and from local authorities, I took the opportunity of the creation of the new MPA to re-align the Met's boundaries with those of the MPA and the new Greater London Authority. That will ensure that there can be borough policing in each of the 32 boroughs, which, in turn, means a reduction in the number of local operational command units from 60 to 32.

The Commissioner is building on those objectives with the agenda for action reform programme. Those reforms have removed a tier of management, resulting in savings of more than £4 million, and have transferred funding for 445 posts from central budgets, with the effect that, by the end of this financial year, an extra 300 officers will be put on the beat. There has also been a reduction in the number of senior officers. There used to be five areas—each of which was bigger than most police forces outside London—each headed by an assistant commissioner. Sir Paul Condon reduced those areas to three, and Sir John has abolished them entirely. Management is now much more streamlined between New Scotland Yard, at the centre, and the 32 boroughs responsible for delivering policing to local communities.

Those reforms will be greatly aided by the inception of the new Metropolitan Police Authority. I have long believed in the key role of police authorities in ensuring police accountability. You will remember, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as you were elected at the same time, that back in 1979, just after I entered the House, I introduced a ten-minute Bill—the Police Authorities (Powers) Bill—which proposed, among other things, a properly representative and democratic police authority for London. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] Thank you, but I failed. A year later, I introduced the Police Bill—again, without success.

All that those Bills did was to enhance my reputation as a dangerous left winger, who wished to hand over the operation of the police service to politicians—a reputation, of course, that I continue. One of the delights of being Home Secretary is being able to put into law ideas that one had 20 years ago. I was glad that we were able to do that under the Greater London Authority Act 1999.

My argument is the same today as it was 20 years ago—it was frankly an impertinence for one man, with many other and conflicting duties, to seek to represent the people of London on policing matters. Therefore, we now have a new police authority with a similar structure and virtually the same powers as those outside the capital.

Let me make it clear that the creation of the MPA and the election of a Mayor and the Assembly do not in any way erode the operational independence of the Commissioner. Neither the MPA nor the Home Secretary or the Mayor has the right to direct him on how he conducts operations. The Commissioner is accountable for his decisions. After any major event or incident, the MPA, and in some cases the Home Secretary, can order a report on what happened and on the lessons to be learned. That post hoc scrutiny is important, but it does not detract from the independence of the police in handling incidents at the time.

Although the MPA will not affect the Met's operational independence, it will of course have a major impact on the policing of London. It will have to work with the Met to deliver a first-class policing service, taking responsibility for the budget and securing best value, consulting local people, setting objectives, working with crime reduction partnerships and playing a significant role in the appointment of senior officers.

The 23 members of the MPA have now been appointed—12 are from the Assembly, seven are independents and four are magistrates. I am pleased that seven of them are from the black and Asian communities. I am particularly keen that the MPA should build on the links that the Metropolitan police already have with the diverse communities of London.

The duty of best value, which came into force on 1 April, will have a major impact on how all police authorities operate, including the MPA. Meanwhile, the Home Secretary still has the power, under the Greater London Authority Act 1999, to set a minimum budget for the MPA if he or she considers that the one set by the Mayor and Assembly is too low to maintain an efficient and effective police force. I assure the House that I will use that power if I have to. The Home Secretary also retains powers to ensure that the Met continues to perform its national and international functions, such as counter-terrorism and protection, to a satisfactory standard.

The Home Secretary will make recommendations to Her Majesty on the appointment of the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner, given the national and international importance of those posts, as well as their importance to London as a capital. When major events

occur. I have no doubt that I shall be expected to, and will, report to the House, as I have done in the past, in my capacity as Home Secretary.

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): In view of all the powers that my right hon. Friend is retaining, will he give an assurance that there will continue to be an annual debate in the House on policing in the metropolis and that it will not be shuffled off to the Greater London Authority?

Mr. Straw: I have no objection to there being an annual debate on policing in London, but that is a matter for business managers, as my hon. Friend knows. We must recognise that the House has voluntarily agreed to transfer to the new police authority some of the responsibilities that I hold as the current police authority.

Mr. Cohen: My right hon. Friend is keeping the powers.

Mr. Straw: I assure my hon. Friend that my powers are fairly limited. The main power is to ensure that a maverick Metropolitan Police Authority could not cut the budget of the Metropolitan police service and hand it over to some fanciful occupation. I do not think that that will happen, but I thought it necessary to take that power, as well as others in respect of national and international policing. If it is the will of the House, we can communicate my hon. Friend's view, and that of the House, to business managers.

I am sure that the whole House joins me in extending best wishes to the members of the Metropolitan Police Authority as they get to grips with their new role.

The Metropolitan police was the first police service in the country, and it has always played a leading role in the development of our very successful systems of policing. I am confident that, with proper resourcing, Sir John Stevens's programme of reform and the launch of an independent MPA, we can ensure that it continues to play that role and to win the fight against crime and that it continues and enhances London's reputation as one of the safest cities in the world.

10.18 am

Mr. Oliver Heald (North–East Hertfordshire): I agree with the Home Secretary that this is an historic moment. For more than 100 years, Home Secretaries have acted as the police authority for the metropolis, and I echo his comment that the new Metropolitan Police Authority should have our best wishes. We hope that it will do a good job for London.

I join the Home Secretary in paying tribute to the men and women of the Metropolitan police service. They perform a difficult and dangerous task, which should not be underestimated—I do not believe that it is in the House. I thank him for making proof copies of the final version of the Commissioner's 2000-01 plan available to right hon. and hon. Members before the debate.

Last year, my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) opened the debate for the Opposition. He said that, as a former Metropolitan police officer, he felt honoured to do so. I have never been a police officer, but I feel that it is a privilege to speak for the Opposition today.

I pay particular tribute to all the front-line crime fighters in London, from the specialist squads who are involved in some of the most high-profile cases, to police constables. They all do an excellent job in difficult circumstances. I was struck by what Sir John Stevens said yesterday:

> We have some incredibly courageous and breathtakingly brave officers doing amazing things, but we see so little of it in the press.

It would be good to see more of the tremendous work done by the Metropolitan police reflected in media comments.

I echo what the Home Secretary said about the retirement of Sir Paul Condon and the appointment of Sir John Stevens. I, too, pay tribute to Sir Paul's work. As we have already seen, Sir John has adopted a distinctive, radical and hands-on approach to many aspects of his job, and we wish him well.

Times are changing. We live in the world of the Macpherson report and the Human Rights Act 1998, and we shall soon have the Race Relations (Amendment) Act. Officers must be aware of all their implications. They have been providing, and will continue to provide, particular challenges for the Metropolitan police, but progress is being made. I know that the Metropolitan police feel that very strongly. I was pleased to hear the Home Secretary repeat a point that has been made numerous times, but is nevertheless important: that the right of officers to stop and search should not be curtailed for other than operational reasons.

I have no doubt that the Metropolitan police will meet the challenges of the future as they have met those of the past, but there is a worry about morale in the force, which is reflected in recruitment. Last year, a survey of 6,000 serving officers produced separate results for the Metropolitan police. Eighty-seven per cent. of Met officers could not say that morale was high, and 78 per cent. said that they would take a job outside the police service with the same pay if it were offered to them. Sir John said yesterday:

> We have taken one hell of a battering over the past two years.

In a debate on police numbers on 3 May, my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall), who is present, said:

> The council tax payers of Hillingdon want to know why, in the past three years, their precept for the Metropolitan police has gone up by 36.29 per cent., yet they are getting fewer and fewer police officers for their money. Four police stations in Hillingdon are now closed to the public or operate restricted schedules, with opening hours that generally do not include weekends, bank holidays or any hour after 6 o'clock in the evening . . . Only Uxbridge police station is open to the public for 24 hours a day.—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 3 May 2000; Vol. 349, c. 47WH.]

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): I am afraid I have some bad news. Uxbridge police station is now closed between 2 am and 6 am. No police station front desk in the Hillingdon division is now open during those hours.

Mr. Heald: That reinforces the point that my hon. Friend was making on 3 May. There is real concern about access to the police at the times when people are most worried about crime, and most fearful.

We should not ignore that public concern, and the issue of numbers is crucial to it. It is the cuts in police numbers in London that have led to the cuts in police stations, and

[Mr. Heald]

in the hours for which they are open. The numerical strength of the Met—the number of officers available, rather than the budgetary strength—has taken a battering recently. When the Government came to power in 1997, it was 27,166. Yesterday, Sir John said that the figure was 25,480. That is a drop of nearly 1,700 in just over three years. The thin blue line is becoming ever thinner. That is just the figure for the Metropolitan police; the City of London police have lost more than 100 officers in the same period.

Sir John has said that he needs to maintain at least 25,600 officers if he is to police London properly. He says that

> if numbers continue to dwindle we're in trouble, make no mistake. We have reached a point where I am going to have publicly to say that we don't have enough officers to police London properly . . . We do not have enough officers to police London with confidence.

Those words speak for themselves. I believe that they are of great concern to hon. Members on both sides of the House, and especially to the police and the public in London. We have falling police numbers; we have what the Commissioner himself has described as a crisis in recruitment, and the impact of that has been plain on the streets of London. The chairman of the Police Federation, Glen Smyth, put it in a rather pithy phrase:

> You've got to have feet on the beat to put hands on collars.

That is an amusing way of putting it, but it is a good point. If we have not got feet on the beat, we are not going to catch people.

Will the Minister tell us what analysis the Home Office has made of the impact on recruitment, and the number of extra feet on the beat, of an official offer to increase London weighting, which the Home Secretary announced today?

Mr. Straw: As I said, we are of course concerned about the reduction in numbers, and have introduced significant measures to ensure that they return to where they should be.

Will the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that about a third of the reduction that he mentioned is accounted for by the transfer of officers from London to Essex, Kent and Surrey? Will he also acknowledge, in a spirit of non-partisanship, that the Metropolitan police suffered a serious squeeze between 1992-93 and 1997-98, when it lost 1,700 officers? Since then I have sought, with only relative success, to stabilise numbers. We have seen nothing like that decline in the last three years.

Mr. Heald: I think the Home Secretary will recognise that there was a background of organisational changes in the force between 1992 and 1997, as in almost every other walk of life. Middle management was removed. It is true that police numbers fell slightly across the country, but there were 2,500 extra constables; and in London, although there was a small fall in the number of constables, it was nothing like the number quoted.

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): The last Government announced their response to the Sheehy report in October 1993. The figure for April 1995 shows a drop of 1,178 in Metropolitan police numbers in 12 months, and a national drop of 2,069. That was the impact of Sheehy, from which we never recovered. Metropolitan police numbers in London peaked just before Sheehy.

Mr. Heald: I do not accept that the one follows the other. The fact is that a reorganisation was taking place—*[Interruption.]* There was a reorganisation, which meant that chief inspectors were no longer appointed and there were cuts in middle management. The present Government have taken no steps to reverse that.

If the hon. Gentleman feels that the numbers that existed under the Conservatives—which, after all, had increased across the country by 15,000 since 1979—were not satisfactory, how must he feel now? Even according to the Home Secretary's figures, if we take full account of secondments to Hertfordshire, Essex and Surrey, London numbers have fallen by 1,200 in three years, and it looks as though that fall will continue.

Let us examine the way in which the crime fighting fund is alleged to work. I understand from written answers given by the Minister that over the next two years the Met will recruit, or have transferred in, a total—this is the base figure—of 1,068 officers. Over the same period, 2,700 Met officers will leave the force or transfer out, making a net loss of 1,632 officers. Since then, a growth in the crime fighting fund has been announced, which should result in 1,113 recruits over two years. However, the Metropolitan police, despite the much-vaunted crime fighting fund, will lose 519 more officers between now and March 2002.

I am trying to discuss these matters in a non-partisan way by simply setting out the arithmetic contained in parliamentary answers. However, the Met has already lost 1,200 officers—taking account of secondments—and will lose 519 more. In addition, the City of London force has lost more than 100 officers. That is far from satisfactory.

Mr. Efford: The April edition of the police magazine, *The Voice of the Service*, contains an article headlined "Sheehy's chickens come home to roost". It states:

> The "substantial savings" that resulted from the Clarke/Sheehy/Howard era have already inflicted great harm on the police service.

The service is fed up with being a political football. We must accept that mistakes were made in the past and that the Government are addressing them by tackling housing allocation.

Mr. Heald: Circumstances have plainly changed since the time of Sheehy, but I would never admit the point that the Home Secretary has made with the benefit of hindsight.

Mr. Straw *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Heald: It is true; at the time of the Sheehy proposals, the housing situation in London was much different to that pertaining today.

Mr. Straw: How does one admit a mistake except with hindsight?

Mr. Heald: Let us take this matter seriously. If one makes a decision on day one, and 30 days later something has happened that changes circumstances for the future,

one w[illegible] wrong in the first place but must be sensible enough [illegible]nge one's mind. We have made it clear that we are [illegible]ng to reconsider housing allowances, as my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition made clear to the Police Federation conference. I do not accept the admonitions offered either by the hon. Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) or the Home Secretary.

It is worrying that the position—the hon. Member for Eltham agreed that it was unsatisfactory—will get worse.

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Heald: Yes, it will. A further 519 officers will be lost unless the Home Secretary takes some action.

Mr. Straw *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Heald: That is no good: even on the right hon. Gentleman's own figures, 519 more officers will be lost. That will be the overall effect of the crime fighting fund. If he says that he is introducing measures to improve recruitment, we shall welcome it. However, he is not budgeting for a return to the figures he inherited when the Government came to office. Over this Parliament, there will be a massive reduction in the number of officers available.

The effects of all that are being felt in London. Crime is rising—in London, it rose by 12.6 per cent. in the past year.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that there would have been a reduction of 519 officers whether or not there had been an announcement today of the extra £3,500? If so, is he against that increase?

Mr. Heald: The Met is budgeting for a further loss of 519 officers by March 2002. The situation would have been far worse than that, however, because the Met has found itself unable to recruit necessary officers. Instead of losing 1,700 officers over the course of this Parliament, the force would have lost far more. Some people suggested that the Met would have had 23,000 officers available for ordinary duty—2,600 less than the figure identified as the absolute minimum by the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis. The danger was that instead of the disaster of losing a further 519 officers, there would have been a catastrophe as numbers fell too far to allow any sensible policing of London. The Government are merely papering over the cracks, not sorting out the real problem—that numbers need to rise to the level in place at the 1997 general election.

Mr. Davies *rose—*

Mr. Heald: This has to be the last time on this point.

Mr. Davies: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that today's announcement will make no difference to the projected number of police officers? Surely there will be more money for the police and per police person.

Mr. Heald: I certainly welcome that, but I urge the hon. Gentleman to read what Sir John Stevens had to say yesterday. He welcomed reinstatement of the housing allowance, but added that he "quite honestly" did not believe this will be enough to attract the quality applicants we need.

It is a step in the right direction, but will it be enough to reverse the position that the Home Secretary has created in London during the past three years?

The effect of cuts in police numbers and the number of stations open has been that crime rose by 12.6 per cent. last year. Street crime went up by 36 per cent. in 1999-2000. On four of the five main indicators, public satisfaction with Metropolitan police performance has fallen. Sir John is making every effort to reverse those trends, but he is not helped by the legacy of underfunding for police numbers during the past three years. Nor is he helped by policies such as the early release scheme, under which 811 robbers have been released early.

In an earlier intervention, I quoted Deputy Assistant Commissioner Andy Trotter, who said that young criminals are feeling more confident. They know that there are fewer police officers and that a large number of people convicted of robbery have been released early. The chairman of the Police Federation has said that there is a crisis of no cash, no confidence and no colleagues. It is welcome that the Home Secretary is starting to address serious issues, but he is too late to reverse the trend quickly. Once young people become confident that they can commit offences without being caught or without serious penalty, a culture develops in which there is lax law and order.

Mr. Gardiner: The hon. Gentleman spoke about a crisis of cash and a lack of funding. To some extent, it is admitted that the lack of funds stems from the Sheehy changes of 1994. We have heard today about the increased funding that the Government propose for the police. What increased funding would the hon. Gentleman's party give to the police in London to address the very problems that he has discussed?

Mr. Heald: We have made a clear commitment to find the funds to restore police numbers to the 27,166 officers inherited by the Government.

Mr. Straw: How much money?

Mr. Heald: The Home Secretary can ask that, but it will clearly depend on when the Conservative party retakes office—*[Interruption.]* The way things are going, it will not be that long.

The Prime Minister denied that policing was in crisis on the same day that the Home Secretary spoke at the Police Federation conference under a great big placard—"Policing in Crisis". I suggest that the Government ask police officers what they think. It is easy to talk about police stations closing without fully realising the impact, but the people of Biggin Hill, Chislehurst, Westcombe Park, Collier Row, Lee Road and Barnes will realise it because their stations have closed during the past year. In addition, stations at Muswell Hill, Highgate, St. Ann's, Brockley, Banstead and Tooting have had their hours reduced. Other stations have closed or had their hours reduced, too. That causes concern and anxiety, of which the Home Secretary should be aware.

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): The hon. Gentleman mentioned that the police station at Collier Row had closed. I can assure him that it has not.

Mr. Heald: If that is so, the hon. Gentleman might tell the Minister of State, who said in an answer to me:

[Mr. Heald]

The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis informs me that six police stations closed during 1999.—[*Official Report*, 15 May 2000; Vol. 350, c. 59W.]

One of the stations named was Collier Row. Perhaps the Minister needs to get out a bit more. He could visit Collier Row, if it is still open.

Mr. Cohen: Are Conservative Members making a commitment to reopen those closed police stations, or to ensure that those that have limited hours stay open 24 hours a day, seven days a week?

Mr. Heald: Our point is that the previous number of police officers has to be restored. Those police stations are not able to offer the service that they once did because there are not enough police officers to man them.

The detailed policing of London is always, of course, a matter for the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis and the authority. We are making the point that, with the size of police cuts that we have had since the general election, fewer open police stations and reduced hours are inevitable. If the Home Secretary thinks that that point is wrong, I am very willing to allow him to intervene. It must be right that, if one cuts officers, the service offered to the public will be cut.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heald: No, not now; I should like to make a bit of progress.

The point that the Home Secretary made on the establishment of the first Metropolitan Police Authority and the end of his role in the job needs a little further examination. *[Interruption.]* If the Minister could listen for a moment, I should like to make a point that he might deal with in his reply. Will he comment on the very public intervention by the Mayor of London in the Lawrence family compensation case? I ask him to comment not on the details of the case itself, but on the Government's attitude to that type of intervention by the Mayor in Metropolitan police affairs. Surely the Metropolitan Police Authority is not the same thing as the Mayor. I should be grateful to know how the Minister thinks that the interaction between the Mayor and the authority will work.

Mr. Charles Clarke: I shall deal with that matter in my reply. Now, however, I shall simply say that responsibility for policing London is the Commissioner's and the Metropolitan Police Authority's, not the Mayor's. That is absolutely clear.

Mr. Heald: I am grateful to the Minister. However, it would be helpful if he would amplify on that a little in his reply, as there might be some confusion in the Mayor's mind about his exact role.

Mr. Clarke: Will the hon. Gentleman accept that I do not speak for the Mayor of London on anything, and that, in a long political history, I never have?

Mr. Heald: I fully accept that. I know that the hon. Gentleman certainly does not speak for the Mayor in that sense—far from it—but perhaps he could outline a little more fully how he sees things working in future months and years, as the issue has been widely commented on in recent days by both the public and the media.

The matter of the equipment available to the Metropolitan police—such as the Metropolitan police vehicle fleet—is also causing concern. In answers to questions that I tabled, the Home Secretary revealed that, in March 2000, about one quarter of the Metropolitan police vehicle fleet was taken off the road for repairs and was out of action. Why was that? Can the Minister give any assurance that, in future, police will have vehicles that work? How has the Met been coping with the decline in the number of available vehicles? What impact would he say that has had on street patrols?

The Minister will also be aware that great concern has been expressed about 999 calls. He will have seen the *Evening Standard* article on that matter, which made it clear that

Scotland Yard is in danger of being overwhelmed with emergency calls amid a staffing crisis and a surge in the number of people dialling 999 . . .

Many emergency calls to the police are now met with a recorded message telling people they are in a queue and will be answered shortly. Senior officers say they are coping with the surge in calls but one 999 operator told the *Standard*: "We are basically losing it. On one recent shift 20 to 30 calls were being held in a queue."

Will the Minister comment on that? For members of the public who are in fear or desperately worried about a relative or a crime victim, one of the most worrying things imaginable must be to ring 999, only to hear a recorded message and discover that they are in a queue. Is that the type of service that the Minister wants to be provided? If not, what will he do about it? It is just not good enough.

I should also like to deal with the recent report, "Winning Consents", into the Met's investigation of murders. The Commissioner's and the Home Secretary's responses to the report are welcome and thorough. However, does the Minister agree that the report shows that senior investigating officers have a very heavy work load of murder cases, and that their work load is heavier than those in any other part of the country? Does he think that the action that has been taken so far is adequate to deal with a very difficult problem?

Will the Minister also comment on liaison on state visits? When the Met admitted the difficulties that occurred during the visit of President Jiang Zemin of China, it seemed to emerge that the Home Office had had barely any involvement in discussions on operational policing matters for the visit, and that the work had been done by the Foreign Office. Could the Minister explain that, and also the overlap of responsibilities? As he will know, there is considerable public concern about the way in which that particular visit was policed, and about the fact that the Foreign Office, rather than the Home Office, seemed to be doing the liaison. In a letter to the Home Affairs Committee, the Home Secretary admitted that Home Office officials were not involved in liaising with the Foreign Office on planning policing of the state visit. It would be good to know which part of the Government deals with that matter, and that the issue is being addressed.

It is clear from this month's edition of the Police Federation magazine that one thing causing concern and some offence to police officers is the public's inability to

visit as they wish the memorials to brave police officers. One result of the closure of Muswell Hill police station seems to be that the memorials to PC Nat Edgar, who was shot in 1948, and to PC Keith Blakelock, who was killed in the Broadwater Farm riot, are no longer accessible to the public. Could the Home Secretary look into that matter, and mention it to the Metropolitan Police Commissioner? The matter is obviously causing concern to police officers.

Will the Minister join me in applauding the work of the men and women of our capital's police service? They keep us safe and make many sacrifices—personal, financial, and sometimes even the ultimate sacrifice. I pay tribute to their work. I look forward to the force—under Sir John's leadership, and in the new era of the Metropolitan Police Authority—adding to its already considerable achievements. Long may they continue. I hope that the whole House will join me in sending a message of good will to the Metropolitan police on this traditional annual debate. From what we have heard, this may be the last such debate.

10.48 am

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North): Crime and community safety are probably now at the top of my residents' list of concerns. I therefore very much welcome this debate on the policing of London, which is being held before the change in responsibilities that will introduce to the Met a long overdue element of local democratic accountability.

I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to assure me that he will ignore some of today's comments by Conservative Members—who, in recent years, cut police numbers; after Sheehy, removed the recruitment incentive of the housing allowance; and are now claiming that they have set themselves targets to restore police numbers which are completely incompatible with their tax guarantee.

I should like to make three sets of points. First, I congratulate the Home Secretary and the Commissioner on holding firm in the face of criticism from parts of the media, and defensiveness from some parts of the Met itself, in the wake of the Lawrence report. I know that the report's aftermath, and implementation of the changes that it requires, must have been very painful for the service—most of whose members have a sincere commitment to responsive and effective policing. However, change was, and is, necessary to build a service that can command the support of a wide range of London's diverse communities.

I deplore the hysteria with which negative stories about crime and policing have been reported in the past year, as though a commitment to anti-racist policing were completely incompatible with the fight against crime. I believe that the opposite is true and that we can tackle crime and anti-social behaviour effectively only by building a service that has the support of the whole community. The truth of that cannot be demonstrated in a matter of months. It will take years to establish, but I believe that the overwhelming majority of police officers know it to be true.

The use of stop-and-search powers has been at the forefront of that debate. Tiresome though it is to state the obvious, no one—certainly no one on the Labour Benches—objects to the use of stop and search. It is a vital element in the fight against drugs and the carrying of weapons in particular, but the powers must be used thoughtfully and the Metropolitan police service must be accountable for their use.

There was clearly a defensive reaction against the use of stop and search post the Macpherson report, although it is coming back into balance. However, attempts, including by Conservative Members, to draw a correlation between the worrying rise in street robberies and the decline in stop and search are part of the backlash against anti-racist policing and should be resisted.

I am indebted to the Kensington and Chelsea police consultative committee for its comments on that issue. Chairman Peter Bull points out that

> There has been a very significant change in practice under Steve Otter,

who is our borough commander and whom I hesitate to commend to my hon. Friend the Minister as a truly outstanding police officer because I am terrified that he will be poached. The police consultative committee letter states that, under his command, there has been

> a huge drop in the number of Stop and Searches and a sharp rise in the number of arrests as a percentage of the searches. In other words, more intelligent policing and no racial prejudice: the percentage figure for arrests is broadly similar across the ethnic groups. That is most encouraging.

That demonstrates that, in practice, on the ground, intelligence-led policing can both tackle the problem of discriminatory use of stop and search and be effective in the fight against crime.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Does my hon. Friend accept that concern over stop and search in the community is as much, if not more, to do with the manner of stop and search—police officers should be polite and give respect to our community—than the number of stop and search incidents? The community respect the fact that stop and search is a necessary tool available to the police force to prevent crime.

Ms Buck: I wholly agree with my hon. Friend. He must have read my speech because I was about to come on to the fact that, as part of the welcome change post the Lawrence report, reflecting the attention on the operation of stop and search, complaints against the police in central London have dropped sharply. Since 1998, there has been a 13 per cent. fall in complaints on the grounds of harassment and unlawful arrests. In my borough of Kensington and Chelsea, there has been a 43 per cent. fall and a 34 per cent. fall in complaints on the ground of incivility. That is part of the same argument. The police have learned an important lesson about the operation of stop-and-search powers. That is to their credit and will help in building the confidence of the community and in tackling crime.

I welcome the new seriousness with which public agencies are responding to racial incidents and commend the work of Chief Superintendent John Grieve in particular. Since 1998, there has been a fivefold increase in reporting of racial incidents in Westminster, and a fourfold increase in Kensington and Chelsea. We have yet to establish whether that is worrying because it shows a dramatic increase in racial incidents, or pleasing because it shows greater responsiveness by the agencies and a willingness to report, but surely those matters are far better out in the open, where they can be tackled, than hidden away.

Secondly, I commend the Home Secretary for his success so far in winning the resources for the crime fighting fund and for today's announcement, but there is

[Ms Buck]

a need to strengthen his arm in negotiations with the Treasury on the comprehensive spending review, so that we can continue to move forward in tackling the recruitment crisis in the Met and in building on the success of the crime reduction initiative.

The 1,113 additional officers allocated to the Met through the crime fighting fund are welcome, but, again, in my local boroughs establishment figures are well down on 1998. The latest figures are that Kensington and Chelsea is 31 officers down and Westminster is 43 officers down. Westminster's establishment has declined from 1,708 to 1,622 since 1998.

Although I am assured that front-line strength will be maintained—I pay tribute to the management skill of both borough commanders in ensuring that resources will be directed to the front line—I am unhappy about that fall in numbers, which will, happily, be at least partially offset by a share of the 1,113 extra officers, but there is a real issue: residents, particularly in the areas that I represent in the north of those two city boroughs, do not feel that they are getting the visible policing that they want to give them confidence. The early indications are that those two boroughs will not do as well from the 1,113 as other boroughs. I fully understand and appreciate the need for the Commissioner to establish priorities, but again when I go to the estates of north Kensington and north Paddington, I have to account for the needs of those communities. They want visible and responsive policing.

I am aware of the fact that, whatever the establishment figures, we must recognise the recruitment crisis. I am delighted with the Home Secretary's announcement recognising the problems that police officers post-Sheehy have had with housing costs, in the light of London house prices increasing by almost half over the past couple of years. We need to do more. We should tackle that not simply through the money that we pay to police officers, but by pursuing what should be a classic example of joined-up thinking. The Home Secretary should be working with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to ensure that we tackle London's housing crisis.

We have 42,000 families living in temporary accommodation in London. The supply of affordable housing has fallen very sharply over recent years, again as a result of a long-term trend—the failure over many years to invest in affordable housing. Unless we create homes for rent and shared ownership homes throughout London, even with the welcome additional housing allowance for police officers we will not be able to ensure that our key public sector workers have the opportunity to live in the city and to have the family homes that they want to bring up their families.

The housing crisis in central London is, to go off at a tangent, an issue not just in the recruitment of police officers. It has a direct knock-on effect on the problems of crime and anti-social behaviour. It is worrying. Hundreds and hundreds of people with severe mental health problems and personality disorders live in bed-and-breakfast and temporary accommodation because we do not have the supply of affordable housing to deal with them. Therefore, I urge the Minister to do all he can to secure not just resources for the police, which he has already shown he can do, but the related resources to help us to tackle the housing crisis in central London for public sector workers and for others in housing need.

Thirdly, I speak in support of—and, naturally, ask for more of—some of the excellent crime prevention initiatives that are being developed to help us to be tough on the causes of crime. This year, the royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea's community safety team bid successfully for £117,000 for closed circuit television in north Kensington—it made two bids to supplement police efforts to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour. That will build on successful schemes elsewhere in north Kensington.

CCTV does not solve all our problems. It is not a panacea, but the recent evaluation of a major scheme in my constituency has shown—I quote from the evaluation report:

> it is achieving its main aims in terms of reducing crime, providing a deterrent to crime and reducing the fear of crime, with a 19 per cent. reduction in total recorded crime during the evaluation period last year—nearly double the divisional average.

More than half the residents surveyed said that the scheme had increased their sense of security. We should be very pleased with the CCTV schemes and welcome the additional investment that has already been made, but if we ensure that the scheme rolls forward and helps us to tackle further problems on our estates, car parks and city centres, it will be extremely welcome.

I for one regret the fact that Westminster, which covers half my constituency, has so far concentrated CCTV bids—I am sure with good cause—on the city centre, which is represented by the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke). The north Westminster estates have not benefited from the schemes, despite the fact that there is real fear—and experience—of street crime, and car crime in particular, in those communities.

Finally, I want to commend two important prevention schemes being developed, thanks to the Government, with single regeneration budget funding. The New Life for Paddington neighbourhood warden scheme, the first of its kind in London, will concentrate on community development, environmental improvement and crime prevention through visibility in the management of public spaces.

Early consultation on the scheme confirms the huge gap between the existing means of discussing policing and safety with the public and the public's needs and perceptions. We have a long way to go to convince people that we are recognising their fears, but schemes such as this, which complement the work of the police, make a valuable contribution to the process.

The other scheme is being funded through the single regeneration budget award to Golborne United in north Kensington. The community reward scheme, the brainchild of inspirational youth worker Barran Hulme from the Wornington green detached youth project, offers reward points to young people for their involvement in community projects such as graffiti clearance and gardening for housebound pensioners. The points can be exchanged for trips and activities. I gather that a day's jet skiing is one of the latest options.

The scheme is brilliant in its simplicity and I hope that the social exclusion unit will come to see it and hold it up as an example of good practice in involving young

people and offering a deterrent to crime, making people feel that our young people are an integral part of our community and not a source of fear, which is unfortunately often the case at present.

We are running some excellent schemes, backed by Government money. Government investment in policing and the crime fighting fund is extremely welcome. We must continue to sell its benefits and to extend it into other needy and pressurised communities. The Mayor and the police authority must now take up the challenge of working with the Metropolitan police service to complete the process of change and convince all Londoners that we are tackling crime and policing for all our diverse communities. I wish them luck.

11.2 am

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I am very happy to follow the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) and I will return later to her central point—the need for affordable housing in London for people in the public service. I share her view on that absolutely, and we need to go much further in public policy.

Since before I was elected, I have campaigned for London to have a democratic police authority, so it gives me pleasure to think that this is the last of these debates when the Home Secretary is the police authority and that next month there will be a transfer of power to the Greater London Authority. I pay tribute to the Government for implementing that commitment.

One of the reasons why that is important is that it is nonsense to have a system whereby the police authority is not present for the whole of the annual debate on policing. I know how often the Home Secretary is at the Dispatch Box, because I am normally here when he is, but the move to an accountable authority is welcome. In passing, I thank those in the Home Office who have supported Home Secretaries past and present, and look forward to working with the Mayor, the GLA and the police authority in the months ahead.

The Met police have wanted an accountable police authority for many years. At last, London will have a voice that is properly independent of Government and will put the case to Government. The failure in London has been the inability to speak independently to the Home Secretary and the Government with the same effectiveness as elsewhere in the country.

I thank those who were doing Met work outside the Greater London Authority boundaries before the handover to the three county forces. Again, that was a completely logical move and it is right for Surrey, Hertfordshire and Essex to do their own policing. I am glad that the change has taken place.

I join the Home Secretary in paying tribute to Sir Paul Condon for his work as Commissioner. He bemoaned the fact that, as the longest-serving Commissioner of the previous century, he lost 2,000 police officers—not, I might say, through any lack of effort on his part. He certainly kept up the pressure on Government to ensure that London was given the resources that it needed. We welcome his successor equally strongly. He has started well, has the confidence of his force and is ensuring, as he said at the Press Gallery lunch yesterday, that the voice of London and its policing needs will not go unheard.

In the year since we last had this debate, I have had exceptional reasons to be thankful to the Met police. As the Minister knows, for the first time in my life I suddenly found that I needed police protection in the way that normally only people such as Home Secretaries need it. Following the three or four months when the Met police accompanied me pretty well everywhere, looked after my home and guaranteed my security, I can testify to their competence, professionalism and dedication.

That experience was a very useful way of catching up with the issues of concern to special branch and others in the police and gave me the opportunity to check my presumptions about them. I had people with me 24 hours a day who were competent to talk about those matters. We owe an especial obligation in London to special branch officers, who play a background role but do it with thorough professionalism. I am personally very grateful to them.

The backdrop to today's debate is, first, the amount of crime in London and, secondly, whether we have the resources to deal with it. On the first, the sad reality is that crime figures in Europe's largest capital are still going up. Last year, we reached for the first time the sad figure of 1 million recorded crimes. That is just about a fifth of the recorded crimes in the country as a whole. That is not a trend with which any of us can be happy.

Crime is not the police's but society's fault. Unless we prevent and deter it, we have a hopeless task. We must also note that violent crime is the area about which people are rightly most concerned. The Home Secretary was right to say that stop and search is important in dealing with that. That is why I asked about the clear-up rate for murders. There was an inspectorate report in January about how murders and serious crimes have been dealt with in the Met. They have not been given the resources in the past that such crimes in other areas have got, probably because there are more of them, so they get downgraded.

I cannot stress too strongly that when murders are committed in London, as they are only too often, it is vital that they are given the necessary resources. Killings—murders or manslaughters—must be perceived to be as important here as they are in the rest of the country. More police are needed in big cities because there are higher rates of violent crime.

I have never moved from the position that, if the police have to put more officers in certain areas or communities in London because certain crimes are more common there than elsewhere, they must have our support in doing that. They must not be held back. A member of one of the neighbourhood consultative groups in my constituency, now a pensioner, whom I respect highly, complained that he got the impression that often the media, by hyping up particular issues, prevent the police from getting involved.

My constituent chose the example of the arrest of Neville Lawrence. That was a wrong stop, but the way in which it was reported carried the danger of making the police feel unable to go about their job. We must not be overly sensitive. The police must be able to operate without fear or favour. If people get stopped, so be it, provided that the way in which that is done is properly monitored and managed.

The other big issue is the fall in police numbers, which fell significantly in the last five years of the Conservative Government. During Sir Paul Condon's tenure, they have gone down by about 2,000. The Commissioner has made

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

it clear that the numbers have sunk below a level that is acceptable and that allows him to do his job properly, and they are still going down.

The decrease has had an effect throughout London. Over the past eight years, the number of officers in each of Islington's police stations has gone down: in Holloway the number has decreased from 260 to 226 and in Islington it has gone down from 287 to 284. The same is true of the borough in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) and other outer London boroughs such as Bromley. In my borough, the number has decreased from 900 in 1990 to 851 in 1999.

What do we do about that? Yesterday, the Commissioner said that there are three issues to be tackled: bad morale, bad perception and bad pay. The last issue is important in dealing with the others, so the Home Secretary's remarks today are welcome. Rightly, he speedily accepted the arbitration proposal, and it will make a significant difference although the Commissioner said that it will not be the answer. We have to make sure that police pay in London is kept at the level necessary for recruitment.

That brings me to the point made by the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North. Whatever one-off pay increase we make, we will be unable to get public sector workers to stay in London if the city does not have a decent quantity of affordable housing for them. That is an absolute priority. The public policy position is that 25 per cent. of development in inner London boroughs, and certainly in constituencies such as mine, should be affordable housing, but I think that the proportion should be 50 per cent.

If the three main parties were to reach a consensus on that and were able to persuade the Government and the Greater London Authority of that view, we would begin to be able to persuade people who are making large profits by building homes—often second or third homes—for people on large incomes that meeting demand is not as important as meeting need. We cannot run a capital city unless we have a police service and the civilians to support it. Many of those people have to work anti-social hours at weekends and at night; they have to get in very early before public transport is running and they have to stay late.

One of last year's amusing episodes was when the Home Secretary miscounted extra police numbers and his Bournemouth conference speech had to be revised. In the process, he happened to leave out all the people being trained at Hendon. I am not sure who did the tallying up and was responsible for Hendon being discounted, but it was rediscovered. The only problem is that Hendon is not full of police trainees; there are many spaces because it is not getting enough recruits.

I have a proposal that I want Ministers seriously to consider, although I realise that the responsibility will move, in part, to the Metropolitan Police Authority. They should do as the armed services and industry have done and give young people a financial incentive to join by sponsoring them during their post-16 training in A-levels or City and Guilds and then at college or university. That could be done through public money or through the private sector. In return, those young people would be required to stay in the service for, say, 10 years. Such sponsorship persuaded many people to go into the services and into big firms such as ICI.

We need to consider ways of recruiting not just more people, but people of the quality that the Met needs. Policing needs people with good A-levels and degrees and those without. No academic background should disqualify someone from having as successful a career in the Met or another police service as they would have anywhere else. The Met does not consist of a few elite managers who are academic and who have done degrees and everyone else who is straight out of school with no qualifications. It needs a mix, and it needs to offer in-service training. Londoners want that because, at the moment, every London council tax payer is paying more for less: the council tax and the precept go up and the number of police goes down. Given the crime figures, that does not reassure people.

Over the past year the Met has done many things very well, such as policing the millennium, although it was not reimbursed for the cost of that. It managed the May day demonstration well, although there were criticisms. It did not handle the Chinese President's visit well, and we have had an explanation for that, but I hope that in future there will not be behind-the-hand briefings from Government Departments which mean that people's civil liberties are not respected. However, the Met has responded well to the Macpherson report on the Lawrence inquiry.

Many police officers were unhappy about the previous Commissioner's policy on tenure, which meant that they were moved around a lot. The hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North made a similar point about a senior police officer. We understand the dilemma because there is a career structure for police officers, but that tenure policy is not good for community policing. The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock), whose constituency is next to mine and has the same problems, knows that an area gets a community police officer who is well respected and manages their local team well, and then suddenly they are moved.

Many officers were told that they could do a particular job, in firearms, special branch or CID, for five years and then they would have to do something completely different for which they were not skilled. We need a career structure that makes use of expertise but takes account of the fact that the police are a public service for individual communities, so people cannot be moved around without consideration.

I turn now to my own patch. Southwark has suffered from the reduction in numbers, which is the unhappy and unpopular consequence of police stations having their hours cut, and being rationalised and closed. The test of that policy will be whether people get more responsive policing and more police on the ground. Our local police know that people are watching them like hawks to ensure that we do not lose local police stations, which does not help to reassure the public, and that the police respond speedily enough.

We must ensure that police attention continues to be focused on the area. There was a murder in Rotherhithe, which was then heavily policed, but the pressure on the police means that they may have to move on and the problems will reappear. The police, with the help of the public, must reassure every part of the community in Greater London.

I pay tribute to the police because their comments on asylum seekers, refugees and the people begging on our streets have been much more sensitive and intelligent than those of the tabloids and the rest of the press. My constituency has many refugees and asylum seekers, and there are hundreds in one building. The police said that if they had put some 700 male police officers aged between 18 and 30 into one place, left them without work and without anything to do all day and given them £40 a week or nothing at all, there would have been far more trouble than there has been from the asylum seekers who are waiting for their cases to be dealt with.

Of course there are problems, but we must realise that the police and the community can deal with them. London has had supportive policing and very little trouble from asylum seekers or refugees. There has been little trouble from beggars, although the police have had to deal with spates of aggressive begging, particularly in the middle of London. Westminster police indicated that most of those beggars do not come from outside the UK.

As Parliament loses control of the Met to the Greater London Authority, we wish them well. Police officers have our support because they do a very difficult job extremely well. We want more of them, and we want people to believe that it is a good career because the capital is still under-policed. London needs to be better policed by more officers if Londoners' wishes are to be met in the year ahead.

11.19 am

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): The fear of crime and the reality of crime are potent forces in my constituency, as undoubtedly they are throughout London. In the 13 years that I have been in the House—mainly, of course, under the previous Government's tenure—I have seen a rise in crime, a rise in the fear of crime and a loss of confidence in the police and, because one third of my constituents are from ethnic minorities, the latter has been especially important.

Under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, we have seen dramatic improvements. Much remains to be done, and none of us can be complacent about the terrible levels of crime that we still experience. None the less, there is a new mood in the community and a new sense that we are going in the right direction.

In the past, I felt that the police often had no idea how to develop a strategy for preventing and tackling crime, and that every crime was dealt with piecemeal. My constituency contains a block of flats primarily occupied by pensioners and I repeatedly had constituency cases from there. Eventually, the tenants association met me to discuss the problems that pensioners had with crime in that block. I was amazed to find that some individuals had been burgled as many as seven times. However, when I talked to the local police, they had no idea that they were dealing with such a huge number of crimes in one specific location. In truth, there was a complete lack of intelligence-led policing. The police recorded the figures manually and sent them to headquarters, but they did not examine them locally and nothing came back that would enable them to develop a proper strategy for preventing further crimes.

It is clear that great change has been required in the policing of London. It is our Government who have begun the process of new partnerships and innovation which is making the new strategy much more effective. I pay tribute to my borough commander, Mike Humphrey, who has embraced the new philosophy—which has been led by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary—and has made effective partnerships with the local authority, the London borough of Lewisham, and with other key players in the communities. He has done so against a background of some difficulties—which other hon. Members have mentioned—not least, in our case, the lack of decent working accommodation for our police service and the critical need for a new police station to be built in Lewisham.

Staffing problems have also dogged the borough commander throughout the year. At one point, the police were 50 officers short, which is an unacceptable situation. I am glad to say that the shortfall has now been reduced, and I am confident that the problem is being addressed. However, as other hon. Members have said, numbers matter and we have to ensure sufficient resources for policing this capital city.

Despite the problems, the borough commander considers that the service has had a successful year, and I wish to record the fact that Lewisham is near the top of the Metropolitan police league table for the clear-up rate for robbery, burglary and vehicle crime. However, in two of my wards—Pepys and Drake—burglary is still more than twice the national average rate. That is why I am delighted that under round 2 of the reducing burglary initiative, we have been granted £143,800 for a project that will fund not only new security for homes, but the installation work, which has not been the case in previous projects. It is the most vulnerable and needy residents who are so frequently the targets and victims of burglars, and that project will be directed at their needs.

Last year in this debate, I referred to what was then the experimental ringmaster scheme. It is essentially a giant telephone tree which draws together people in localities so that the police can share with them information about matters such as a spate of a certain crime or an appeal for witnesses to a particular crime. In the beginning, we had 4,000 participants in that scheme, but today we have 22,000—a remarkable achievement. It has even drawn in some subscribers—and their families—who have been arrested and convicted of crimes in the past. It is an enormous and worthwhile initiative, with promising early results.

I also praised last year the work of undercover officers in policing Millwall football matches, which I know are regularly attended by my neighbour, the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), as well as myself. Those undercover officers are doing an intelligent and effective job, and I can report that 15 arrests have been made for racism and that 14 people have already been convicted. That is crucial to building confidence in my community.

Overall, the most disappointing aspect of crime in the area, as in the rest of London, is the rise in street crime. However, the local police are considering how to tackle it in a more effective and intelligent way. They have analysed the crime patterns and found that a large percentage of the crimes are gang-related, and occur within a narrow geographical corridor which reflects the bus routes. Some 75 per cent. of the robberies lie along five bus routes. That information has led to the formation of a new partnership between the police, London Transport Buses and our local CCTV team. Lewisham

[Joan Ruddock]

racial equality council, school heads and an independent advisory panel have been consulted about how best to tackle the problem. Some 40 officers are being used in a high-visibility operation on a daily basis, and the early results are promising.

That scheme has led to a determination to achieve a new partnership between London Transport Buses and the police authority against fare dodgers and criminals which will lead, we hope, to the installation of CCTV on selected buses in the autumn. That will have the benefit of catching those criminals perpetrating street crimes and riding on the buses to get away from the scene of the crime, and it will also help with the anti-social elements among schoolchildren, who have become a real nuisance on buses in the mornings and afternoons, especially to elderly passengers.

Other hon. Members have mentioned the issue of stop and search. For many years, the use of stop and search powers in my constituency led to much suspicion and anger among the black community, which had a huge sense of unfairness—much of it justified. After the Macpherson report, the situation has been uncertain and Lewisham police have been sensitive to that, as well as to the rise in street crime that we have all recorded. In response, the police have piloted a fairness health check, which examines fairness and proportionality across a range of police functions, including stop and search. All the police and the civil staff have received training in the investigation of racial incidents, in stop and search, and in race relations.

Those internal changes would not be enough if the new procedures could not be shared with the local community. The Lewisham community consultative group set up with the police a sub-group to examine what was happening because of the changes in stop and search and the new training. The group has worked effectively with the police and built new confidence in doing so, both within the group and in the police procedures. The group has concluded, as all hon. Members have done, that stop-and-search powers are important for the prevention and detection of crime.

The group has several recommendations to make. It believes that the Macpherson report recommendation on recording voluntary stops needs to be clearer. It believes that proper recording is necessary for vehicle stops, which are very contentious, and that ethnic data recording in relation to those stops is essential. The group also suggests the production of a booklet, which lays out the powers of the police and the rights of citizens and the appropriate behaviour for both parties, and which would be available to the community at large and not just to young people. I know that such a scheme has been piloted elsewhere in London. That information should also be part of citizenship teaching in schools, and police action should be underpinned by better communications with the community. Attempts to build more trust will be assisted by transparency, especially about the data collected.

I can report, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck), that there has been a drop in stop and search. At the same time, the proportion of arrests has increased, which means that we have better targeting and more sensitive policing.

I note that racially motivated crimes and racial incidents in my borough, as in that of my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North, have risen. In my borough, they have risen from 411 in 1998-99 to 794 in 1999-2000. Once more, we are uncertain whether that is a genuine rise or, as the police believe, the result of increased confidence, leading to more people coming forward and better detection. The clear-up rate has gone up from 18 per cent. to 26 per cent. which, again, can only increase confidence.

I want to pay a brief tribute to three police officers who have contributed substantially to the black community's growing confidence. Detective Chief Inspector Peter Newman and Detective Constables Graham Aylett and Peter Burns have undertaken day-to-day work in the new investigation into the New Cross fire, which caused the deaths of 14 young black people in my constituency 19 years ago. Assistant Commissioner John Grieve is overseeing the investigation and I would remind him, as I would my hon. Friend the Minister, that we are now in the third year of the re-opened investigation. The families and survivors are desperate for the matter to be concluded. Excellent work has been done, but it must be brought to a conclusion, especially as many of the victims' parents are now quite elderly.

In conclusion, I want to join the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey and my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North in addressing the housing dilemma. There can be no doubt that this is an issue that affects not only the recruitment of police officers in London, but retention. People would like to become home owners and settle with their families close to where they work. As the *Evening Standard* revealed this week, the average house price in London has reached £185,000, which is an impossibility on the modest salaries of many of our public service workers. I therefore make an additional plea for more attention to be given to the problem and for new solutions to be found for affordable housing in the rented sector. The private sector, of course, will always depend on market value. We must acknowledge what is happening in London and address the need for decent, affordable family accommodation.

I believe, as others do, that we are now facing an important new development in London with the creation of the Metropolitan Police Authority. Having campaigned for such an authority throughout my political life in London, I, too, welcome its existence and the fact that it is democratically controlled; a major partnership now exists between the Government, the new authority, Members of Parliament and all our communities. We are in a new era in which partnership, innovation and intelligence-led policing will meet the needs of our communities, if we all continue to put our energies behind it.

11.34 am

Mr. John Horam (Orpington): My hon. Friend the Member for North–East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald), who opened the debate for the Opposition, quoted from a speech made by the chairman of the Police Federation as recently as 17 May. The chairman said that the police service is

> facing a crisis of no confidence, a crisis of no cash and a crisis of no colleagues.

The police seem to have picked up the knack of putting things succinctly these days and, undoubtedly, that is the core of the matter. The chairman went on to say that there is

a sense of disorder and anarchy

in urban areas. He also said that people in many rural areas feel that they are

unable to rely on the police.

I am glad to be speaking in this debate as I wish to express the concerns of London's suburban areas. A crisis of confidence in policing affects them just as much it does inner-city and rural areas. I accept that control is changing, but no doubt the Government will still have considerable influence in such matters. Will the Minister reassure us that London's suburban areas will receive fair treatment in the handling of Metropolitan police resources? I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) is here, as he pointed out in a previous debate that our residents feel that they are paying more and more for the police precept, yet are getting fewer and fewer resources. I therefore seek from the Minister a clear assurance that suburban areas will get proper treatment and that the present limited and decreasing coverage will not be reduced to even more exiguous levels.

The situation in suburban areas is deteriorating. Reported crime figures for Bromley for the past six months show an increase of 6 per cent. in overall crime. I am glad to say that there has been a 17 per cent. reduction in burglary, but there has been a 48 per cent. increase in street crime. I listened to the Home Secretary open the debate, but I am afraid to say that ordinary people are not convinced by the statistical machinations in which he indulged. People do, in fact, make a link between the lack of stop and search and the increase in street crime. Indeed, ordinary people's perception of that is more accurate than the Home Secretary's statistical analysis.

There has been an increase of 15 per cent. in criminal damage. In Orpington, which is the southern sector of the borough of Bromley, there has been a 7 per cent. increase in overall crime. There has been a 2 per cent. reduction in burglary, but there has been a 42 per cent. increase in street crime and a 15 per cent. increase in criminal damage. More worryingly, the offence clear-up rate has gone down dramatically. In 1994-95, that rate was 23 per cent., which is incredibly low. However, this year, it is down to 14 per cent., which is a significant reduction. I should be interested to know what the Minister makes of that because, in many ways, that figure is more telling than police numbers and other considerations.

Areas of my constituency which, hitherto, have been relatively crime free are now experiencing quite serious levels of crime. In Petts Wood, for example, seven cars were burned out and the lives of two young boys put in danger in a recent night of arson. One of my local papers said:

> Once upon a time you would have said Petts Wood and Orpington were relatively safe areas . . . But it seems you are not safe anywhere these days.

Crime is not the only problem. There is also the element that we generally label anti-social behaviour. One of my constituents wrote to me:

> We are getting large numbers (40-50) teenagers who are congregating on the green creating a nuisance, many who are under age, drinking alcohol and smashing the bottles in the road, and boys urinating in public and on private property in the area.
>
> When we request Police assistance, we get a car, if and when one becomes available, sometimes a considerable time later, which merely cruises around the area and drives off. This gives the teenagers the impression that it's OK so they carry on.

Another local resident has written to me to say:

> we have had cars vandalised, house and shop windows broken, local library windows broken, flower containers upturned and stolen, bottle banks overturned, paper banks emptied—apart from cars racing round the roads driven by under-age, unlicensed, uninsured drivers.

Some people in my constituency and others in London live in a daily hell as a result of anti-social behaviour.

Yet another local resident writes:

> In the year we have lived here, we have endured threats, things thrown at the our window, our back door kicked in, a fear for me to venture out with my children without my partner. My car windows were smashed and the car was then set on fire and the fire brigade had to be called. My mother came to see me and her car was stolen.

That is happening daily in suburban and inner London areas.

Another lady writes:

> I called the police . . . The police had 15 calls on standby, and it would have taken them until midnight to get to me!

That is a common problem.

In a graphic e-mail I received yesterday, a resident said:

> Without exaggeration, pretty much every other day I return to St. Mary Cray station from working in London, a column of black smoke is visible across the other side of Cray Valley in the Star Lane area. This is obviously another car that has been torched. We need police in this area, we need cameras in this area, offenders need punishment that will act as a deterrent to prevent future offences.

The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) referred to the situation on the buses. Drivers refused to work after 7 o'clock for several weeks because they were fed up with the behaviour of young people. Fortunately, the police were able to sort that out.

The problems in my area are made worse by the fact that we have a large group of travellers living on a site, and they have spread into adjoining streets—some to housing association houses and some to private houses. As can be well imagined, that does not help the problem of anti-social behaviour—it considerably worsens it. Local people feel that the police are not in control of the situation.

The Government are putting regeneration funds into the area but the money will be wasted if the fundamental problems of law and order are not tackled. People want and need, and believe that they are paying for, effective and visible policing to deal with the problem. The first requirement is proper numbers of policemen on the ground—on the streets of our suburban areas.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire has said, police numbers in London are down by 1,200. In Bromley, the police are under strength. In Orpington, police stations have been closed to the public, and beat officers and the time they spend on the beat reduced to almost non-existent proportions. The police are rarely seen now, unlike several years ago.

The chairman of the Police Federation has said that there has been the largest fall in actual police numbers since the crisis days of the mid-1970s; and only yesterday Sir John Stevens said that numbers in London were at their lowest since the 1970s, and outlined the problems of retention and recruitment. It seems that every time we

[Mr. John Horam]

have a Labour Government, we have a crisis of this kind in the police. *[Interruption.]* That is absolutely true, I am afraid.

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): Which party is the hon. Gentleman in today?

Mr. Horam: One of the reasons I left the Labour party was because it could not deal with these things.

We need an absolute increase in numbers on the ground floor. Equally, we need effective support for proper policing from the top. The unfortunate fact is that the very top of the pyramid is occupied by the metropolitan intellectuals who largely run the Government. Their main concerns seem to be political correctness and the rights of minorities. The fact is that the way they have handled the Macpherson report has damaged morale.

My hon. Friend the Member for North–East Hertfordshire was right to point out that an opinion poll of policemen has indicated that 78 per cent. of them would rather now be doing something else—a frightening percentage. That is the consequence of the attitude of Ministers. The Minister of State, Home Office, the right hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), is at it again this week with his comments on the probation service.

To use one of the Government's phrases that the Deputy Prime Minister thinks they should abandon, it is time to think about the concerns of the many and not just the political correctness problems of the few.

The Government have an attitude problem, as well as an experience problem. One of the most telling facts is that none of their leading members has spent a single day in a commercial organisation. Frankly, that shows, because they have no idea how to deal with the problems that they face, or how to get the right sort of management tools into place. They believe that it can all be done by central diktat and bureaucratic regulation.

It is quite clear that we need to devolve as much as possible to those on the ground floor, trust them and back them when they make mistakes—something that ordinary people feel has not been done. Many individual policemen have suffered in their careers as a consequence of making one very public mistake when they have not been backed up by their officers.

Mr. Edward Davey: The hon. Gentleman's criticism of Government centralisation is correct in matters such as education and health, but one cannot say that with respect to policing in London. The new Commissioner, Sir John Stevens, has taken out a middle rank of officers and now local divisional commanders have greater powers than before.

Mr. Horam: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman agrees with me at least about health and education. I would argue that the trait is common throughout the Government in all of their policies—not least that on the police. They believe that top-slicing resources and centralised target setting are important. It is a disaster.

We must look at the record of the Home Office team. They started with the fiasco of the Passport Agency and the chaos at Croydon with the immigration service. They then moved to the mess with asylum seekers and got into difficulty with e-commerce. Most recently, we have seen the football hooligans and the blatant political manoeuvring over fox hunting. Underneath all that, we have the worsening crime figures and policing.

I have been in this House off and on since 1970 and this is the worst set of Home Office Ministers that I have ever come across, although I will pay them one compliment—they are good at talking. I am not surprised that the Home Secretary has been wheeled out for the fifth time this week to calm down the House of Commons. The Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), is becoming an accomplished parliamentary performer. However, it is all talk, as people up and down the country are recognising. There is no action and, frankly, that is a tragedy for the people of London.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): I call Miss McDonagh.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) *rose—*

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I said Miss McDonagh.

Mr. McDonnell: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

11.49 am

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden): First, I apologise for not being here throughout the debate and I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for your kindness this morning. I have an eye infection and I had to go to the doctor to try to sort it out.

This is a timely debate. The creation of the Metropolitan Police Authority is welcome and will help the police and London's leaders to focus on the real priorities in the fight against crime in the capital. I hope that the new authority will help to strengthen links between the Metropolitan police and individual boroughs, because in that way we can do most to fight crime locally. To contradict the hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam), I believe that the devolved schemes that are currently developing have helped most of our constituents over the past two years. Now that boroughwide policing has become the norm, police and local authorities can work in close harmony on setting local priorities and can embark on joint local initiatives.

In my borough, Merton, we have had a boroughwide division for years and it has brought many benefits. Merton is not a high-crime borough; in fact, compared with other south-west London boroughs, it is a very low-crime area, with below average rates of nearly all categories of crime. The exceptions to that rule are racially motivated crime, of which the incidence in Merton is 28 per cent. above the south London average, and car crime, of which we have 17 per cent. above average incidence. Thankfully, we have recently had good news on both fronts. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has awarded funding to target and reduce racially motivated crime in Merton. That money will be used to identify and prosecute offenders, establish outreach teams to work with young people, establish a new neighbourhood warden scheme and make

environmental improvements to enhance community safety. Car crime has been reduced from 4,755 reported incidents in 1988-99 to 4,042 last year.

The key to success is working in partnership—partnership between the police and the council, and between local people and the organisations and agencies working on their behalf. The police are at the heart of that approach, and I am pleased that in Merton there is an excellent relationship between the police and local agencies. That is paying off: in Merton last year, burglary declined by 21 per cent. and car crime by 15 per cent. In fact, over the past three years, Merton has achieved its best-ever performance, reducing overall crime by 2 per cent.

In addition, for the first time in years, there has been no reduction in police numbers, thanks to the additional funding that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary awarded the police from the crime fighting fund. Even so, it is important to remember that police numbers alone do not automatically lead to crime reduction. It is how the police use their officers that really matters. My local divisional commander recently wrote to me saying:

I believe that we are proof of the Home Secretary's claim that it is not numbers of officers that make a difference in reducing crime, but the local leadership, officer commitment and our use of intelligence-led policing initiative to target criminals. All of these things make a difference and really can reduce crime and improve the quality of life in the borough.

At the heart of today's debate lies the question how the police can be enabled to tackle those crimes that seriously diminish the quality of life of many people. The hon. Member for Orpington cited many examples of such crimes, which include so-called petty, non-violent crimes that can make life intolerable—graffiti, fly-tipping, nuisance neighbours and abandoned and untaxed cars cluttering up residential roads. None of those crimes is ever likely to feature on "Crimewatch UK", but, as every Member of Parliament knows, it is such problems that our constituents queue up at our surgeries to complain about.

That is why I take this opportunity to draw Ministers' attention to a bid by Merton council's partnership against crime to set up an anti-graffiti pilot project, involving young offenders in clearing up the offensive and often racist graffiti which have become increasingly prevalent in our streets. That is another example of the partnership approach. Only by joining up the experience and resources of the council, police and probation service can a solution to a serious social problem succeed.

Another exciting local initiative is the e-radicate project, which will allow the public directly to access council and police services via the internet and to report abandoned cars, graffiti and so on. That service will be free of charge and will be available in supermarkets, libraries and other public buildings. In addition, people will be able to access up-to-the-minute advice on crime prevention. The success of the bid depends on an initial allocation from the Government's invest to save fund, and I warmly commend it to my right hon. and hon. Friends at the Department for Education and Employment and the Cabinet Office.

Such initiatives led my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to recommend the Merton partnership against crime as an example of good practice. I am sure that every Member of Parliament can tell of similar exciting and innovative schemes springing up all over London. I hope that the new Metropolitan Police Authority will be a place where best practice can be shared and spread.

Let me close with a word of caution. As I said, I welcome the introduction of the new MPA—I believe it will help in the fight against crime. However, I should like to offer a word of warning to the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) and his colleagues on the Greater London Authority and the MPA: they should not forget that London is a very big city and that there is more to it than the glamour of the west end or the terrible deprivation of many large estates. We all know that the incidence of crime and disorder is greater in inner London and that the problems facing our colleagues there are immense, but suburban outer London, where most Londoners live, has its problems as well. I, and all outer London Members of Parliament, will be keeping a close eye on the workings of the MPA to ensure that the issues affecting outer London and the needs of the area are not overlooked.

11.56 am

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) who, like my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam), voiced the feelings of all of us in suburbia, which cannot be emphasised too strongly.

I always enjoy the Home Secretary's preamble to these debates and today was no exception, especially in the light of his references to the historic early days of the police force. I was surprised to hear that the term "blue devil" was regarded as derogatory; I think it rather fitting to the Conservatives, as we become increasingly blue devils in the fight against the red lobsters.

I pay tribute to the divisional commander in Hillingdon, Alan Matthews, and all those police officers and civilian staff who give of their best and are doing a good job in difficult circumstances. I also thank the Hillingdon community and police consultative group. My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson)—who cannot be present today, as he has to attend a funeral—my close neighbour, the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell), and I are beginning to get a consensus going on ensuring that desperately needed police resources come Hillingdon's way. Sadly, despite our best efforts, that does not seem to be happening.

I have repeatedly raised the problems affecting us. Together with my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip–Northwood and the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington, I recently had a meeting with the new Commissioner, who assured us that there would be no further reductions in the number of police officers in the Hillingdon division. That is true, according to the figures that have now been given for the establishment. However, the Commissioner omitted to say that there would be a further reduction in civilian posts.

The Commissioner was, understandably, very careful in what he said. The number given for the establishment was 380, but because of the problems of recruitment and retention, about which we have heard time and again, the actual number of officers is 356. To try to fill some of those roles with civilians, four officer posts have effectively been swapped for eight civilian posts. I hope that that is only a temporary measure and that we will not lose four officer posts.

As I commented to my hon. Friend the Member for North–East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald), the position regarding police stations in the Hillingdon division is

[Mr. John Randall]

worse than it was on 3 May. There is now no police station with a front desk open between 2 am and 6 am. That reinforces the worries of local residents. Although Hillingdon is not a high crime borough in statistical terms, the local authority's annual survey of local residents has consistently shown crime to be the No. 1 issue of concern.

One of the figures that concerns me greatly and which I do not think is generally known yet to the residents of Hillingdon is the clear-up rate. A parliamentary answer in the *Official Report* on 22 May this year shows that the clear-up rate in 1995-95 was 23 per cent. The figure rose to 24 per cent. the following year. In 1999-2000, incredibly, the clear-up rate for crimes in the Hillingdon division is 12 per cent. If that is not an indictment of the ever-falling number of police officers, I do not know what will get the message across.

Recruitment and retention is, of course, a serious problem. I welcome the news today about the housing allowance. As an employer, I worry about the retention of officers who are pre-Sheehy, who may see that as slightly divisive. I understand the difficulties involved in such a decision, but I say to the Minister that although the increase may encourage new recruits, it may also make some older officers feel that they are not quite as well regarded as they should be.

Not only my constituents, but businesses throughout the area, are worried about the increasing level of crime and the apparent difficulty in getting a police response. As we heard earlier, the problem is not just the time taken to respond to a 999 call, but the difficulty in getting through to the emergency services on 999.

If the situation were not so frightening, it would almost be farcical—the idea of someone dialling 999 and being greeted by a message saying, "I'm sorry, we are busy at the moment. Your call is held in a queue", or perhaps, with modern innovation, "Press 1 if you are being attacked; press 2 if you are being burgled; press 3 if you are lying in a pool of blood." However, it is not funny. It is one of the most nightmarish situations imaginable. People think that if they are the targets of crime, they can summon help by dialling 999. I can imagine nothing more awful for many vulnerable people than not being able to get through.

I understand the problems. I know of one case in which a constituent rang 999 to find out what happened to his correspondence with the Commissioner. I recognise that the system is abused, but we must ensure that those who require the service get an instant response.

In Hillingdon, and especially in the community and police consultative group, we feel strongly about permanent beat officers. The number of those officers has been cut, and they constitute one of the elements that have often been targeted. Reports from so-called experts state that bobbies on the beat are not efficient in catching criminals or deterring crime. However, police officers who know their patch and the people on it are essential to developing effective policing and good police-community relations, which are vital.

Such officers do not have to walk up and down the streets all the time, but local people must know that there are officers whose job is to take an interest in the area. Those officers can meet local residents, go into schools, make local contacts and gather intelligence. Those are essential parts of community policing. In the light of those observations, will the Minister tell me—in his winding-up speech or later—whether the Home Office has undertaken any research on the role and effectiveness of permanent beat officers? If it has not, perhaps there is scope for commissioning such research.

Is there any evidence that community policing helps or hinders the recruitment and retention of staff? If there is no answer because no one has looked into the matter, perhaps that, too, could be researched. Is there any scope in the current crime reduction programme for grant aid to local projects, which could test the benefits of community policing while acknowledging that there may not be an immediate reduction in crime statistics?

Hillingdon has faced repeated cuts in resources in recent years. As several of my hon. Friends have said, the precept has increased and residents do not feel that they get anything like value for money. We realise that resources for the Metropolitan police are allocated on a national basis and that the Met then has an allocation. Various formulae are used. We consistently ask for an explanation of the basis of allocation at London level. What is the magic formula? Is it on the back of a cigarette packet somewhere? If so, we shall never find out what it is.

Another factor that affects Hillingdon and that should be taken into account is that, although crime levels are important in allocating resources, the size of a place should also be considered. Hillingdon is the second largest borough in London, and the police have to cover huge distances to get to scenes of crime. There are some rural areas in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip–Northwood. Many of the suburban issues that we have discussed apply to rural problems. The Government have considered that problem, and, for various reasons, rural policing is beginning to come into line. I have a nasty feeling that, once again, suburbia, or even semi-urban areas, will miss out because we will be squeezed between the inner city and rural areas.

Many other hon. Members wish to speak, so I shall be brief. Pensions have not been mentioned. At some point, a Government will have to face up to that problem. It is a time bomb, and if the nettle is not grasped, our debates, whatever their form in future, will become increasingly difficult for the Home Secretary, whoever he will be. The fire service and the pensions issue will probably cause us more problems than anything else.

The major concerns of my constituents are the fear of crime and the visibility of the police. I urge the Minister to take note of the views from suburbia.

12.10 pm

Mr. Iain Coleman (Hammersmith and Fulham): I am pleased to have this opportunity to contribute to this debate. I shall be brief because I am acutely conscious that a significant number of other hon. Members wish to speak. I shall raise a couple of local issues and a couple of initiatives that are crucial to policing in my constituency of Hammersmith and Fulham.

I am pleased to report that there is an increasingly close working liaison between the police and the local authority, which continues to go well. May I take this opportunity publicly to thank our local borough police commander, Chief Superintendent Anthony Wills, for his strong commitment to a partnership approach with all the

relevant major local agencies, such as the health authority, the business sector and the local council? Their work, with the support of volunteer, residents and tenants groups, has led to successful partnership initiatives to fight crime and disorder, and to build an environment in which a spirit of community and neighbourhood renewal is possible.

I recall the bad days of the 1980s, when the police and the local council were continually at war. They refused to consult each other and spent their time issuing increasingly negative public statements about each other. The effect of such a dire relationship between those two important bodies was that our residents, especially those in the poorest and most vulnerable sectors of the community, suffered. Now, a new environment of trust and tolerance exists. It is important that we continue to build on that relationship for the benefit of the people whom the council and I were elected to serve, and on whose behalf the police are paid to carry out their duties.

The House has already debated football hooliganism this week, but I want to discuss briefly the policing of football matches. Hammersmith and Fulham police division is unique in being the only police command in the United Kingdom—and probably in the world—to have three professional league clubs within its borders. Those are Chelsea, Fulham and Queens Park Rangers football clubs. Last season alone, 92 matches were played within the borough, including in the European Champions league, the FA Cup, other cups and the league. Those matches were policed by a total of 6,749 officers, many of whom came from other divisions in the capital. Inevitably, that creates a tremendous demand on the division, in both managerial and operational terms. However, the local police have had considerable success in meeting their crime objectives and deserve to be congratulated on their performance.

Over the past three years, because of efficiency measures and the remarkable success of police operations, it has become possible to reduce staff levels. However, I am reliably informed that there is now little scope for further reductions. I am concerned that the extra £80,000 awarded to the local police last year to deal specifically with football-related policing has been cut from the budget for next year. Although £80,000 from Hammersmith and Fulham's budget of more than £30 million may seem irrelevant, my hon. Friend the Minister will understand that the vast bulk of that budget is taken up by salary costs, and that the flexibility available in the budget to the senior management is extremely limited. Indeed, the entire overtime budget is less than £500,000, and it should be possible to review the decision to cut the extra resources that have been available to police football matches locally.

Although no responsible or sane person would wish in any way to condone the disgraceful scenes of English thugs causing mayhem and violence at Euro 2000 that we have witnessed on our TV screens—especially in the "Panorama" programme, which many hon. Members will have seen—one fact remains unchallengeable: the high-quality, intelligent and experienced policing of football matches in England is directly attributable to our going a long way to eradicate the appalling scenes of hooliganism at football matches that take place in England, London and Hammersmith and Fulham. That eradication is of course to be welcomed, but it comes with the price of often heavy policing to ensure that civil unrest and disobedience are not allowed to occur.

The same category C thugs who organised the orchestrated violence in Euro 2000 are present at all our football league grounds. There are certainly some at Chelsea, Fulham and QPR every week. We should all remember who has the job of controlling them every week, and what a successful job they do, but I reiterate that that costs money.

I also draw to the attention of the House the ward-based policing initiative in Hammersmith and Fulham, which has proved to be especially successful. Each of the borough's 24 wards now has a dedicated community police officer to respond directly to local policy issues and build strong relationships with the community. An inspector oversees two wards and, following widespread local consultation, ward-based objectives specific to that particular area have been agreed.

Those objectives deal with problems such as graffiti and young people causing vandalism and disorder, which tend to be the ones mentioned most often by the local community as adversely affecting the quality of life and to which many hon. Members have referred. There is no doubt that that genuine exercise in community action has allowed police locally to devote more time and effort to the issues of principal concern to local residents.

In the truancy watch scheme being operated in my constituency, Hammersmith and Fulham police, working with their partners in the education department, are now utilising recent Government legislation to combat truancy. There is a clear link between absence from school and young people's involvement in crime and disorder, and the truancy watch initiative is intended to reduce the number of young people who become involved in anti-social behaviour.

Several of those operations have taken place and the last truancy watch was on 8 June 2000, when there were five joint patrols between police, education and social services departments. Four primary schools, as well as secondary schools, were targeted and a considerable number of young people were spoken to, including 30 who were stopped and questioned about why they were not at school.

Such co-operation and collaboration is another excellent example of partnership working in practice to deal with a perennial problem in a new, imaginative fashion, and all those working together should be congratulated on introducing yet another successful new initiative locally.

12.18 pm

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): The police service is essential, as are nursing and the fire service, and should be valued as such. Unfortunately, just being valued is not enough; it does not buy homes for police officers. They should be paid a salary that allows them to cope with the cost of living in London.

We face difficulties in retaining police officers and recruiting new officers to the service. A decade ago, there were more than 28,000 police in London, but there has been a steady decline in numbers since then. In the early 1990s, the previous Government set up the Sheehy inquiry into police pay and structure. Although many factors contribute to those recruitment and retention problems, Sheehy has brought specific difficulties to the Met. I shall illustrate them.

[Mr. Clive Efford]

Two of my constituents are serving Metropolitan police officers. One told me that he pounds the beat in central London with a colleague who joined the police force after he did. My constituent joined before Sheehy came into force in 1994. They do exactly the same job, but my constituent earns £4,600 a year more than his colleague. Another constituent came to London from Northumberland. He is a post-Sheehy officer, and cannot afford to remain in London. He is now looking for jobs in other forces.

Pre-Sheehy figures for the last decade show a steady decline. The peak in London was at 28,455 in 1990. By 1993, the figure had dropped below 28,000, to 27,867—a fall of 592. The Government published their response to Sheehy in October 1993; its main findings were to be implemented on 1 September 1994. March 1994 saw a drop of 173. By the end of March 1995, six months after the implementation of the Sheehy findings, the London figure had dropped by 1,178.

The pattern is similar in England and Wales. The peak occurred in 1993, at 126,164—an increase of 606 on 1992. By March 1994 the figure had dropped by 351, but by the end of March 1995—again, post-Sheehy—it had dropped by 2,069. After that there was a significant increase, due largely to a massive recruitment drive in the capital to stop the decline. Overall, the figure for England and Wales increased by 1,071 in 1996, but most of that is covered by an increase of 889 in the Metropolitan police. The figure fell in London, however—by 628 in 1997, and by a further 583 in 1998—although the overall figure for England and Wales remained static, in that it rose by 243 in 1997 and fell by a similar amount in 1998.

More recently, the recruitment problem has increased again, and the Metropolitan force is bracing itself for a large number of resignations. Joining the police is not an attractive option for many people. It is not just a problem of pay; serious problems were created in London by the removal of the housing allowance and the implementation of Sheehy, and the force has not recovered from that.

The earnings survey shows that police salaries have kept pace with other public sector salaries. They increased by 25.7 per cent. for all non-manual staff between 1993 and 1999, and police salaries in general increased by 20.1 per cent. The increase for other public sector workers was 18.5 per cent., however.

Our problem in London and the south-east is caused as much by the strength of the economy as by housing difficulties. The strong economy is creating opportunities outside the police force. As those opportunities increase, and as confidence grows, pay cannot keep pace with private sector salaries, and more and more officers are being attracted to other jobs. That is causing a growing recruitment and retention problem.

New recruits earn about £16,500. They receive a London allowance of £1,011, and London weighting of £1,662. That brings their salary up to £19,300. I understand from my local police force that the average basic pay of officers who have served for 10 years—who make up the bulk of the service—is about £24,306. In London especially, it is difficult to retain officers, who find that they cannot earn enough to buy a house and provide for their families.

My local force also tells me that it has not been uncommon in the past for serving officers to receive family credit. As the economy forges ahead, the pressure on the Government to deal with the problem of salaries will increase. I think that it needs urgent attention. There is no doubt that recruitment problems can be traced back to the implementation of Sheehy. In addition to the problem of the cost of living in London, there was the disastrous decision to remove the housing allowance and the freeze applied to officers serving from before 1 September 1994. The Government are right to address those problems. History shows that the Metropolitan police has attracted officers from outside London, and the housing allowance has allowed them to come here. Its removal has prevented such recruitment—people who would come to London are choosing not to.

Attitudes towards the police are also a problem. There have been many problems in that area over the years, notably, though not only, the inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence. The hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) referred to compensation for the Lawrence family. The impact of the Macpherson inquiry on the Metropolitan police has been highly negative. I do not agree with everything said by the Mayor of London, and I will doubtless disagree with him in future, but he was right to say that we must draw a line beneath the Lawrence inquiry if we are to tackle underlying dissatisfaction. The police are not attractive to many people. A realistic settlement with the Lawrences to compensate for how the police treated them after the murder of their son should be achieved.

Several other high-profile cases have made the police unattractive to many people. There were areas of corruption in Westminster police and problems with Kent police. There has been racism and the Michael Menson and McGowan family cases. Each of those issues calls into question the standing of the police in the eyes of the public. They have brought about large-scale dissatisfaction, and they lead to problems of recruitment.

Several notable initiatives have been taken in my constituency. Greenwich police has led the way in racial awareness training through partnerships with local youth services and the local authority. That has allowed the police to bring young people—those whom the police confront on a day-to-day basis—into training sessions at which they can discuss problems. I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies): young people do complain, not about being stopped and searched, but about the police taking the attitude that they are guilty before they are searched. Those people do not think it unreasonable that they should be stopped, but the manner in which it is done and the way in which they are spoken to are issues that the police must resolve.

Greenwich is about to lose 28 extra officers provided to deal with anticipated problems arising from the millennium experience. Those problems have not transpired, but the officers have been effectively used across the borough. High-visibility patrols have been provided, and partnerships in the community were created. Those officers have worked closely with the local authority.

Statistics for Greenwich show the difference that they have made. Burglary is down by 8 per cent., while it has increased across London by 4 per cent. Street crime is down 4 per cent., but across London it has risen by 36

per cent. Arrests for intent to supply drugs rose by 20 per cent. in Greenwich, but there was a 20 per cent. reduction across London. In April and May, car crime was cut by 20 per cent. while London's figure remained almost static, and street crime fell by 17 per cent. and burglary by 30 per cent. Overall, notifiable crime was down by 8 per cent. in Greenwich.

I asked a local inspector how he would account for that. He said that we need good partnerships with the local community and officers to do the job. Today's announcement by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will start to address the decline in the number of officers, but whatever we do in future must ensure that we have enough officers to allow the police to do their job.

12.30 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): The hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck), my immediate parliamentary neighbour, opened the debate from the Back Benches, and I agreed with a great deal of what she said. I geographically have been bracketed on the Opposition Benches by my hon. Friends the Members for Orpington (Mr. Horam) and for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall). Now, I speak for the heart of the capital.

It is a pleasure to follow directly the hon. Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford), who, if I may say so as a Londoner, always speaks most effectively on London problems. It is a genuine privilege to speak after him.

The Home Secretary opened his speech on the cusp between the first 171 years of the Met's history and the new era which is now opening out. Veterans of the Greater London Authority Act 1999 Standing Committee—whom I have seen in the Chamber today from all three parties—will remember our debates on the very provisions that are now being introduced. The template of legislation for rural forces obviously had to be significantly modified for the Met and for the special problems of Greater London.

I wish the Met and the Metropolitan Police Authority well, as I do Sir Paul Condon. I saw him on new year's eve. It was an evening when the Government set some of us a challenge by telling us to dress appropriately for one of their events. In Sir Paul's case, there was no problem, for he was in uniform. It is a great pleasure that that particular night passed off so well at the end of his career. I wish well, too, Sir John Stevens, with whom I had connections in Northern Ireland.

Inevitably, there is a constituency tendency to this debate. However, I should like to open with one or two general London and pan-London issues. I congratulate the Government genuinely and sincerely on the working of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and on the spirit of collaboration with local government that they have inspired by that. The Association of London Government has welcomed borough-based policing, and hopes that borough-based recruitment initiatives can be developed.

In that context, it is worth remarking on the subject of ethnic minority recruitment, for which the targets are well known. The general officer commanding, London district wrote to a number of London Members with large ethnic minority communities in their constituencies on the subject of recruiting ethnic minorities into the armed forces. Although not all of those Members acceded to his request, he has paid tribute to the quality of advice and help that he received from hon. Members on both sides of the House. It is an initiative that might have relevance to the Met as well.

I do not want to dwell at length on the issues of attraction, motivation and retention, very important though I recognise them to be, for they were dealt with at considerable and admirable length by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald). On the other hand, although of course we welcome the Government's housing announcement, which has been foreshadowed in the past couple of days, and has now been announced in this debate by the Home Secretary—I genuinely admire the way in which the Home Secretary deflected the Commissioner's thoughtful reaction to the announcement, which was quoted by my hon. Friend, the Member for North-East Hertfordshire—we shall need to continue to watch the practical effects of that housing announcement.

We cannot forget—I am talking about history, not seeking to make a partisan point—the loss of experienced police sergeants around the age of 35 that we sustained in the 1970s, until the Edmund-Davies report was introduced, and subsequently implemented by the incoming Conservative Government. The Met paid a very heavy price in the quality of officers that they lost in the middle of the 1970s. There is, therefore, a concern to see how that particular initiative works.

There is a genuine problem that effective policing can lead the commanders of those particular borough forces not to be reinforced, as there are greater problems elsewhere, which obviously creates problems for morale in the forces under them. There is no doubt at all that concern about police numbers is being reflected at sector working group meetings in south Westminster, as well as in the constituency of the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North. It is being noticed and then reflected in comment.

Still at the pan-London level, there was concern on the Standing Committee that considered the Greater London Authority Bill about the police community consultative groups' statutory cover being removed in that legislation. Westminster has always had strong groups, with three groups throughout the city and sub-groups on specific issues such as homelessness and licensing. I suspect that, over the years to come, one of the most valuable developments in that sector will be new sub-groups looking at specific issues such as licensing and homelessness, as the new sector working groups, of which there are 15 in Westminster, themselves gather strength in working within the community on the ground.

As I have mentioned homelessness and licensing in that context, let me dwell briefly on them in a police context. I am an admirer of the integrated approach to issues of rough sleeping, led by Louise Casey, but derived from earlier work. In the past year, that has been deployed effectively in Westminster, as it had been in Camden and Lambeth.

In terms of licensing, the police community consultative sub-committee, which is chaired by a notable west end licensee, my constituent Matthew Bennett, produced a very good report and has since taken central Government officials around Soho at three and four in the morning, which, I will remark neutrally, has had the effect of opening eyes. Of course, one can build in conditions

[Mr. Peter Brooke]

for licences, and licence holders can make commitments when they are securing their licences, but if, overall, three times as many licensees are operating in the west end compared with 20 years ago, and the number of police monitoring them remains static, inevitably, the quality of monitoring must fall.

Licensing takes one with natural elision to the Government's enthusiasm for a 24-hour city. Let me make it clear that I realise that a lot of crime, especially robbery, occurs on commercial premises and in entertainment outlets. I salute the work in collaboration with Westminster city council and the police to prevent and to make crime less likely through a series of management initiatives on those premises, but, necessarily, entertainment outlets feel less responsibility for their patrons once they have left their premises. That is where much of the problem can occur, which makes for sleep-disturbed nights for local residents.

I am told that there are more people in Leicester square at 3 am than there are at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. There is a real risk of the police losing control of order in those circumstances. Westminster city council has already had to have second thoughts about pedestrianisation schemes in Soho. It is bound to have third, fourth, fifth and sixth thoughts about the pedestrianisation of Trafalgar square. It is close to Leicester square. The record thrower of a cricket ball in cricket history could just about cover the distance between Leicester square and Trafalgar square, but if there are potential problems in losing control in Leicester square, they are a fortiori worse in a space as large as Trafalgar square.

It can be safely policed on great occasions, but, if it is pedestrianised, we are talking about a 24-hour city, 365 days a year. It took three deaths at a Garibaldi demonstration in Hyde park in 1862 to persuade the then Government to create the narrower focus of Speaker's corner. The scale of space does matter.

I am conscious that the nature of my constituency in several ways—the size of the non-resident population and its high profile—attracts crime. In 1978, Home Secretary Lord Merlyn-Rees warned me when I visited him to discuss the El Al shootings in Mayfair that I had to expect at least half the terrorist crime in London to occur in the constituency. He and the Commissioner were extremely good in their response to a major street prostitution problem in Shepherd Market in the same year, to which 24 women police constables were posted for a prolonged and effective period. Prostitution is an activity that has been subject to local displacement throughout London's history, which one can trace in Stephen Inwood's new book.

In paying contemporary tribute to the Home Secretary and the Commissioner for the resources that have been put into combating street trading in drugs in Soho, I note that exactly the same displacement effect is occurring—which is at least a temporary index of success and effectiveness—and moving the problem to the top end of the Charing Cross road, which brings the London borough of Camden into the issue. I hope that the Met can continue to sustain the campaign, with all its implications for the tourism industry.

The same collaboration with the private sector to which I referred in connection with robbery also relates to the work in designing out crime, as previously done in housing estates, which is now being done on major thoroughfares in the west end, under the auspices of Sir John Wheeler, a most distinguished former Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee.

The hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North referred to closed circuit television in the west end. Of course, that played a significant part in the nail bombs detection and the Soho drugs campaign. The Minister of State is always good enough to write and tell me about CCTV developments in my constituency. However, as with police speed cameras monitoring motorists, running costs are a problem and CCTV's effectiveness necessarily depends on its being switched on.

I want to say a quick word about drunks in custody. My constituency is not immediately affected by the current trend towards joint custody suites shared by more than one station, as mentioned in the *Evening Standard*. Given the problems of both cost and nimbyism surrounding detoxification centres, on which there have been no swifter developments under this than under the previous Government, I am delighted that the Kent experiment of having resident nurses on duty to help with drunks in custody is now being tested at the Met's Charing Cross police station. It will be interesting to see how it develops.

The hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North referred to the commander in the royal borough. The last time she spoke in such a debate, she referred warmly to the commander in Westminster, Bob Currie. He is about to retire after 32 years in the police service, initially in Cumbria and latterly—and for a long time—in the Met. Westminster is grateful to him for his leadership.

Ms Buck: I was remiss in not paying tribute to Bob Currie on the eve of his retirement, and I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to offer my warm regards to him now.

Mr. Brooke: It adds pleasure to the event that I have stimulated that intervention from the hon. Lady. The fact that Bob Currie is to be succeeded by a Deputy Assistant Commissioner is a neat compliment to the national aspects of Westminster's policing, as well as the local ones.

I spoke about the City of London police at greater length in the two previous debates on London policing. I pay tribute to them today in recording the 1998 level of public satisfaction with them, reported by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary, at 84 per cent., the highest for any force in the country with foot and mobile patrols.

My hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire drew attention to that force's loss of personnel. I realise that that is due significantly to the ceasefire in Northern Ireland, but I hope that the loss would be swiftly corrected if, heaven forfend, Irish terrorism in the capital were to resume.

12.43 pm

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke). I, too, served in Committee on the Greater London Authority Bill, and I had the pleasure of hearing many of his contributions, liberally sprinkled with historical and literary quotations which amused many of us.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on his announcement today, which will go a long way towards addressing many of the issues about policing that have been a constant theme in many of the speeches in this debate. Decisions such as the one taken by Sheehy as long ago as 1994 have long-term effects that cannot always be seen in the first months or even years. Today's announcement is welcome, but its benefits will come through in years rather than months. London has enormous problems in the recruitment and retention of police, so it is good that the Government are attempting to address that.

I emphasise the importance of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, which has significantly influenced the improvements in policing throughout the Metropolitan police area. There are always difficulties, as we hear from constituents who have not had an adequate response from the police, but generally the figures show that there is high satisfaction with the Metropolitan police, and they provide good service throughout London. The Act will continue to have a lasting and beneficial influence, and increased resourcing of local partnership will lead to even greater success.

By resourcing, I do not necessarily mean additional funding for the Metropolitan police service, although it will always welcome that. In my constituency, the local authority's adverse financial position means that it is unable to contribute to and participate in local partnerships as effectively as we would like. The 1998 Act places important obligations on local authorities which require adequate resources if benefits are to be forthcoming.

I can give a positive example. In Havering, the local community safety strategy, developed as a result of the 1998 Act, involves the police and the local authority working towards reducing injury in road traffic accidents. That is, admittedly, a small component of the strategy, but it illustrates my point. Community police officers and local government officers visit schools and emphasise the need for improved road safety. They concentrate, in part, on the need for seat belts. My young son, who attends a local school, had the benefit of one of those visits, and I can see by his actions that it has impressed on him the urgent need to belt up as soon as he gets into the car.

The important point is that since that strategy was introduced, there has been a 55 per cent. reduction in in-car injuries, and it is mostly young children who have benefited. There are also the knock-on effects of fewer visits to accident and emergency departments and fewer days off school. Community police officers and the local authority have worked together to deliver positive results. From talking to the local police and other members of the partnership in Havering, I know that they would like to develop other initiatives, but they are restricted by local authority resources. I am sure that many other benefits would flow from such work.

There are similar problems in dealing with youth crime. It is recognised locally that street crime, anti-social behaviour and vandalism can be targeted through better youth provision and the use of outreach workers. However, cuts made to those services, largely during the 18 years of Conservative Government, cannot be restored, so there is a lack of local youth provision. In my view and that of the local partnership, that is a contributory factor in youth crime.

Some projects remain. My constituency has the particular problems of motorcycle theft and of motorcycles owned by young people being ridden over local fields, causing disturbance and nuisance. A motorcycle project is being developed through single regeneration budget funding. The local police participate in that and encourage disaffected young people, and those with records of offending, to participate. The police run training schemes and identify areas where the motorcycles can be used under supervision. The scheme has helped to reduce accidents and associated crime. Constituents are enthusiastic about the scheme, and when they see the benefits from it they wish that it could be extended elsewhere.

Funding is not the only issue. Londonwide, and indeed nationwide, the crime statistics and the Audit Commission's performance indicators clearly demonstrate that benefits accrue to policing by means other than additional funding. The key question from the performance indicators is why there are such large variations in performance between similar police forces. An example from the indicators is that in the west midlands—which also has a metropolitan police force—the clean-up rate is more than a third higher than that of the Metropolitan police. However, because of the change in the rules for counting crimes, it is difficult to compare the performance of individual forces over the past few years.

The Metropolitan police service has the highest number of police officers available for ordinary duty per 1,000 population at 3.2, when the national average is 2.1. However, the London figure has fallen since 1994-95 by 0.4 per cent., the largest decrease nationwide. The announcement today will, I hope, address that decline. At the same time, expenditure on the Metropolitan police per head of population is approximately £220, but the national average is £118. Again, the Met has seen the largest reduction in the years since 1994-95 of approximately £12 per head.

Almost all police authorities increased their expenditure, adjusted for inflation, over the past five years, but the Met has reduced expenditure by 5 per cent. That reduction has had a debilitating effect on the outer-London divisions, such as Havering, with lower police numbers and some reductions in services, including reductions in police station hours. The hon. Member for North–East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) mentioned the Collier Row police station, which was highlighted for closure. After an effective campaign, which was led by my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Mrs. Gordon)—who is unable to be present for the debate—the police station remains open, albeit with reduced hours.

I congratulate the local borough commander, Chief Superintendent Bob Youldon, and, in my own constituency, Sergeant Walford, who is responsible for community policing. I receive significant support and assistance from those officers in dealing with constituency complaints and inquiries.

During the year, the Havering police continued to respond to the many demands made on them. The borough, and Romford town in particular, continued to attract growing numbers of visitors to the many social activities and shopping facilities available, which inevitably has contributed to the increase in reported crime, especially street crime, vehicle-related crime and violence against the person. However, Havering is one of

[Mr. Keith Darvill]

London's safest boroughs and the need to reassure and effectively communicate the actual levels of crime to the public is highlighted in the local crime and disorder audit.

The success in reducing residential burglary has been offset by the increase in the number of non-residential offences so that overall there has been a 5 per cent. increase in the total number of burglaries committed. Operation Arrow, a pro-active initiative funded by challenge money, was established to stem the increase and had a significant effect during the second half of the year, when non-residential burglaries were reduced by 22 per cent.

Street crime has shown a significant percentage increase, especially in the Romford town centre area, but that needs to be put into its true perspective in that the actual number of offences—an average of 20 a month—is the lowest of all London boroughs. Vehicle crime increased by 2 per cent., with areas in and around Romford town centre, and Harold Hill in my constituency, being identified as hot spots.

The offences of drug supply and of possession with intent to supply are measured by the number of judicial disposals. That number fell last year, and one probable cause was the deterrent effect of the positive action taken, with the management of late-night licensed premises, to identify and arrest drug abusers as they enter night clubs. That is another example of a good working partnership, and similar examples involve other agencies in the judicial process.

Crimes and other incidents with racial elements increased last year, with recorded offences at levels double those of the previous year, although improved public awareness and greater confidence in reporting crimes were almost certainly factors in the rise. The commitment to meet the challenges involved in all aspects of hate crimes or of crimes committed against vulnerable groups will place greater demands on police and community safety unit staff.

My regular meetings with chief superintendent Bob Youldon and his team are also attended by my hon. Friends the Members for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) and for Romford. They have proved positive and beneficial.

This is the third debate of this Parliament on policing in London. Even though the Greater London Assembly and the new Metropolitan Police Authority have roles to play, I believe that these debates should continue. Members of Parliament will continue to receive representations from constituents, and it is useful to be able raise in debate concerns about police issues in the Greater London area, as hon. Members of all parties have experience in this important area of public life and service.

I congratulate Sir John Stevens and all Metropolitan police staff on their achievements. I wish the new MPA and the GLA all success in the work that they are about to commence.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I cannot impose a time limit on speeches by Back-Bench Members at this stage in a debate, but if hon. Members can try to keep their remarks to about 10 minutes in length it will be possible for everyone to contribute.

12.57 pm

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): I rise to speak in this debate as a Surrey Member of Parliament. A significant part of the Metropolitan police was transferred back to the county of Surrey this year. Some years ago I was a London councillor and I represented an area that stretched as far as Paddington Green, in which there were several police section houses. I have followed the fortunes of the Metropolitan police very carefully over the past few years.

In his opening remarks, the Home Secretary spoke about the recruiting difficulties faced by the Metropolitan police. His observations contrast with what the Financial Secretary to the Treasury told a debate in Westminster Hall. Only two months ago, on 24 May, he said about the Metropolitan police,

retention in the police is not a major problem.

He went on to make a favourable comparison between turnover in the Metropolitan force and in the economy as a whole, and he cited Confederation of British Industry figures for 1998-99. Clearly, the Home Secretary will have more up-to-date information, and one wonders whether the new recruiting difficulties that he has described stem from problems that have developed and grown since.

Mr. Edward Davey: I happen to have the *Hansard* report of the debate to which the hon. Gentleman referred. Although it is not my job to defend the Financial Secretary, I can tell the House that, immediately after the sentence to which the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) referred, he went on to say:

However, there have been recruitment difficulties, which are being dealt with through the police negotiating board.—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 24 May 2000; Vol. 350, c. 225WH.]

Mr. St. Aubyn: The hon. Gentleman is right. The Financial Secretary said that retention of police was not a problem.

Clearly, there have been growing difficulties in the past year. Why have they developed? The problem seems to be about more than money. House prices and the cost of living in the capital have risen dramatically over the past eight years, but the really decisive problem over the past year or two has been the deterioration in morale in the Metropolitan police.

Recently, I attended a meeting with the Surrey police authority at the Surrey police headquarters at Mount Browne in my constituency. We were informed of the very low morale in the Metropolitan police. There is no doubt that a key reason for that drop in morale is the impact of the Macpherson report. The problem has to be dealt with sensitively and carefully, but we must address it in this debate. In 1988, the number of stop-and-search operations undertaken on a quarterly basis by the Metropolitan police was 85,000; by the middle of 1999, the number had dropped to only 60,000. During the same period, street crime rose by 30 per cent.

Some of the more recent recruitment difficulties for the Metropolitan police have reflected the serious consequences of the change in operational performance and the constraints that the police feel that they are now under.

Mr. Heald: Was my hon. Friend making a distinction between retention and recruitment? Does he agree that

about 6,000 officers a year are leaving the police service in Britain? Does he agree that that high figure is one of the reasons why measures such as the crime fighting fund will not achieve all that is hoped for them?

Mr. St. Aubyn: I agree and I feel that the Financial Secretary was being complacent in his remarks about the retention problems in the police force. I shall explain how retention in the Surrey police will be seriously affected by today's announcement by the Home Secretary, however well intentioned it may have been.

Clearly, the Macpherson report was well intentioned, but it has not achieved the results meant for it. In January, Sir Paul Condon said that police officers' lives had been damaged in a way from which they would never recover. The report was an attempt to address a real problem in the police—the problem, arguably even a culture, of racism. However, it was going too far to state that there was institutional racism. No one here would want to condone racism. I spent nearly a year living and working in Soweto in the era of apartheid. That was institutional racism. The Metropolitan police did not face a problem of that scale. Evidently, the way in which the problem was described had an impact on morale at a time when the police were already trying to deal with the problems in their ranks.

The new arrangements for post-Sheehy officers in the force are part of the price of failure that we have to pay for the Macpherson report and its consequences, and there will be a knock-on effect on other police authorities. In Surrey, we have a particular problem because part of Surrey's responsibility was taken over in April this year from the Metropolitan force. For a handover period, officers are being seconded from the Metropolitan police to Surrey. I would be grateful if the Minister would clarify the precise status of those officers and whether they are post-Sheehy officers, in terms of today's announcement.

If those officers are to be awarded the extra £64 a week on top of the existing differential over the Surrey officers with whom they will be working, that will highlight a discrepancy. If they do not receive the extra award of £64, they will find that they face all of the difficulties of their former colleagues—as very few of them will have moved house since they were seconded to Surrey—without any of the new help announced today by the Home Secretary.

That is a pivotal example of a wider problem that will face us in Surrey. Up until now, we have had a differential between Surrey and the Metropolitan police of around £3,000 a year. Following today's announcement, that will go up to £6,000 a year. The same will be true of the other home counties. I was grateful that the Home Secretary recognised the scale of the problem, which was expressed to me during the recent meeting at Mount Browne. The size of the differential has grown so much that there will be a transfer of police officers from Surrey and other surrounding forces, meaning that the recruitment problem has not been solved, but merely transferred. We fear that, at the same time, some of the problems of morale will be transferred, because we have discovered from London's experience of the past few years that it is one thing to lose morale, but a far harder thing to rebuild it.

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point and, as my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said earlier, I am discussing the matter with the chief constables of the forces concerned. However, does he believe that, for that reason, my right hon. Friend's announcement today should not have been made, or does he think it should have been made but more should be done? I should be grateful for clarification on that point.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I think that, as the Minister responsible for all policing in this country, the Home Secretary should have made an announcement that encompassed all policing in this country and not confined his remarks to the Metropolitan police. Of course, the Met will welcome the award and I acknowledge that there is a job to be done to rebuild the morale, effectiveness and success of the London force. The Home Secretary made the comparison between a London police constable of five years' experience who will now earn £27,600 a year and a London teacher of many years' experience who will earn only £26,300 a year and expressed the hope that that will attract more people into policing. However, the problems in policing cannot in the long term be addressed at the expense of other public services, so his approach is short-sighted.

The real problem at the heart of police and public service recruitment in London is the skills gap, represented by the fact that there are now in our economy 1 million vacancies, many of which are in the London area. That is the highest number of vacancies recorded at any time in the past 10 years or more, and it has serious consequences for the economy. In my opinion, it reflects directly the Government's failure to maintain the number of people going through college, especially further education colleges, that the Conservatives had achieved by the time they left office in 1997. Cumulatively, since 1997, 500,000 fewer students have completed FE courses. The knock-on effect of that is the growing skills gap. That, in turn, has affected recruitment to the police and other public services as private sector employers have used their flexibility to raise salaries. As a result, the police are now being forced to raise their salaries in London and I predict that there will be knock-on consequences for forces elsewhere in the country.

I am mindful of your comments, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have appreciated the opportunity to participate in a well-informed debate and to hear the speeches of other hon. Members. I hope that the Minister will deal with the points that I have raised when he replies the debate.

1.7 pm

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): To be able to speak in this important debate and reflect the views of my constituents, I have not gone on a visit to Northern Ireland with the Select Committee on Defence.

I recall a former Conservative Home Secretary meeting a group of Labour Members of Parliament and telling them that crime had a connection with enterprise. His audience was deeply unimpressed with that complacent excuse for the huge rise in crime recorded under Conservative Administrations. Crime doubled under the Conservatives: in London, violent crime increased by an astonishing 259 per cent. To an increasing extent, young offenders got away with their crimes; if they were caught, it took an age to get them to court. Nothing was done to tackle anti-social behaviour, including the vicious racial attacks that ruined many decent people's lives. In the capital, between 1993 and 1998, the number of police fell by almost 2,000. The right hon. Member for Maidstone

[Mr. Harry Cohen]

and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), then a Home Office Minister, promised 5,000 more police officers, but instead delivered that reduction.

Turning around that legacy of lawlessness is a difficult task, but I appreciate that the current Government are making relentless progress. Crime has fallen by 7 per cent., and the Government are well on the way to fulfilling the Prime Minister's election pledge to halve the time taken from arrest to sentencing of persistent young offenders. In London, the time taken getting them to court was reduced by 35 per cent. between 1997 and 1999. Laws have been passed making racial violence and harassment crimes—something I first proposed to the House in 1985—and enabling local authorities to evict anti-social neighbours. Anti-social behaviour orders and detention and training orders are now available to the courts, and youth offender teams have been set up in many communities.

The Government have allocated cash to recruit an extra 1,113 police officers for London over the next couple of years. That is in addition to the Commissioner's plans. The Met has been set a target to increase the number of its ethnic minority officers from 865 to 6,526 to match the proportion in the local population. It is right to do that.

Targets have been set to reduce vehicle crime by 31 per cent., burglary by 10 per cent. and robberies by 15 per cent. in London over the next five years. Crime reduction partnerships have been set up, involving the police, local authorities and other key players. Those are up and running in every part of London.

Despite such programmes, there is a crime wave in my constituency. It is one thing to have the various youth offence orders in place; it is another thing to catch the youths in the first place. The 7 per cent. crime reduction is welcome. For some crimes, such as burglary, there has been a substantial reduction, but for others, such as vehicle and street crime, there has been an increase. In some parts of the country, there has been a big reduction in crime, which is welcome, but in other parts an increase has taken place. That seems to be the case in Leyton and Wanstead, and neither I nor my constituents like it.

There have been some horrendous exceptional crimes recently in my constituency: a murder, a robbery with a sawn-off shotgun, another robbery in which a security man almost lost his hand, a sniper with an air gun—I pay tribute to the police who apprehended the sniper—and a vicious racial attack. On top of that, there has been a high tide of youth crime, in which youngsters are the perpetrators as well as the victims. That spills over into the rest of the community. In some cases adults are the victims, and a fear of crime builds up as a result.

I know that the Commissioner has set up a safer streets programme, but it has not yet reached Leyton and Wanstead. What is it? When will it apply? That is the Commissioner's first real test, and my constituents are waiting to see whether he will pass it.

I refer the House to some comments from my recent constituency casework. A woman came to my last advice surgery from the Avenue estate, Leytonstone. She told me about a roaming bunch of youths, some as young as eight, who were very much into car crime. At 12.30 pm one day they were setting out to torch a car—a petrol can was found on the scene—but, fortunately, they were disturbed.

The head of Norlington school in Leytonstone, Mr. Neil Primrose, telephoned me only yesterday and spoke about muggings having reached crisis levels and impacting on the performance of the children at his school. He said that whereas there used to be one or two muggings in a whole term, on Monday evening alone there were four. He has called a public meeting on the subject, which I shall have to attend.

Gill Morley of Voluntary place, Wanstead wrote to me, stating:

> Wanstead has no wish to become a crime "hot spot".
>
> Christchurch Green has, in particular, turned into a late night meeting ground and walking along the High Street after dark usually means hearing screaming, shouting and the sound of fights. The park in daylight looks like a war zone—lights torn down, trees, benches and anything else to hand are trashed.
>
> Would you please make every effort to ensure Wanstead has an efficient and energetic police presence.

Mrs. S. J. Bass of Dangan road, Wanstead, a resident for 27 years, also wrote about the problems of Christchurch green and the George green, and listed a litany of crime and vandalism. She wrote:

> My home is located near Christchurch Green. I am appalled to see that this precious and valued green area which has for many years been used for the recreation and enjoyment of local people old and young has now become the chosen "hang out" for the ignorant and uncouth. . . Large groups "hang out" on the green at night and are very threatening.

She continued:

> Petty crime and petty vandalism if ignored and tolerated eat their way through an area and it becomes a bad place to live.

Mr. and Mrs. Green of Spratt Hall road came to my advice surgery. They have been residents for 20 years and said that crime levels were the worst that they could remembers. They called for a visible police presence patrolling locally.

Mr. Baptiste of Warren road in Wanstead also visited my advice surgery. He has been a resident for 30 years and is shocked at the current position. He said:

> Wanstead is being targeted as a soft touch because there is no police presence.

That situation cannot be allowed to persist.

The safer streets programme must become effective; police must be around to capture youths so that the relevant orders can be implemented. The courts and the authorities must act because long-term, generalised plans alone are no good. There should be foot patrols and a car presence when needed—for example, at night and at weekends. Response times must be faster. The police charter talks about police responding to 80 per cent. of calls in 12 minutes. That is not being achieved. One Wanstead family who were threatened with violent assault by a gang who were stealing the wheels off their car in broad daylight waited 28 minutes for the police to arrive. The criminals were long gone by then.

I support the provision of CCTV for small shopping and business areas, and the campaign by the local *Guardian*. However, I suspect that the Government would not. They emphasise large shopping and business centres, not smaller ones. There is also a problem of matching funds: it is more difficult for smaller businesses to contribute. However, smaller urban centres are important. The Government's priorities for CCTV should change to help them. I have written to the Chancellor urging a tax break and an insurance premium break for those who install CCTV and take other security measures.

The number of police for normal borough policing should be increased. Police are currently siphoned off for other purposes, which are perhaps laudable—for example, to supplement murder teams and murder review teams, and to go on secondment to the home counties. However, the Government should tackle the problem. I am pleased that they have made a start with today's announcement of a £64 a week pay rise for junior officers. Police numbers must increase, and that must permeate to the boroughs.

Let us consider small police station closures and limited opening times. My constituents argue strongly that Wanstead police station should be open seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Monday to Friday opening, from 10 am to 6 pm, is the plan. Even that is not achieved because of the inability to recruit suitable reception staff. A sergeant and two officers are based there. My efforts have led to the appointment of another two officers, but they cover a slightly larger area. The assumptions about the closure programme for small police stations should be reconsidered. Closures are made on the basis of cost and on the presumption of faster response times, which are not happening. The closures and run-downs make areas such as Wanstead vulnerable to crime.

Small urban shopping areas are like rural areas, but it is easier for the villains to gain access to them and to get away from them. The Government are trying to improve the policing of rural areas; they should do the same for smaller, urban parts of London. I note that there was no Conservative commitment to reopening police stations that have been closed or to opening them for longer.

The Tory years emphasised consumerism and instant gratification, without having to earn it. The Tory Government ignored young people: they did not listen to them, they took away their training and education opportunities, they did not provide proper work for them, and they closed down their youth clubs. That has created a yobbish culture, which is a serious problem at home and abroad. It shames Britain, as happened in Brussels last week. That is compounded by allegedly pro-British boorishness, lack of civility, xenophobia and racism, and the belief that other races and other nationalities are less human and can, therefore, be disrespected.

The Government have acted on several fronts, some of which I mentioned at the beginning of my speech. Youth employment has been a particular achievement. We need to tackle the youth issue from several directions. The general plan of anti-crime partnerships must result in sustained action on the ground. That is not happening yet.

The Home Secretary should set up an urgent inquiry to ascertain what more needs to be done to turn the tide. The Chancellor of the Exchequer should loosen his purse strings to implement its recommendations, which I would expect to include more youth clubs, more mentors and ways to utilise our youth as an asset to the community, rather than a threat. Obviously, there must also be more effective policing throughout London.

Crime gets people down; the Government must get crime down. I know that Ministers are determined to do that.

1.20 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): May I put on record my thanks to, and admiration for, the Metropolitan police in general and, in particular, every single police officer working in Kingston division? They are ably led by Chief Superintendent Alan Given, Chief Inspectors Keith Free, Paul Dowell and Nick Jupp, and DCI Kevin Hurley. Many PCs, such as Robert Newman, are embracing some of the new ideas and opportunities provided in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. They are doing a very good job and are committed to policing the streets of Kingston.

However, all the innovation in the world cannot make up for the lack of numbers, which is a serious problem in Kingston division. It suffered cuts in the run-up to the last election and has suffered cuts since, and now finds that it cannot even recruit to the establishment numbers that the Commissioner has allowed.

Recruitment has been the theme of this debate, but it is in real crisis. The Home Secretary made a welcome announcement at the beginning of the debate, but the question for the House and for the Government is whether the measure goes far enough to meet the extent of the recruitment crisis facing the Metropolitan police. I do not think it does.

The number of recruits going to the training colleges is down. The number coming from the training colleges to Kingston division has been down this year—the division has not had a new recruit for the past three months and is not expecting one until August because of the reduced number going through the training colleges. The increased salary allowance will be helpful, as it will presumably attract new recruits. The question is, is it large enough? Before the police arbitration board reached its conclusions earlier this week, the figures that were being discussed were significantly higher—we were looking at 5,000 and 6,000.

Another question is whether the pay award is wide enough. It is being made only to post-Sheehy police officers. As the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) said, the morale of pre-Sheehy senior police officers may be damaged by the fact that they are not covered by the award. Let us remember that they have withstood a lot of pressure over the past few years as numbers have dropped because of the Sheehy reforms. It is they who have stood by and taken on the extra work load. They have borne the brunt of the pressures, but their loyalty and commitment are not being rewarded. The Government must look after the pre-Sheehy Metropolitan police officers as well.

An awful lot of recovery is needed from the damage perpetrated by the Tories with the Sheehy reforms. That damage is severe, so it will take a good many measures from the Government to heal it. It will not be healed simply by a housing allowance or the future provision of houses; any measures must be wider than that to ensure that a career as a Metropolitan police officer is attractive and regarded as worthy and respectable. I cannot emphasise that point enough.

May I exemplify how the shortage of police officers has affected conditions in Kingston? Morale has fallen because of various changes that have been forced on the divisional commander as a result of the lack of police officers. For example, the division has had to move from a shift of five to a shift of four, which has meant that officers who are already under pressure now have more night duties and fewer weekends off. That has an effect. Unless more officers are recruited, morale cannot be raised and we cannot get out of the vicious circle and into a virtuous one.

[Mr. Edward Davey]

All that must be viewed in the context of a group of officers in Kingston who are trying to do everything that the Government have allowed them to do. They have entered partnerships with businesses. New business watch schemes have been set up in Kingston, New Malden, Surbiton and Chessington. There is a pub watch and an industrial estates watch in Chessington. The police have joined the safer stations initiative, which I set up. They are responding to ideas that I proposed, such as a school safety net, borrowing an initiative that was used in Hillingdon division. The police communicate with the schools in the borough, using e-mail as a rapid messaging system to ensure that if there are problems—for example, with potential sexual offenders, child molesters or drugs—messages can be communicated to schools so that they are aware of those problems and are linked to the police.

Such initiatives are very effective in tackling crime, and they are being embraced. Officers in Kingston are being more productive—to use an economics term—in tackling crime, but the problem is that there are just too few of them. It takes the police longer to respond to 999 calls for help made from the perimeters of Kingston division.

Low-level crime has increased significantly in the past two years, primarily because of the cuts. Graffiti, which hon. Members have mentioned, are rife in Kingston. The police are taking an anti-graffiti initiative and working with the local authorities and the probation service. The youth offending teams are tackling graffiti, but this is a real problem and the reduction in police numbers that has taken place over the past five years is one of the major contributory factors to its being so severe.

I make no apology for pressing the case for having more officers in the Metropolitan police overall and in Kingston yet again in this annual debate. The hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) was right to argue that the Chancellor needs to make that a priority in the forthcoming comprehensive spending review. The Metropolitan police service has suffered significantly in the past 10 or 15 years. Its share of the national police budget cake has declined, and it is time that decline was reversed significantly.

I have some good news for the House from my patch in Kingston. Because of the campaign that my colleagues and I have waged and because of the excellent leadership of Chief Superintendent Alan Given, the police station in New Malden, which has been closed for some time, will now be the home of the dog-handling section for south London. I welcome that important development, which will guarantee that station's future. It will not be sold off in the Metropolitan police force's efficiency programmes. Moreover, it means that many marked police vans will move in and out of the station and that those police officers will be able to respond to emergency incidents in the Kingston division.

Kingston division has implemented the diversity strategy. We want the divisional commanders to respond to the Macpherson report, and that has been done remarkably well in Kingston, where a comprehensive strategy has been set out. Officers have been designated to deal with certain race and hate crimes and the police are liaising with the local authority to enhance emergency rehousing for victims of race-hate crimes. There is a determined recruitment drive, with a long list of activities by Kingston college, Kingston university and so on to try to recruit members of the ethnic minorities to the local police force.

The strategy includes providing religious support for Muslim prisoners and victims of crime at Kingston station. The Korean business community watch has been developed, which is a welcome initiative. All that has happened under the scope of the diversity strategy for Kingston. Some of the best practice in the Metropolitan police service is being developed in Kingston, and I recommend it to Ministers in the Home Office and the Commissioner.

We have had to form a community team in Kingston because of the lack of resources and the need to respond to all those challenges. It pools the nine or 10 beat officers who remain in Kingston—five years ago there were about 30—to try to ensure that they focus on particular crime hot spots. The arrangement has worked very well in the case of the truancy patrols that were mentioned earlier and in the attempt to focus on groups of youths who have caused problems in certain communities such as the Sunray estate in Tolworth, the Verma Drive estate in Surbiton and the Chessington Hall estate in Chessington. It has been effective in tackling the surge in youth crime in my area.

The problem is that there are still too few police. Chessington, which has a population of more than 10,000, has half a beat officer.

Mr. Forth: Which half?

Mr. Davey: I mean half the officer's time. For the other half of her time, the lady officer concerned has to join the community and become involved in various programmes and initiatives elsewhere in the borough.

Chessington therefore does not have the beat officer cover that it needs. We have the smallest possible number of officers, and we need far more. Not only do we need to engage properly in the fight against crime in order to reduce the number of offences—incidentally, the number increased by 11 per cent. last year in the Kingston division—but we need to respond to the public's desire to see beat officers on the streets, and that will be possible only if the Government provide resources to give communities such as mine the support that they need.

I would have liked to make many more points on behalf of local residents and Kingston police, but I am conscious of the time. Let me ask the Minister a final question. During a recent debate on graffiti, he referred me—and other hon. Members—to, I think, section 12 of the London Local Authorities Act 1995, saying that it gave local authorities power to try to clean up graffiti. My local authority, with which I have discussed the issue, tells me that although the power is welcome, it takes a long time to use it, and that the costs involved make it prohibitive for a cash-strapped authority. I do not expect the Minister to reply today, but perhaps he will consider whether that welcome power could be altered to make it more effective and more easy to use.

I end by praising the officers of the Kingston division.

1.32 pm

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): The hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam) sneeringly referred to what he called the cosmopolitan elite on the Government Front

Bench. It is deeply ironic that someone like him should make such a comment. He used to represent a working-class constituency in the north-east. Working-class men and women put him here, but what did he do when he got down here? He kicked the ladder away, joined the Social Democratic party and then disappeared. I am sure that those people were glad to see the back of him, given that they had not seen the front of him too much for the previous few years.

The last royal commission report on the police was published in 1962. Since then, both society and the police have changed almost beyond recognition. There are now 4 million illegally held handguns in the country. A range of statistics demonstrate a clear link between crime involving drugs—especially class A drugs—and other crimes. There is a huge network of motorways that did not exist in 1962, which has enormous implications in terms of car crime.

Even in the supposedly leafy borough of Havering, which I represent, and in the area represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill), who spoke earlier, drug crime, gun crime and knife crime combine to constitute a serious problem. Although it is not given a great deal of attention by the media, there is an enormous problem in outer London generally. The media tend to focus on what happens in inner London, but outer London contains pockets of severe deprivation. I want to draw the attention of my hon. Friend the Minister of State to the fear that outer-London boroughs will suffer if officers are drawn from outer London and concentrated in inner London. There is fear in Havering that that will happen—it has happened in previous years, and there is a danger that it will happen again.

There is no substitute for bobbies on the beat. All sorts of attempts have been made over the past 30 or 40 years to come up with substitutes for officers on the beat. It does not work. Investment in CCTV and information technology is welcome, but those things complement people on the beat; they do not replace them. We need people on the beat to reassure our constituents.

Like other hon. Members, I pay tribute to the work of police officers—in my case, those in Havering. Chief Supt Bob Youldon, the borough commander, has done a terrific job. Since he and his team arrived in Havering a couple of years ago, the profile of community policing has increased enormously, and partnerships of the kind envisaged in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 have been established. Other boroughs were already pioneering such partnerships, and arrangements of the kind had been made for many years. In Havering, they simply did not exist, and much pioneering work has now been done.

I echo the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Upminster about the pathetically inadequate standard spending settlement that the Government have provided for Havering. That hits a range of public services, particularly the police. Partnerships cannot be properly fulfilled and community policing is put under enormous pressure as a result of cuts in social services and other services. The SSA is made under a formula introduced by the previous Government, but we have persisted with it. Discussion of SSAs is not directly in order for this debate, but the system has direct relevance to how the police conduct themselves.

Recruitment is a problem in the whole of London. There is no shadow of a doubt about the key factor in the Metropolitan police's inability to recruit more officers—the Sheehy proposals of 1994 and the abolition of the accommodation allowance. I welcome wholeheartedly my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's announcement today, which will go some way to repairing the damage inflicted in the early and mid-1990s by the previous Conservative Administration. The hon. Member for Orpington was completely wrong to say that the Labour Government had damaged the police—the Labour Governments of the 1970s implemented the Davies report, which gave one of the biggest-ever lifts in police pay.

The police have suffered more under Tory, and even Liberal, Administrations than at any other time; we should not forget that the police strike of 1919 was broken by Lloyd George. He had the leaders of the strike in and made a deal with them, then he stabbed them in the back by making the strike and their union illegal. The Police Federation that has existed for the past 80 years was the result.

The federation has called for a royal commission to investigate the state of the service, and there is a case for doing that. The bottom line is that we need more resources for the police and public services. We always hear that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has billions at his disposal, and he must open the coffers and sink a lot more money into the police. Moves are being made in the right direction, but much more money is needed for the police service and public services in general.

1.39 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): In deference to Labour Members who wish to speak, I shall give the potted version of my speech, and shall try to do so quickly. I wanted to add my voice to the sentiments expressed this morning by saying that although there is much in life that is not just about numbers—class sizes, for example—the number of police officers is extremely important. The hon. Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) has just said so, and so did most of his hon. Friends. It is equally evident to the citizens of London.

Rather than developing the argument, I shall simply put to the Minister a few simple questions. Could the Minister please tell us exactly how many Metropolitan police officers are currently available for ordinary duty? Can he tell me the current wastage rate and, therefore, how many officers he projects will be available for ordinary duty over the next three to four years? Those are very simple and straightforward questions, and it would be helpful to have answers to them.

I should like to mention—in passing, but only because of time, not because of a lack of importance—the closure of police stations. I have had one police station closed, in Chislehurst, which, for understandable reasons, has caused much local disquiet. Police stations are a visible sign of police commitment to the local community and are a reference point for that community.

Police have tried to explain the closure of my police station and to make substitute or alternative arrangements, but the local community is not and will not be satisfied. The community believes that the disappearance of the police station is a symbol of how much the Government do or do not care about what is happening locally. It can be no coincidence that, since 1997, two police stations in the borough of Bromley—one at Biggin Hill, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam), and one in mine at Chislehurst—have closed. I should love to hear the Minister's explanation for that.

[Mr. Eric Forth]

It is one thing to talk about the incidence of crime, but another to examine clear-up rates—which best reflect the police's perceived and actual effectiveness and affect us most. The figure that I have on the Metropolitan police area clear-up rate is 16 per cent. If that figure is correct, it is scandalous. However, it is supported by the figures that I have for Bromley.

I have glanced through the latest figures that I have on the Bromley division's clear-up rates, and they vary from as high as 30 per cent for violence against the person, and 26 per cent for sexual offences, to as low as 13 per cent for robberies, and 6 per cent. for burglaries. On the figures that I have, the overall clear-up rate is 14 per cent. I do not want to blame my excellent local police service for that—it has my admiration for what it does—but, with those clear-up rates, I should think that the unease felt in Bromley and across London is very understandable.

I should like to add to the comments of the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) on the huge distress caused in our communities by anti-social behaviour, neighbour problems, property damage and extreme misbehaviour, very often by very young people. We really have to find a way of dealing with that. The types of measure that the Government have introduced recently are simply not working. It seems that, for whatever reason, police and local authorities are not yet prepared to use the powers available to them to try and demonstrate that we really have to get to grips with the problem.

All London Members must be aware of the distress caused daily—usually to elderly, vulnerable and frail people, even in their own homes—by the type of anti-social and violent behaviour that can be caused by a small number of very disruptive people. We have to find a way of getting a grip on that. If we do not, it would be unforgivable. I shall give whatever support I can to police, local authorities and the Government in introducing measures to deal with the problem.

I am grateful for the opportunity to put those few points on the record. The brevity of my remarks should not be taken as an indication of any intention to skip over them. However, I want to give as many Labour Members as possible an opportunity to contribute to the debate.

1.44 pm

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) for his brevity. It is nice to hear him talking about local issues in his constituency.

I pay tribute to the quality of policing in my part of London, which I think can be attributed to four factors. The first is the strong sense of partnership between police, council, health authority and probation service in working together on an effective crime reduction strategy.

The second is the community's active involvement in the neighbourhood watch and Battersea crime prevention panel, which raises huge sums to pay for summer schemes for young people—this year, the Home Secretary opened the scheme—and to provide security locks for the elderly.

The third is community policing, which began many years ago in Battersea and has ensured that we now have many police officers with knowledge of the community that they serve.

Fourthly, leadership has been shown by the borough commander Brian Wade and by Battersea's former divisional commander Mike Fuller. They have done a lot to reduce burglaries and to fight auto crime, drug crime and especially racial crime. I do not think that they can be blamed if they are suffering from the Londonwide problem of a rise in street crime. The figure for April was 156, nearly twice what it was in the same month a year ago. It is often 10-year-olds robbing nine-year-olds in what are essentially designer crimes. It used to be trainers, mountain bikes and scooters; now it is mobile phones and Pokémon cards.

Local crime reduction strategies alone cannot always solve such crime surges. The mobile phone industry might be able to do a lot more. It could learn from the car industry, which has been working in partnership with police and the Home Office to deliver the Prime Minister's target of a 30 per cent. reduction in auto crime. The mobile phone industry could lend its mind to that problem.

In such a debate—I am keeping my eye on the time—we should look beyond crime fashions of the day and local issues to the underlying problems of London policing. I see those as essentially recruitment and retention. The Macpherson report was right to identify ethnic minority recruitment as a vital issue. A community that is 25.5 per cent. ethnic minority cannot be policed with a police force that is only 3.9 per cent. ethnic minority. That is why the advances being made are so important. The Met deserves to be congratulated on passing the 1,000 mark; it had 1,015 ethnic minority officers at the end of April.

The Met is putting huge efforts into not just recruitment, but retention. The unit that co-ordinates that effort, the positive action team, is concentrating on ways in which to improve the retention rate, especially among ethnic minority police officers with nought to five years service—which is the most vulnerable period—and to improve the progression of ethnic minority officers through the ranks of the service. After all, the promotion of ethnic minority officers will do most to encourage people in the ethnic minorities to join in the first place. The promotion of our former divisional commander Mike Fuller is a great encouragement to many serving black officers.

The issue is whether the police force is representative of the community that it polices. That is a much wider question than ethnic minority recruitment. On the latest figure, the Met takes 56 per cent. of its recruits from outside London. That has significant consequences for the police, the community and, indeed, criminals. It means that the police will never fully understand the community that they are policing. Even recruits from the home counties, who form a quarter of the Met's intake, live in a completely different world, which is 3 per cent. ethnic minority, not 25 per cent. It means that the police will never be an integral part of the community, as they are in many other parts of the country.

If people live in London, certainly if they live in inner London, they can discount the possibility that their neighbour, or the man sitting at the next table in the pub, will be a police officer. It simply does not happen. That means that the whole community feels less protected and that the criminal has more air in which to breathe.

Many very good officers in my area live in Surrey and come in every day, mainly for reasons to do with the cost of housing. One or two do live in the constituency and on their beat. It may be uncomfortable for them sometimes to live among people whom they have arrested, but I salute their dedication and determination to make community policing a living thing.

That is why it is important that the Met is coming home to London. On 3 July, the Metropolitan Police Authority will be established, ending an injustice that has been tolerated for 171 years and giving us what the rest of country has taken for granted for at least 100 years: a police force that is accountable to the community that it serves.

The first thing that the MPA will want to see is a Met that is largely drawn from the ranks of Londoners. It will not need to convince the Met itself of that. It is already committed to it. In a recent Home Affairs Committee report on police recruitment and training, the Met says:

> it remains our clear intention to draw recruits from London communities, who have had exposure to the nature of London life and understand the local issues. Applicants from beyond the Metropolis are likely to be less well equipped to deal with all the different features of the London environment and are less likely to reflect the diversity of our public.

The Met does not lack the will, although it may lack the money. In that context, the extra £3,327 allowance offered to post-1994 recruits is extremely welcome. It is a clear sign that the Government understand the problem and are prepared to do something about it. Some will say that it is not enough, because finding a flat in inner London is still likely to be beyond the realistic reach of a new recruit.

Most people can afford to live in inner London only because they already do so. They have already bought their house or qualify for social housing. New people coming in on salaries of £22,635, for example—which I understand will be the salary—will often fall between the two stools, earning too much to go on the waiting list but too little to qualify for a mortgage. It is a crying shame that the Met was allowed to sell off so much of its police accommodation in London. We could desperately do with it now. Housing is important for the Met to allow it to attract new recruits from other professions such as teaching and nursing.

It is well known that the northern police authorities practically encourage applicants to go and join the Met and then to go back up north when they are trained. A leading police officer in the north said:

> We quite often used to say to candidates that they would have more of a chance if they got some experience in one of the bigger city forces, such as the Met, and then they could transfer back.

That was Lord Mackenzie of Framwellgate, who is well known to Ministers. That is why an increasing proportion of the Met's premature wastage—up from 14 per cent. to 17 per cent.—is caused by officers transferring back to provincial forces. The reasons are always the same: cheaper housing, lower cost of living and better quality of life.

I am saying not that the Met should not accept good applicants from the north—we have many good officers from the north in my area—but that we need people who know or can get to know the area, who stay with the problem and integrate with the community. The whole point about modern policing methods is that we must enlist the help and support of the community to win the fight against crime. The best policeman is the guy next door, because people are more likely to listen to him and tell him what they know. Somebody who comes for a short time and goes on somewhere else does not have the chance to win the confidence of the community.

We are beginning to get a change towards preventive policing, with success no longer measured by the number of arrests but by the actual crime rate. The police's job is seen as the prevention of crime, rather than screeching around on two wheels, sirens blazing, to the next emergency.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is using his budget to fund some very imaginative projects. In my constituency, we have had £73,000 for CCTV in Battersea park and, recently, £19,000 for a burglary reduction initiative in the area that we now know as New Balham.

In contrast to the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, I do not think that the number of officers is the key issue. So often in crime prevention people concentrate on the wrong issue—the number of arrests, the prison population or police numbers. The issue is the reduction of crime.

Of course, increasing police numbers has a part to play, but we should never forget the fact that under the previous Government police numbers were increased from 110,000 to 125,000 between 1979 and 1992, during which time crime doubled. Over the next six years, under the same Government, the number of police officers in the Met fell by 2,000 and, for the first time, crime was reduced. To base a policy on the assumption that police numbers are the key to solving crime is completely wrong; indeed, history seems to indicate the reverse. We must keep our eye on the essential ball—the number of crimes.

1.55 pm

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Some things are so important that they must be said at the beginning of a speech in case the Whips make sure that one does not get to the end. I begin, therefore, by expressing my thanks and those of the whole community of Brent for the lifetime of service to the police force given by the Brent borough commander, Chief Superintendent Paul Green. He has been an exemplary leader of the force and has brought openness and confidence to the dealings between the police and local community groups in Brent. His retirement will be a great loss, and I wish him and his wife Pauline all good things for the future. Commander Green developed a style of policing which was intelligence-led and based on resolving community problems, and that is what I want to speak about.

I confess to thinking that the local crime and disorder strategy is a misnomer because it should be the anti-crime and disorder strategy or the strategy for combating crime and disorder. It was proposed only after extensive consultation with the local community, which I welcome. The consultation showed that local people are concerned about violent crime to an extent that is disproportionate to their risk of being a victim of it, but although perception is not everything, it is a fact that those who seek to serve the community must always take into account.

Under the Conservatives, violent crime in London increased by 259 per cent. Last year, violent crime in the borough of Brent increased by just 2 per cent. I am the

[Mr. Barry Gardiner]

first to say that that figure is still moving in the wrong direction; I want it to go down, but it is clearly stabilising and that is critical to turning the figure round.

I speak in a week when my excellent local newspaper, the *Wembley Observer*, has as its headline "Mother shot". It is a tragic story of a young mother of three who was shot twice, in the head and arm, in my constituency in a long-running feud that appears to have started as a dispute over children playing. I extend my sympathy to the victim and her family, and I want to make two points about the incident.

First, it underlines the importance of reducing firearms incidents in the borough, which is one of the force's key target objectives under the strategy. It is absolutely right that guns must be made less freely available so that small incidents cannot escalate to that level of violence. Secondly, I point out that such incidents still make the front page of the *Wembley Observer*. They are news because they are so uncommon. People's fear of crime is of course heightened by such headlines, but they must realise that in many cities in north America or western Europe, such stories would never make front-page news.

What can the police do to make sure not only that people are safe, but that they also feel safe? Time and time again, residents associations and local neighbourhood watch schemes in my constituency tell me that they value above all else their relationship with their local beat officers. They are a vital human face in an increasingly high-tech police force.

I thank in particular the two sergeants at Wembley police station who are responsible for community safety, Richard and Geoff. They are a great double act in persuading local people to fight back against crime, and I enjoyed attending their presentation in Sudbury last week, where yet another neighbourhood watch scheme was established. It is communities that beat crime, and not coppers on their own. I commend all the beat officers, the residents associations and the neighbourhood watch schemes working in Brent, North to such good effect. They ensure that the fight against crime is truly an effort of the whole community.

Brent is one of the most ethnically diverse boroughs, not only in London but anywhere in Europe. I cannot speak in this debate, therefore, without referring to the action being taken by the police in response to the Macpherson report. The issues of stop and search and the effect on street crime have already been fully discussed. I wish to focus on other sorts of crime and their differential effects on the black and Asian communities in Brent.

Whereas the average burglary rate for Brent residents as a whole is 8.5 per 1,000 population, if one is an Asian resident, it rises to 13.3 per 1,000. For black residents, the chance of being burgled rises still further to almost double the average at 15 per 1,000 population. The good news is that burglary in Brent has fallen by 15 per cent. in the past year, but the bad news is that black and Asian residents are more likely to be victims of crime. That must change. My local force in Brent has set targets to achieve that, and I commend it for doing so. However, I must circumscribe that praise with the harshest criticism and roundest condemnation of the lingering attitudes in the police service that Macpherson publicly labelled institutionalised racism.

Yesterday, on the day of the Tottenham by-election, caused by the death of Bernie Grant, the magazine for the Metropolitan Police Federation, *Metline*, arrived in my office. The front cover is a full-page photograph of Lord Tebbit and the interview it contains is a panegyric to a politician who is remembered in the black and Asian communities in London for his remarks about the cricket test. Contrast that with the anonymous page three editorial, entitled "Bernie Grant MP is dead", which gloats about

> The controversial left-winger who appeared to moderate his views.

The article is a disgraceful attempt to trash the work that Bernie Grant did for community relations in this country. It is in my view a disgraceful article that will be condemned, by every police officer who is working to heal the division between the police and the ethnic communities in our capital, as simply reinforcing the old stereotype of the police that good officers are striving so hard to do away with.

I value the close, cross-border co-operation that I have with my hon. Friends the Members for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) and for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty). We work closely together, especially on the Kenton road, which borders our two communities, to ensure that community safety issues are examined by both boroughs and both sets of police. However, I would gently ask my hon. Friends to keep their prisoners out of my cells. I know that there is a shortage of cells in Harrow, but the transfer of prisoners stretches resources at Wembley, and I trust that they will attempt to increase the provision in Harrow itself.

My hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) mentioned the Sheehy report earlier, to great effect, and the consequences that it had had on policing in London. I am delighted to add my welcome today to the remarks from the Home Secretary announcing the reinstatement of moneys to the police force which will do so much to increase recruitment and retention in the force. I also wish to express my delight that at the GLA elections the member returned for Brent and Harrow was Lord Harris, who will take an active role in the new police commission for London. I look forward to working with my noble Friend and the local community to do all we can to keep the crime figures in Brent coming down.

2.4 pm

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): I have not read or seen the article to which the hon. Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) referred. I am sure that we are all in agreement, and I remind him and the House that no article in any magazine is as disgraceful as the horrific murder of PC Blakelock.

We have had a lively and diverse debate as a result of the diversity of views on both sides of the House. More interesting, however, is the fact that hon. Members have reflected different issues in different areas in their constituencies. It is that diversity which makes the job of the Metropolitan police so difficult and such a challenge. I am not an official London Member, as my constituency is proud to be part of Essex. However, until this April the Metropolitan police looked after a large part of my Epping Forest constituency. We are now in the changeover period and I am pleased to have the opportunity this afternoon to give my sincere thanks to the Metropolitan police who

have looked after my constituency so well. The officers at Barkingside are highly respected and the work that they did and are still doing in my area is greatly appreciated.

Many Metropolitan police officers live in my constituency so, although I am not a London Member, I certainly have an interest in the subject. My hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) made some extremely important points about the changeover from the Metropolitan police to police in the home counties around London. I shall not reiterate his points, as he made them so well, but I hope that the Minister will give them serious consideration.

I welcome the Home Secretary's announcement of an extra housing allowance for the Metropolitan police, although I share the reservations of my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford. I note with irony, however, the concerns about affordable housing expressed by the hon. Members for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) and for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock). I agree with them, but the irony is that I have raised the issue on many an occasion as affordable housing in my constituency is difficult to find. I have raised the matter in connection with stamp duty and other taxes, for example, only to find that Labour Members simply laughed at my comments on house prices. The issue is important, and I hope that the Government will take it more seriously, now that it has been acknowledged by their own Members. I therefore look forward to the Minister's response.

The diverse duties of the Metropolitan police have been emphasised by those who have discussed the suburban, country and inner-city aspects of policing in London. My hon. Friends the Members for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) and for Orpington (Mr. Horam) and the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) made those points extremely well. Most unusually—indeed, for the first time ever, I believe—I find myself in agreement with the hon. Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer). I hope that he is not upset about that, but I agree with him about the benefits of police partnerships and community policing. The policeman whom he mentioned has done a lot of good work in my constituency, and I join the hon. Gentleman in commending him and his officers.

A couple of weeks ago, I was approached by a rightly concerned constituent, who told me that he was worried now that the Metropolitan police are not looking after Loughton in my constituency. I am sorry that the Home Secretary is not here—I understand why, of course, and am not criticising him—as I am referring to an area that he knows extremely well. Indeed, he was born and brought up there. I know that he cares a lot about it. My constituent told me that he was most concerned that Essex police might not have a wildlife protection officer which, previously, the Metropolitan police had provided for that part of Loughton. I thought that a wildlife protection officer might be needed for the deer in Epping forest, which are a protected species.

I discovered that the issue was the breeding of slow worms under carpets on the allotments of Loughton. Hon. Members may not be aware that the slow worm is a protected species, that it is rare and that it breeds very well under carpets on allotments. I had to ask Essex police to continue the important role of wildlife protection. I mention this to illustrate the diversity of what we expect of policing in London. One might imagine that the problems faced by the police are all to do with inner-city crime and the dramatic things about which one reads in the newspapers. But not so: the real problem with the slow worms is that they are being stolen by teenage boys.

We expect a lot of the police. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) paid tribute to the police, through his personal experience, and we are probably all pleased that he has been so well protected. The hon. Member for Deptford surprised me with her point about young people escaping on bus routes. It is amazing to hear—I do not make light of it—that the bus service in Deptford is so good that getaway cars are not needed. Every cloud has a silver lining.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), with his customary wit and eloquence, has drawn our attention to many issues concerning the inner cities. The House will agree that when he is no longer in his place, we shall miss him very much.

My hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) addressed all of the key issues that face us, especially the 999 service. What he said was extremely worrying and I hope that the Minister paid attention and will answer his remarks in a few moments. My hon. Friend was right to emphasise the concerns of the new Commissioner, Sir John Stevens, which he expressed earlier this week.

We expect so much of the people who serve as police officers. They deserve our financial and moral support, and our confidence. Individual officers have told me—and, I am sure, other Members—how difficult their jobs have become; not because of rising crime, which they are trained to deal with, but because of increased bureaucracy, form-filling and overstated and sometimes misplaced political correctness which makes their jobs so difficult. I do not mean reasonable political correctness.

Mr. Forth: There is no such thing.

Mrs. Laing: My right hon. Friend says that there is no such thing. I appreciate the importance of the Lawrence report, but it is simply not fair to ask a police officer to operate with, metaphorically speaking, one hand tied behind his back with the other filling in forms instead of getting on with the job of policing.

Mr. Efford: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Laing: I am sorry but I do not have time to give way. I want to leave enough time for the Minister to answer the important questions that have been asked.

We ask police officers to face danger and take risks. A young lady who lived in my constituency, WPC Nina Mackay, was tragically murdered about two years ago during a drugs raid. She and many other members of her family, including her father, devoted their lives to the police service. Too often, we get carried away with our criticism and forget the heroism of those who serve us as police officers.

Sometimes, I am ashamed when I hear Members of Parliament complaining about the unsocial and long hours that we have to devote to working in this place. When we are here at midnight or in the early hours, we are sitting on these comfortable—well, relatively comfortable—green leather Benches and we can go and have a cup of tea if we want. We ask police officers to work extremely

[Mrs. Laing]

unsocial hours and think nothing of it. I am ashamed when Members of Parliament do not take their public duty more seriously—

Joan Ruddock: Oh, come on.

Mrs. Laing: Our constituents expect of us as much as we expect of those who serve as police officers and other servants of the community who work seriously unsocial hours in risky and dangerous conditions.

The Home Secretary said that London compares well with other capital cities. I am sure that the House will give the new police authority and those who police London our confidence and our support, in the hope that London continues to compare well.

2.16 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): First, I should like to say how strongly I agree with the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing) that the debate has been an extremely good one. We have debated for five hours, in which time 17 Back Benchers have contributed. I note all the tributes to the police expressed by Members on both sides of the House and associate the Government with them. That the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) made the shortest speech in the debate might be an historic first—I shall ask the Library to check—but we all appreciate that he did so. Every speaker, with the exception of the hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam), who made a poisonous and insubstantial speech, made a substantive point that requires a response, and I shall go through them as rapidly as I can.

My hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) made powerful points about CCTV and affordable housing. We issued new guidelines recently on the use of CCTV. They prioritise, first, parades on the outskirts of cities where people congregate, but which have not been a priority for inner-city funding; and, secondly, transport—the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) mentioned his involvement in safer station schemes. We have tried to shift CCTV into areas where it will make a real difference, and there is a rolling programme for bids and applications, so there are no deadlines. I hope that people will see the potential and bid for resources to enable them to achieve the provision they want. I agreed with my hon. Friend's comments about affordable housing, but, owing to pressure of time, I cannot accept the invitation to discuss in detail that important issue here and now.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) raised the question of tenure—I am surprised that that important issue did not come up more often in the debate. The Commissioner is currently consulting widely with colleagues in the Met on an interim policy to provide a significant step toward succession planning. The purpose is to ensure that periods of time in post are made more flexible to take account of the nature of the role and individual circumstances—for example, shorter times in stressful roles and longer periods in which there is considerable investment in training or in community relations and other, less stressful, roles. I believe that that positive approach to the issue will strengthen community policing.

I am grateful that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) focused on intelligence-led policing, which is key to our whole approach. She will be aware, but other hon. Members may not be, of the recent decision following the Budget to allocate resources to Operation Lion, which is being piloted in Lewisham. It is designed to improve communication between partners under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, and the 12-month pilot study is designed to examine the way in which local authorities, the Metropolitan police and the fire service share data, and to move the whole programme forward. That sort of intelligence-led approach, advocated by my hon. Friend, is essential if our efforts to reduce crime are to be effective.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) made a powerful speech. She is right to emphasise organisation on a borough basis and, with that, the change to the borough boundaries which is taking place. It is a pre-condition for effective partnership organisation and for transparency in public debate about police performance and crime reduction, which is a key element in raising standards. I was glad that my hon. Friend drew attention to those important aspects. It is only a recent development, as was clear from the debate, but over time it will lead to a steady improvement in the quality of policing throughout the capital.

The hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) raised a number of points. With regard to the basis for allocating resources across London, which has been raised by other hon. Members as well, the distribution of resources is a matter for the Commissioner, as has been acknowledged, but needs are assessed using an apportionment process known as the resource allocation formula.

The five key policing functions on which the formula is based are identified as 24-hour response, tackling crime, maintenance of the Queen's peace, community safety and partnership, and traffic management. I understand that the Met acknowledges that the resource allocation formula is slower than it should be to respond to operational needs, and it is continuing to refine the formula. No doubt the various points made in the debate will be noted. I am well aware of the suburban point, so to speak, which has been powerfully expressed in the debate and previously.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Coleman) made several important points, but I shall comment particularly on the truancy watch initiative and the key need to develop a much more powerful relationship between police and schools. We are examining the matter closely, partly because, as my right hon. Friend mentioned, much of the street crime that has been described takes place among young people, often outside school gates, and involves mobile phones, among other things. We need far stronger relationships between police and schools, and the truancy watch initiative is part of that. We are actively examining further steps that could be taken.

If I may say so, my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) made the most learned speech of the day, on the subject of pay, reviewing the issues in detail. My right hon. Friend's announcement today will go some way towards dealing with the points that he raised. I acknowledge, as does my right hon. Friend, my hon. Friend's close interest in the subject.

I appreciate the comments of the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke). He made a number of points—for example, about licensing—which are important. Our recent announcement of an initiative concerning prostitutes' cards in call boxes, which my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North has pressed, is important for the right hon. Gentleman's constituency and other city centre areas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) made an important point about partnerships. In several respects, partnerships are patchy. They do not have the necessary involvement of education, social services, health and so on, as my hon. Friend said. I draw attention to the fact that funding is available from the invest to save programme for local authority systems in England to develop partnership approaches. The Metropolitan police, for example, have submitted a bid in a partnership with the Crown Prosecution Service to support joint administration of the criminal justice system, and I gather that in Sutton, there has been a joint local authority-Met bid to build resources. I hope that we can direct more resources to the development of those important partnerships.

The hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) made some significant points. Let me clarify my right hon. Friend's announcement today, in response to the hon. Gentleman's specific question. The Met officers seconded to shire forces as a result of Metropolitan police boundary changes will qualify for the pay award announced today where appropriate—that is, post-Sheehy officers. Those who have been seconded retain their Met terms and conditions. On the more general issue of the police authorities' attitude around the capital, as my right hon. Friend said earlier, we are discussing that actively with them and we will examine the evidence as it comes through.

Mr. St. Aubyn *rose—*

Mr. Clarke: I will not give way, if the hon. Gentleman will excuse me. I must respond to a large number of points.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) raised the safer streets initiative. All borough commanders have been required to develop a street crime intervention strategy. Boroughs with the most significant problems of street crime will receive additional support from the Met's specialist operations division. We will gradually spread that out. I hope that, over time, the policy will tackle some of the points that my hon. Friend raised.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton made several points. We have discussed graffiti previously, and I shall consider the legislation, as the hon. Gentleman requested. My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) made one of the few references to drugs in the debate. It is surprising that so few references were made to that subject. He was right to raise it; it is a critical issue, which is at the top of our agenda.

I hope that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst will excuse me if I reply to his particular questions in writing. It would take too long to answer them now. My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) made an important point about recruiting ethnic minorities and police who reflect the communities that they serve. That is a priority for the Metropolitan police, and requires a series of different sorts of changes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) was the final Back-Bench speaker. He made a crucial point about violent crime. We are tackling that issue urgently because trends show that, while we are moving in the direction that we want on burglary, vehicle crime and so on, we are not doing that on violent crime. There are several important explanations for that, including statistical factors, and the fact that we want more reporting of violent crime, which means that the figures will increase. However, my hon. Friend highlighted major issues, and I want to assure him that we are tackling them urgently. I hope that we shall make public announcements on that soon. I am glad that my hon. Friend gave it priority in his comments.

The hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) made several serious points, to which I shall respond as rapidly as I can. He mentioned the 999 service. The Met is currently experiencing a substantial increase in demand. Calls were increasing at 6.3 per cent. a year, but, since March 1999, growth has shot up to 22 per cent. a year. The early months of this year suggest that the growth in demand is more than 20 per cent. higher than in 1999. Analysis by the Met revealed that more than half the calls were not about police business and only half required immediate deployment.

New working practices and shift patterns have been introduced, together with additional staff on Friday and Saturday evenings to cope with identified peaks. Extra recruiting for people to work on the service is being undertaken. I entirely endorse the hon. Gentleman's point about the seriousness of the issue.

Beyond that, we have a major control communications and information project, the contract value of which is approximately £1 billion over 10 years, to modernise the whole system. Responsibility for signing the contract will fall to the Metropolitan Police Authority. We are currently considering that in great detail.

If the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire will excuse me, I shall write to him on his point about the car fleet rather than go through it now because of constraints of time. The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the Chinese state visit. Discussions between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the police are a standard part of preparations for state visits. We have learned a lot from the visit to which the hon. Gentleman refers, and future discussions are being minuted to try to avoid the sort of behind-the-hand comments, which were mentioned.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned memorials. I am advised that PC Keith Blakelock's memorial will be relocated to Hornsey police station when it has been refurbished, and people will be able to pay their respects there.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the role of the Mayor. I should love to give that a lot of time, but in the two minutes available to me, suffice it to say that the Metropolitan Police Authority holds the Commissioner to account for securing an effective and efficient police force, best value in policing, setting targets, consulting Londoners and playing a major role in the appointment of senior Met officers. The Mayor's role in policing is much more limited than that of the MPA. Subject to the Home Secretary's override power, the Mayor, in discussion with the London Assembly, sets the budget of the MPA. He also appoints 12 Assembly Members to the MPA. However, he has no direct powers over the Metropolitan

[Mr. Clarke]

service. The Commissioner is accountable to the MPA, not the Mayor. I wanted to clarify that in view of the anxieties of the hon. Member for North–East Hertfordshire.

I intended to say more about numbers and morale, but we have debated those subjects widely elsewhere. I want to comment briefly on murder. For me, the most shocking part of the Macpherson inquiry was that on murder. The Commissioner has responded positively by allocating significantly more staff to murder inquiries, providing an enhanced response, maximising forensic opportunities, increasing the use of intelligence, and improving the training and usage of house-to-house staff. The number of staff of all ranks and grades who investigate murder has increased from 816 before April 1999 to 1,020 in that month. In May 2000, the figure was 1,105. There has been a massive increase for the reasons that the hon. Gentleman identified. It is an important matter, which the Home Office will consider closely.

In a short time, I have tried to respond to as many of the points as possible. I am sorry that I have not spoken about some of the more substantive issues on police numbers and morale, which we debated previously. I hope that the statements that have been made today will play some part—

It being half-past Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Rail Franchises (Sussex)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

2.30 pm

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): I welcome the opportunity to raise the important issue of rail franchises as they affect my constituency and others in East Sussex. This is an opportune time to debate the issue, given that the franchises are shortly to be renewed. I have been in touch with the Minister's office, so I hope that he is aware of some of the issues that I wish to raise. I have seen and read carefully his reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake), so I hope that that helps the Minister in his reply.

I am slightly disappointed that the Government's rail policy has not been as proactive and hands-on as I would have liked. It has taken a long time to establish the Strategic Rail Authority, and we are still not there yet. Indeed, I was told the other day that fewer miles of new railtrack have been opened in the three years since the Government came to power than in the equivalent period of the previous, Conservative Government, which itself was poor.

In those circumstances, and given that Railtrack is still sluggish in spending its money rather than handing it to shareholders, the franchise renewal process is important in securing long-term improvements to the rail network. I would go so far as to say that, if that opportunity is not grasped properly, nothing much will happen in the next 20 years other than what has been agreed in the franchise renewal process. That would be a great pity.

Will the Minister explain why, when three companies were being considered for the short list, South West Trains was eliminated? My written question on this matter must have been slightly misinterpreted because, astonishingly, the answer did not answer the question, but simply set out the criteria used to judge which applicant would be successful. The rail passengers committee thought that South West Trains had put in a good bid. It drew my attention to the fact that the company had set out in detail, with time scales and dates, what it intended to do. The same could not be said of Connex, GoVia or Thameslink.

In a sense, all that is slightly historical: we have two companies left. I want to go through elements of what I think should be the successful shopping list for the franchise bid, which I hope will be considered not only by the Government but by Mike Grant at the shadow Strategic Rail Authority. First, however, may I make a plea to the Minister, which he might be slightly surprised about? It is to avoid the temptation to hit Connex over the head.

A number of complaints have been made about Connex, and some of them are justified. I use Connex regularly from my constituency to this House. It handled the drivers' dispute badly last year and unnecessarily inconvenienced the public, its trains have not been as clean as they might have been, and there are measures that it could have taken relatively cheaply to improve passenger comfort. However, Connex is trying to improve the rail network in my constituency and the surrounding area. I find it receptive to ideas that I put to it. In response to requests that I have made, it has introduced, for

example, extra stops on the service at places such as Plumpton. Moreover, it always gets me here on time, as witnessed by my presence in the Chamber this afternoon.

I do not say that Connex is perfect by any means; it is not. It could and should have done better. However, it would be tempting for the Government to say, "We are in charge of this process. We must make at least one change to the companies that currently run our railways to demonstrate to the public that we are doing something." The Government may feel that, when the first bids are made, someone must change somewhere, otherwise the public will think that the Government are not taking a hands-on approach. I understand the politics of that, but it would be wrong to pick on Connex in making those calculations.

Connex is far from perfect, but I am deeply unimpressed by the way in which GoVia and Thameslink have approached the bid process so far. Connex has set out its plans in great detail in its document "20:20 Vision". It has contacted myself, other Members of Parliament, local authorities and many others and been upfront about its plans, but getting information from Thameslink is like getting blood from a stone. I had to ring up the managing director myself two or three times before I finally managed to get any details of its bid. I had to ring up again to get its document, "The Welcoming Network", which finally arrived only yesterday. If Thameslink is that unresponsive to Members of Parliament, I wonder how unresponsive it is to the public. Its PR on the bid has not started well with me.

I can understand why Thameslink has not contacted me—there is nothing much for East Sussex in its bid. I want to be parochial; I am here not as a party spokesman, but to speak for my constituents this afternoon. East Sussex features hardly at all in the Thameslink bid, but it does in the Connex bid. The general opinion of those of us who have looked at the bids is that Connex is offering more than Thameslink to East Sussex. Thameslink has managed to miss off entirely the Lewes-Seaford line from its map. Not only does the route not feature in its plans, but it has even disappeared from its map.

One ~~of the~~ crucial differences between the bids that affects my constituency is the Lewes-Uckfield line. Connex has pledged to re-open the Lewes-Uckfield railway line as part of its bid. Of course, it needs to be tied down to a date early in the franchise, if it is successful. Thameslink has made no such pledge. That is the key difference to my constituents in terms of the rail network in my constituency involved in determining which bid is successful. I have initiated previous Adjournment debates on that matter, which is absolutely crucial to my constituency and that of the right hon. Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith), who was asked that his support for the re-opening of the Lewes-Uckfield line be communicated to the House this afternoon in his absence. He and I are at one on the issue The seven-mile gap in the line could be easily re-opened because the track bed has been preserved. The SRA has stated that it wants the problem of congestion on the Brighton main line to be solved; it has a capacity problem, and Connex is 84 per cent. reliable on that corridor.

The re-opening of the Lewes-Uckfield line would solve the problem neatly and relatively inexpensively by providing an alternative route from East Sussex to London. The solution proposed by Thameslink and GoVia is to increase the capacity on the Brighton line and to tinker with the Arun line in West Sussex. That would do nothing for my constituents in East Sussex. If they were to pursue that suggestion, it would involve major work on three tunnels and the wonderful Balcombe viaduct, which is grade 1 listed, and cause disruption and inconvenience during the construction phase. The only line from Lewes to London crosses Balcombe viaduct; it is an important piece of the railway network. What a shame it would be to miss the opportunity to introduce another line by simply widening the existing line or increasing its capacity.

The re-opening of the Lewes-Uckfield line is regarded as crucial not simply by me and the right hon. Member for Wealden, but by other Members of Parliament with constituencies in East Sussex, including Labour Members, East Sussex county council, Lewes and Wealdon district councils, Sussex Enterprise and the South East regional development agency, the chairman and chief executive of which I met yesterday for lunch. In my view—I have tabled an early-day motion to this effect—the franchise process will fail if the Lewes-Uckfield line is not part of the successful bid. I cannot put it more strongly than that.

I should like to see other important items on the shopping list. The Government must grasp this one-off opportunity to achieve a major improvement to the rail network in Sussex. We want new rolling stock, and I think that we will get it whichever company wins. We want the Polegate-Pevensey link to be restored so that fast trains and freight trains bypass Eastbourne. I do not wish to be rude to Eastbourne, but the journey would be quicker if the trains did not have to go in and out of Eastbourne. That involves a half-hour diversion. A piece of land could be cheaply and quickly connected, which would enable that improvement to occur.

Business men in my constituency want access to the channel tunnel. They want to travel to Brussels or Paris. At present they must go up to London, because the line between Lewes and Ashford is so hopeless. When I went to Brussels, it took me longer to get from Lewes to Ashford than from Ashford to Brussels. That is how poor the line is. Moreover, it is a diesel line. We need electrification of the line between Hastings and Ashford, the restoration of the Polegate-Pevensey link, and a commitment to through services.

We also need major improvements at Newhaven. The Minister may have read the reports of two earlier Adjournment debates responded to by his predecessor, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson). If so, he will know that, when replying to the more recent debate, the hon. Lady promised to visit Newhaven and to investigate the situation that I had described. As she is no longer with us in her former capacity, I extend the opportunity to the Minister.

I assure the Minister that such a visit would be worth while. Newhaven is suffering as a result of our atomised rail structure. We have three stations, none of which work terribly well. The consensus is that we need one new station delivering top-class passenger services and proper car-parking facilities. Permission should be given for land to be developed for rail freight. English Welsh and Scottish Railways has been to Newhaven: I took its representatives there myself, and they were interested. We are on the trans-European rail network, so we are eligible for European Union money. Moreover, there is considerable growth in Newhaven, which is making

[Mr. Norman Baker]

progress as an economic unit—thanks partly to the Government office for the south east, which has been very supportive.

The difficulty is this. Connex wants one station, not three. Railtrack says that it is a good idea, as do the county and district councils: it accords with their local transport plan. I say the same, as the local Member of Parliament, but it does not happen because of the atomised nature of our railway system. No one wants to take the lead. There is a case for the Government, either directly or through SEEDA—I discussed the matter with SEEDA yesterday—to take that lead, and to bring the parties together to secure a significant improvement in Newhaven. A rail renaissance could be brought about there, at very little cost—if any—to the taxpayer. We must take the opportunity presented by the franchise renegotiations.

The chief executive of the Newhaven Economic Partnership, Julian Rea, wrote to me:

> I consider that Connex's initiative in proposing a new line together with new rolling stock from Lewes to London . . . will transform East Sussex and Newhaven in particular. If this line is constructed and combined with Newhaven's industrial base and port connections it would make the town a major economic motor for the SouthEast. I feel certain that the NEP Board would support Connex's application for an extension of their licence.

Connex proposes regular through services from Seaford and Newhaven to London on an hourly basis; Thameslink does not. According to its proposals, people will have to change at Lewes. There will be a major difference in the quality of service provided for my constituents.

As for fares, I hope—this point has been made to me strongly by the rail passengers committee—that there will be no relaxation of the commuter cap. There is a captive market—people who have to travel to London by train whether they like it or not, because the alternative of driving is so horrendous. Those people could be exploited, but they are currently not being exploited because of the cap. I hope that there will be no problem as a result of the franchise process.

I also hope that some attempt will be made to use the spare capacity on the rail network. I live in Beddingham, in a house that is sandwiched between the railway and the road at a low-level crossing. In the morning, the road is chock-a-block with cars driving from Eastbourne to Lewes, from town centre to town centre. The train from town centre to town centre is half empty, because the fares \are too high. It is as simple as that. If the fares were cut, it would help the Government's own transport policy dramatically by shifting people off the road and on to rail. They could easily transfer along that corridor.

Some ingenuity needs to be exercised in the franchise renegotiation in regard to fares. We could, for example, consider the idea of carnets. Many people nowadays do not work a nine-to-five-day week; they do not follow the office routine. They may want to come in by train on four days, and use the fifth day for visits. Surely the carnet system that operates on the French metro—and, indeed, on our own London underground: it is possible to buy a number of tickets at a discount if a pack are bought together—could be introduced here. We could have a season ticket for five days, but five days chosen by the person who buys the ticket, and not determined by the calendar. That would provide extra flexibility.

My final point relates to the transport corridor study. The Government have rightly put on hold road schemes for East Sussex, such as the proposal for a dual carriageway between Lewes and Polegate, which would have been immensely environmentally damaging. They have begun a transport study of a south-coast route, which will consider road and rail, and that is absolutely the right policy. I am concerned, however, that the study will report after the franchise has been awarded. If it argues that there should be extra rail—and I think that it will—it may come too late. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that the two things are co-ordinated?

I have set out why these matters are so important to my constituents, and I look forward to the Minister's reply.

2.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): Let me begin, conventionally but with complete sincerity, by congratulating the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on securing a debate that provides the House with an opportunity to discuss rail franchises in Sussex. I am grateful for his assistance in providing my office with advance notice of some of the key issues that he wished to discuss.

Sussex is served by several train operators, including Connex South Central, Thameslink, Wales and West, Gatwick Express, Virgin CrossCountry and Connex South Eastern. I shall refer to those operators throughout my speech.

I share the hon. Gentleman's concerns about performance and quality of service. In spite of many welcome improvements over the past year by the rail industry, it is clear that there are still too many late trains, too many cancellations and too much overcrowding. In the refranchising process, the franchising director will seek evidence of a commitment to a step change improvement in service quality that covers the whole door-to-door journey experience.

At last month's national rail summit 2000, we warned train operators that we wanted the worst performers to reach the standard of the best. Performance will be a key criterion when we judge requests for franchise replacement. At the summit, operators committed themselves to improve punctuality over the next year, and we expect them to meet that commitment. In autumn 1999, the shadow Strategic Rail Authority carried out the first of its national passenger surveys. The purpose of the surveys is to provide an overview of customer satisfaction with rail travel. A pilot study identified the factors of most importance to passengers, and satisfaction levels will now be tracked over time.

The second wave of the survey took place in March 2000, and it showed that 76 per cent. of passengers nationally were fairly or very satisfied with the day's journey. Only 11 per cent. were dissatisfied. National satisfaction levels were high for punctuality and reliability, at 74 per cent., and for frequency of trains, at 72 per cent. The highest level of dissatisfaction was for value for money—only 41 per cent. of passengers were satisfied.

An improved public performance measure to give a better indication of the actual performance of Britain's passenger rail services was introduced by the shadow SRA on 6 June. The public performance measure

combines, for the first time, figures for punctuality and reliability. It covers all scheduled services—seven days a week. Initial data cover the second half of the past financial year—mid-October to the end of March 2000. When the figures are compared with those for the same period in 1998-99, it is disappointing that only two of the six operators that serve Sussex—Wales and West and Virgin CrossCountry—improved.

The new public performance measure will provide the Government and passengers with a clearer, more accurate picture of train operators' performance. Train operators will no longer be able to choose to exclude days—so-called void days—when performance is poor. There were too many large loopholes in the way in which performance was measured under the passenger charter system that we inherited. The public performance measure is much more comprehensive, consistent and suitable. Train operators will be rightly judged on the performance of all trains, seven days a week, with no exclusions.

Let me turn now to the replacement franchise proposals. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has issued new instructions and guidance to the franchising director, asking him to deliver improvements through renegotiation of replacement franchise agreements. The instructions and guidance ask him to seek the Deputy Prime Minister's consent before entering into commitments to let any new franchise. As I have said, performance will be a key criterion when requests for franchise replacement are judged. A continuous increase in customer satisfaction will also be a requirement of any replacement franchise.

On 22 December 1999, the franchising director announced that Connex Rail, GoVia and Stagecoach had pre-qualified for the first phase of franchise replacement for the Connex South Central franchise. As the hon. Gentleman will know from the answer to his parliamentary question of 14 June 2000, having evaluating Stagecoach's bid the franchising director did not consider that it met the six criteria for assessment of proposals given to him in his instructions and guidance from the Deputy Prime Minister.

The shadow Strategic Rail Authority, on behalf of the franchising director, is therefore currently considering the detailed offers submitted by Connex Rail and GoVia. It is not yet known when the franchising director will be able to announce the outcome of the Connex South Central franchise replacement negotiations. I note the hon. Gentleman's positive remarks about Connex. Although, as he will appreciate, it would be inappropriate for me as a Minister to comment, I assure him that the franchising director will reach his conclusions on the bids on an entirely objective basis.

The franchising director is operating an inclusive consultation process for franchise replacement. The instructions and guidance require him to consult the chairman of the British Railways Board, local authorities, passenger transport executives, the rail regulator, regional planning bodies, regional development agencies and rail passengers committees. He has consulted widely on the replacement of the Connex South Central franchise, and there will be further consultation. However, the scope for making large-scale changes will be strictly limited. The shadow Strategic Rail Authority does require investment to improve infrastructure on the south coast line.

An issue in which I know the hon. Gentleman is especially interested—he has mentioned it today, and has done so in previous debates—is the reinstatement of the Uckfield-Lewes line. Connex Transport UK Ltd, formerly Connex Rail, has included in its franchise replacement proposals a commitment to take the reinstatement of the line to a Transport and Works Act 1992 inquiry. If it is awarded a new franchise and the Transport and Works Act proposal is approved, it would build the line for an agreed price.

Connex believes that reinstatement of the line is the only way of delivering sufficient increased capacity and relieving pressure on the Brighton main line. GoVia has proposed a study of the viability of the line, which it would take forward depending on the conclusions reached on value for money and appropriate subsidy levels.

The shadow Strategic Rail Authority's position is that it requires bidders to demonstrate value-for-money proposals for delivering capacity to meet expected demand. It recognises the potential value of the line's reinstatement, not only in environmental and social terms but in delivering additional capacity between the south coast and London.

The shadow Strategic Rail Authority will evaluate the proposals made by the counterparties and take account of the costs and benefits of the scheme before reaching a decision. Before a counterparty can commit to reinstatement of the line, there would have to be due process, which is expected to include the requirement for a Transport and Works Act order. As that is dependent upon parliamentary approval, the reinstatement cannot be made—as the hon. Gentleman has occasionally suggested—a pre-condition of the bids.

Overcrowding is a matter on which improvement is needed, and it has been a particular problem for Thameslink. Thameslink has strengthened a number of its services by borrowing four class 317 units from West Anglia, and two class 319 units from Connex, resulting in an extra 3,540 seats per weekday. It has also secured an extra path, from 26 September 1999.

Earlier this week, Sir Alastair Morton, chairman of the shadow Strategic Rail Authority, presented the future map for United Kingdom rail. He said that the current refranchising process has paved the way for further progress on replacement of the 18 short-term franchises and was a big step towards development of a 20-year railway strategy.

Additionally, the franchising director has explained that the shadow Strategic Rail Authority intends to complete the replacement of shorter-term franchises before the end of next year, which entails selection and agreement on principal terms by autumn 2001. The shadow Strategic Rail Authority has outlined the strategy and approach that it wants to adopt on re-drawing those parts of the franchise map that need to change to achieve a better grouping of service patterns than emerged at privatisation. The views of all affected stakeholders have been considered and will be used to take a substantial step forward in the provision of improved passenger rail services for this and the following decade.

The emphasis will now be on early delivery of the proposals following proper consultation. The aim is to secure the investment to make it all happen. We can expect the shadow Strategic Rail Authority to drive that process forward as quickly as is reasonable.

[Mr. Keith Hill]

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of fares. I mentioned earlier that the national passenger survey showed a high level of dissatisfaction with value for money. When franchises were first let, the contracts incorporated a number of restrictions on the level of certain fares. It is accepted that, for many journeys, competition is not adequate protection. The current range of regulated fares will remain subject to regulation and continue to be subject to an overall cap of RPI minus 1 per cent. Those include season ticket fares in the south-east and saver fares.

With increasing demand, transport objectives require that operators meet demand, rather than price it off. Price limits will need to be reconsidered in the light of the competition position of the railway in relation to road and the costs of providing extra capacity.

The transport White Paper called for a simplification of the ticketing arrangements. A simple range of tickets is in the interests of operators, who want their customers to understand what is on offer. The initiative proposed by the Association of Train Operating Companies to focus on six easily understood fare types is welcome. We are asking operators to be innovative in devising new products to encourage new travellers on to the railway when capacity is available. I note that the hon. Gentleman's suggests the introduction of a carnet system of railway ticket purchase.

It is important to remember that the franchising director is not committed to accepting any proposal. If any application is to succeed, it will have to guarantee better performance, more investment, expansion of network capacity and improvements for passengers, as well as providing value for money for the taxpayer.

If the proposals on offer fail to deliver those improvements, the franchising director may decide instead to allow the existing franchises to run their course. Of course, that is the second best solution, but it is preferable to agreeing to a new, longer franchise without having secured additional passenger benefits.

I understand the issues concerning the reorganisation of the stations and lines in Newhaven. I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's tribute to the Government office for the south east. Those issues are largely for the local authority and for the Strategic Rail Authority, but I will consider carefully his proposals and his generous invitation to visit Newhaven.

The hon. Gentleman raised the Southampton-Folkestone multi-modal study. Draft terms of reference have been circulated to relevant parties. It is anticipated that the study will take approximately 18 months to complete. The output of the study will then be referred to the relevant regional planning body which, in turn, will advise Ministers on the way forward. Ministers will need to take decisions in the light of that advice. I note the hon. Gentleman's concerns about the time scale of that work.

I return to the franchise replacement bids. As there is no fixed programme, I cannot inform the hon. Gentleman when announcements about the replacement of the Connex South Central or the other franchises are likely to be made. However, I will ensure that the franchising director is made aware of all the matters that have been raised in the debate.

I have described briefly some of the measures that we are taking in the context of the franchise replacement programme that are particularly relevant to the hon. Gentleman's interests. I hope that I have made it clear that, through those measures, we are determined to drive up the quality and performance of rail services and lever investment into the industry. I thank him again for allowing us to discuss those important issues by means of an Adjournment debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 26 June 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

GLOBAL CULTURAL DIVERSITY CONGRESS

Resolved,

That an humble address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that there shall be laid before this House a Return of the Review of events leading up to the cancellation of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress, including possible implications for corporate governance of the Commission for Racial Equality, by Gurbux Singh.—[*Mr. Straw.*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Global Cultural Diversity Congress

1. **Mr. James Gray** (North Wiltshire): If he will make a statement about the cancellation of the global cultural diversity congress. [126117]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has today published Gurbux Singh's report of his review of the events leading up to the cancellation of the global cultural diversity congress, and has placed copies of the report in the Library.

My right hon. Friend and I are grateful to Gurbux Singh for his thorough review. We accept his findings. The review shows that there were plainly serious failings in the preparation for the congress. However, there is no evidence of impropriety. No single event or individual caused the cancellation of the congress. The decision by Ministers not to invest further public funds in the congress was not taken lightly, but it was the correct decision.

We still await the report of the liquidators of GCDC 2000 Ltd., the company set up by the Commission for Racial Equality to run the congress. In the meantime, we welcome the 10 recommendations made by Gurbux Singh about structure, procedure and training. We will ensure that they are implemented, improving financial and risk management within the CRE and clarifying roles, responsibilities and delegated responsibilities within the CRE and between the CRE and the Home Office. There are clearly lessons to be learned from GCDC 2000, and they will be applied to the management of other non-departmental public bodies.

Mr. Gray: I am grateful to the Minister for that statement, as I think it could be called, in reply to my question. Call me cynical, but I suspect that the placing of the report in the Library may not be unconnected with the fact that I was due to ask this question today. We will consult with some care the report to which the Minister referred, but I hope that the hon. Gentleman will answer one straightforward, factual question. Is it true, as one commissioner for racial equality claims, that the shambles over GCDC 2000 will cost the Government a total of £1 million—£600,000 of which will go to reimbursing the CRE, and £400,000 of which will be made up of Home Office expenses? If so, will the Minister take responsibility?

Mr. O'Brien: I assure the hon. Gentleman that the placing of the report in the Library was directly related to his question, which provided a good opportunity for publication.

Some losses will of course be incurred. We must await the liquidator's report before we know how great they are, although we estimate that they will be quite a bit less than the hon. Gentleman suggests. However, the immediate liability will lie with GCDC 2000 Ltd., the limited liability company set up by the CRE. We will have to wait and see whether any liability extends to the CRE. I do not anticipate that any funding will have to be made available by the Home Office for that. In July 1998, we made it clear that we would not put extra public funding into the project, and we stuck by that decision in February.

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): The Minister will be aware that the problem and its associated irregularities have delayed this year's National Audit Office report on the CRE. Will he give the House an undertaking that the Comptroller and Auditor General will have access to all relevant information—including information about the limited liability company, to which he would not normally be able to refer?

Mr. O'Brien: Obviously, we will give as much information as we have in our possession to the Public Accounts Committee so that it can conduct its proper inquiries. There is no problem with that. When the right hon. Gentleman studies the report by Gurbux Singh he will see that it is very thorough, but we must of course await what the liquidators have to say about the outcome of their review of the matter. I gather that their report may be a few weeks, or even months, away.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): I thank the Minister for his courtesy in letting me have an early copy of Mr. Gurbux Singh's report. Would he not agree that it represents a devastating catalogue of incompetence and mismanagement in the CRE, its holding company and the Home Office? Will he confirm that, among other charges, Mr. Singh says that the original budget for the conference was over-optimistic, that its costings were never assessed independently, that the accounting officer was kept in the dark, and that the process for approving funding was not as independent as it could have been?

Does the Minister accept that it is not adequate to say that no one is responsible and that responsibility for the mismanagement must be shared by everyone engaged in planning the congress? The Government are planning considerably to extend the CRE's powers to investigate and report on Government Departments and institutions. Is it not clear that the commission's management, working

methods and relationship with the Home Office must be thoroughly overhauled if Parliament and the public are to have confidence that those new powers will be exercised competently?

Mr. O'Brien: I ensured that the hon. Gentleman would receive a copy of the report before questions today, and I accept that that report discloses that there were failings, especially in GCDC 2000 Ltd., the company set up by the CRE. However, I do not think that that justifies a general attack on all the good work that the CRE has often done in the past. The hon. Gentleman needs to be careful not to get involved in that.

The CRE has protected its statutory independence from the Home Office and the Home Office has, to some extent, respected that over many years. However, we welcome Gurbux Singh's advice that in future there needs to be a closer working relationship between the Home Office and the CRE. In particular, the Home Office will want to be sure that it monitors carefully the financial issues in the CRE, and Gurbux Singh will be content with that, I know.

We think that many issues will emerge from the report. However, many of the recommendations in Gurbux Singh's report have already been implemented or will be implemented, and they will address the issues that came out of GCDC.

Licensing Laws

2. **Mrs. Diana Organ** (Forest of Dean): What response he has received from the police about his proposals to amend licensing laws. [126118]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said when publishing our White Paper on the reform of the licensing laws on 10 April, it would be helpful to receive responses by the end of July. I look forward to receiving comments from the Association of Chief Police Officers and other police bodies by then.

Mrs. Organ: I thank the Minister for his reply. I know that the Government's proposals are warmly welcomed by industry and by alcohol abuse organisations. However, what representations has he had from magistrates and local authorities? The magistrates bench in Coleford in Forest of Dean is particularly concerned about the issue, as the magistrates there do not believe that the local authority has the expertise to deal with the matter. Moreover, my local authority in Forest of Dean is concerned about the costs that it may incur should such a modernisation take place.

Mr. O'Brien: I agree with my hon. Friend that the new measures will be good for the police, business, consumers, families and local residents. We have had representations from magistrates and local authorities, and we will obviously take them into full and proper consideration. Magistrates will be involved in the process because the magistrates court will be the court of appeal for many of the issues and will also deal with matters relating to penalties which may need to be imposed on rogue landlords. So in those circumstances, they will retain a role.

Local authorities have expressed some concern about costs, but the White Paper contains provision for the administrative costs that fall on local authorities to be met from fees.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): The Minister will know from living in the area that Lichfield is sensibly and efficiently run by a Conservative council. I have no hesitation in recommending that local authorities, when they are Conservative, should be in charge of licensing laws. However, does the Minister accept that dour, dank, possibly even corrupt, councils run by Labour may take the view that they do not want licensing laws to be extended? In those circumstances, at certain times of the evening, people will drift from those rather dour authorities into the happy, sunlit hidden uplands of areas such as Lichfield, which are sensibly run by a Conservative council.

Mr. O'Brien: There was a Labour administration in Lichfield until very recently, and I am sure that it was responsible for anything good that has been done in Lichfield.

Local residents need some say in the way in which the licensing scheme operates. After due consideration, we took the view that the best way of ensuring that local residents had a say was for their elected representatives to play a key part in making decisions. It would be regrettable if the hon. Gentleman believed that local councillors in Lichfield or elsewhere were unqualified as elected representatives to make decisions affecting local people.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): I thank my hon. Friend for his response to that question. There must be a review of the licensing laws, for planning and other issues. Given the expertise and material that magistrates and magistrates clerks have obtained over a period of time, I consider that magistrates should be on the licensing committees. It would be wrong to ignore the expertise in the clerks' offices and on the magistrates bench. I appeal to my hon. Friend to ensure that magistrates are included on the committees that will issue licenses following the change.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his contribution. I shall certainly take his views to the review that we are carrying out of the consultation on the White Paper. No doubt, many different organisations and individuals, including many hon. Members, will wish to make representations on the subject, and we shall consider them all. As I said, magistrates will continue to have an important role in the administration of licensing law and, particularly, in imposing penalties and as part of the appeals process. They will still have a role, but we wanted to ensure that we brought local authorities into the process as well. My hon. Friend's suggestion that local authorities and magistrates might work together is certainly well worth considering.

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

3. **Mr. Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham): What discussions he has had with local authorities regarding anti-social behaviour orders; and if he will make a statement. [126119]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): A large number of discussions have been held over the past three years with local authorities and with the Local Government Association on anti-social behaviour orders. Both local authorities and the police have widely welcomed this new power to tackle a scourge in communities up and down the country. Seventy-nine anti-social behaviour orders have now been imposed by the courts following their introduction on 1 April last year. However, as the House knows, I would like to see them used much more widely. On Wednesday, I shall speak to the annual conference of the Local Government Association, and will there be publishing a new protocol—agreed by local authorities and the police—to provide a renewed impetus to tackle this serious problem.

Mr. Loughton: I agree with the Home Secretary, but why does he think that anti-social behaviour orders have been used at the rate of barely one a week since they were introduced? Does he agree with the social exclusion unit report, which says that

anti-social behaviour is not being tackled effectively?

Will he now admit to some of the blame, not least for sending out such mixed messages to local authorities over the past 14 months?

Mr. Straw: The only mixed message has come from the Opposition, who have appeared from the comments repeatedly made by those on their Front Bench not to want to have this important weapon against anti-social behaviour in place. The hon. Gentleman asked why the orders have not been used more widely. They should have been used more widely; however, I thought that the hon. Gentleman was going to stand up on behalf of his constituents in the Lancing area of Sussex whose lives had been made a misery by Mr. John Vyles and Mrs. Madeleine Vyles, both of whom are now the subject of anti-social behaviour orders.

Mr. Alun Michael (Cardiff, South and Penarth): Will my right hon. Friend cast his mind back over the 18 years in which the Conservative party sent out the message that it did not matter what people did—that they could be as unpleasant and anti-social as they wished in the community and nothing very much would happen? Does my right hon. Friend not agree that it is right to use the orders to prevent anti-social behaviour and that the test should not be the number of orders, but the safety of the general public? Where a message has gone out from courageous local authorities working with the police—in Coventry, for example—the level of anti-social behaviour has gone down.

Mr. Straw: My right hon. Friend is entirely right. There is no question but that, as the police themselves report, in many instances the mere threat of an anti-social behaviour order has been sufficient to ensure that the behaviour concerned has moderated. My right hon. Friend will recall that we proposed the introduction of such orders in one criminal justice measure after another and that in each case we were told that it was neither necessary nor practical to have the orders in place—notwithstanding the fact that there were such serious problems of anti-social behaviour across the country and that the level of crime had doubled under the Conservatives.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Given that the Government were elected to be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime and despite the best efforts of the Home Secretary—anti-social behaviour orders are part of a panoply of response—it appears that the overall crime figures are going up again and that violent crime figures are going up again. It appears from a ministerial answer given on Friday that the clear-up rate is less than 30 per cent. on average across the country, so does the right hon. Gentleman accept that, instead of looking for simplistic short-term solutions, it is appropriate for all the parties in the House representing England and Wales to try to get our heads together round two questions? The first is how we can prevent crime more effectively and the second is how we can ensure that there are convictions and that people are dealt with when crime is committed. Is the right hon. Gentleman willing to initiate talks in the House so that there can be a collective effort to persuade the Chancellor of the Exchequer and other Ministers to deliver the goods and deliver the promise?

Mr. Straw: I am always delighted to have constructive discussions with any right hon. or hon. Member of the House about their ideas for better reducing crime and disorder.

As for the crime figures, as the House knows, recorded crime overall appears to be likely to have risen somewhat from March last year to March this year, and violent crime to have risen by rather more. The House knows that robbery, particularly in London, has increased, and we discussed that on Friday during the debate on the Metropolitan police service. However, what is striking about the figures are the significant variations in the performance of otherwise similar police forces and in otherwise similar areas. Although the Lancashire, Northumbria and Kent forces have no more resources than other forces, they all show significant reductions in crime, while in other areas there have been increases. As well as getting on top of the long-term trend in crime, we must take the lessons from those forces and areas within forces that perform well, and ensure that they are translated across the country.

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): Does my right hon. Friend agree that even in areas such as Liverpool, where anti-social behaviour orders have been used relatively extensively, they have become a weapon of last resort instead of a tool of early intervention? Will he join me in contacting the Merseyside police and the local authority and suggesting to them that they ought to intervene and use the orders at an earlier stage, instead of using them as the last weapon?

Mr. Straw: I am happy to do so. That is one of the messages that will be contained in the protocol agreed between the local authorities and the police, which I shall publish on Wednesday.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): To what does the Home Secretary ascribe the fact that crime is rising for the first time in six years?

Mr. Straw *rose—*

Hon. Members: Answer.

Mr. Straw: Of course I will answer. Crime has risen repeatedly since the war. It doubled under the Conservatives. As the right hon. Lady is, I know, particularly concerned about violent crime, she may like to know that in the year for which she was wholly responsible for crime, 1996—*[Laughter.]* In the year in which the right hon. Lady was a Home Office Minister, 1996, violent crime rose by 13 per cent. We are getting on top of the long-term trend in crime. I should like to know from the right hon. Lady whether she intends to go into the next election casting aside the record of the previous Government, under whom crime doubled, and whether she will promise that year on year, come what may, recorded crime will fall under the Conservatives.

Miss Widdecombe: Perhaps we can now come to the three years during which the right hon. Gentleman has been wholly responsible for crime. I asked him a simple question. The fact is that crime fell significantly and substantially for the last four years of our Administration. It then fell very lightly for the next two years, and now it is rising. To what does the right hon. Gentleman ascribe the fact that crime is rising? May I help him? Does he ascribe any of it to the decline in police numbers of 2,600 since he became wholly responsible for crime? Does he attribute any of it to the fact that 18,000 people have been released before the minimum point of their sentence? Is any of that to do with the rise in crime? It was a very straightforward question. Crime is rising. Why?

Mr. Straw: The right hon. Lady offers me a number of explanations. If it is true that the relatively small decline in police numbers that has taken place since 1997 lay behind the rise in crime that has taken place in some police force areas but not in others, she has to explain why crime fell in the four years from 1992–93 to 1997, despite the fact that police numbers fell in a large number of areas across the country.

The serious answer to the right hon. Lady's question is that there is no ready explanation as to why crime has risen in certain areas. However, as I explained to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), police forces in some areas, including Kent, have been able to reduce crime. Police in Northumbria have reduced crime every year for the last seven years. However, other forces have seen an increase in crime.

Finally, much to the right hon. Lady's disappointment, crime is lower now than it was at the time of the election. That is a better record than that seen by any incoming Government in the past 30 years and compares extremely well with the record under the right hon. Lady's Government, when crime doubled during the 18 years of Conservative rule.

Miss Widdecombe: The Home Secretary struggles. As he appears to think that he is in opposition and asking the questions, I shall answer.

The Home Secretary asked how crime managed to fall in the last few years of the Conservative Government, despite the fact that police numbers were falling. Crime fell because we put more constables on the beat so that there was a rise in their numbers. The Home Secretary has presided over a steady fall in the number of constables. Does he seriously intend to tell the House that having fewer constables has not contributed to a rise in crime? Does he agree with the Prime Minister, who said that the measure of a Home Secretary is what happens to crime figures during his term of office? On that basis, does he not agree that his predecessor was quite a good Home Secretary, and he is proving to be a very poor one?

Mr. Straw: I have always thought that my predecessor was not a bad Home Secretary. However, the right hon. Lady has never taken that view.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): I am sure that Northampton, which is examining anti-social behaviour orders, will welcome the new guidelines. Does my right hon. Friend recall visiting Blackthorn estate with me before the election? It used to have a crime rate on a par with that of Toxteth and has serious anti-social behaviour problems. Is the Home Secretary aware that his Department funded the Caspar project to deal with anti-social behaviour? Will he join me in paying tribute to the council, residents, police and especially the schools, which have worked to identify the reasons for crime and fear of crime in the local community? Will he consider making a return visit to see the great progress that those groups have made?

Mr. Straw: Indeed, I recall the visit that I paid to my hon. Friend's constituency before the election. The kind of experience about which I learned during that visit, and visits to many other similar constituencies, made us determined to put in place tough measures to bear down on the anti-social behaviour that was ripping apart my hon. Friend's area and many others. I am glad that we have put those measures in place.

I noticed that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) did not mention the Conservatives' attitude to anti-social behaviour orders and did not say whether they would keep them going or, in the words of the Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins), would tear them up, despite the fact that they are plainly working throughout the country.

Asylum Applications (Hijacked Afghan Airliner)

4. **Mr. Julian Brazier** (Canterbury): What progress has been made on determining the asylum applications of persons who arrived on the hijacked Afghan airliner. [126120]

Mr. Straw: A total of 33 applicants have so far been refused asylum. Thirty-two appeals were lodged, one of which has since been withdrawn. The remaining 31 are being heard by a panel of special adjudicators from the immigration appellate authority, but none have been determined yet. So far, three applicants have been granted asylum. Fifteen applications remain, relating either to

those currently subject to criminal proceedings following the hijacking or to their relatives, and cannot be determined until the conclusion of those proceedings.

Mr. Brazier: Is there not a certain contrast between, on the one hand, the forthright and determined statements that the Home Secretary made all those months ago about speedily ejecting those people and, on the other, the rather sorry answer that he has just given? Can there possibly be a clearer indication of the extent to which this country is seen as a soft touch for asylum seekers than the news in the Sunday papers that another group of Afghans is now planning to do the same thing?

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman has plainly not read what I said on 10 February 2000. The consequence of our firm but fair approach to the hijacking in February is that just under half of all those who were on the aeroplane have now returned. It was always understood, and I made it clear to the House in my statement on 10 February, that some of those—as it turns out, about half—would be likely to apply for asylum, and those applications have to be processed. I took the exceptional measure of making the decisions about those applications personally in the first instance, and I made most of those decisions, but not all, very quickly. The applicants now have a right of appeal. If the hon. Gentleman or his Front-Bench colleagues are suggesting that we should withdraw altogether from the 1951 refugee convention or give people no right of appeal, we ought to hear from them.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

5. **Mr. Robert Syms** (Poole): How many performance targets the immigration and nationality directorate met in 1999–2000. [126121]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mrs. Barbara Roche): The immigration and nationality directorate met half its targets in full, and another two in part. In the final month of the year, IND made 11,340 decisions, which is a new record and almost 5,000 more than in the best month under the previous Administration.

Mr. Syms: The IND 1999 report forecast a budget of £350 million, but we know that the outturn will be nearer £597 million—which is 71 per cent. over—and, in the same year, more than 20,000 failed asylum seekers have absconded. Is that not a disaster and indicative of the failure of the Government's policy on immigration?

Mrs. Roche: The hon. Gentleman is talking absolute nonsense. He is right to say that the budget has increased; that reflects the number of applications. We said at the beginning that it was difficult to predict the amount that would be needed for asylum support because it depended on numbers. This Administration have removed more unsuccessful asylum seekers than the previous Administration. Why do we not give the immigration service some credit for that?

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): I am sure that my hon. Friend recognises that delays in decision making can have serious consequences for the people concerned. Even in what should be routine cases, people are unable to travel or to prove their status because they do not have documents. What specific targets are being set in IND for dealing with travel documents and applications for indefinite leave to remain? We are aware of the targets that have been set for decisions on asylum cases, but are there specific targets for each area, and if so, will they be published?

Mrs. Roche: Yes, there are, and we will publish the new targets. I can tell my hon. Friend, who takes a close interest in these matters, that decisions in straightforward cases are being made rapidly, but he will know, as will all hon. Members, that more complex cases take considerably longer. The way to deal with that is to make sure, as we are doing, that the proper administrative procedures are in hand and that there are enough experienced caseworkers. Unlike the previous Administration, whose policies resulted in the voluntary redundancy of hundreds of experienced caseworkers, we are taking on more people.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Is the hon. Lady convinced that the immigration authorities are totally colour blind in routine cases? Is she aware of the difficulties experienced by Maori people in coming to the UK—difficulties which, one suspects, would not have arisen in the case of white citizens from New Zealand? Will she make sure that, in the work of the immigration authorities, we are as generous to people coming from countries such as New Zealand as those countries have been to UK citizens?

Mrs. Roche: The immigration service and the immigration and nationality directorate operate in a completely non-discriminatory way. If the right hon. Gentleman has evidence of any practice that is not correct, I will be delighted to hear about it, and I undertake to investigate it as speedily as possible. We have only a small proportion of such inquiries, but the right hon. Gentleman may be assured that if such cases arise, the most rigorous investigation takes place.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Is it not the case that investment in making decisions quickly saves the Home Office money? If that is the case, what is my hon. Friend's prediction of how quickly decisions will be made in future?

Mrs. Roche: My hon. Friend is right; she has great experience of such matters. Not only is it right to make the decisions as quickly as possible, but it reduces the distress of those involved in the process. We are speeding up the asylum and non-asylum decision-making process. A good example is Oakington reception centre, where we consider cases in about seven days.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): Can the Minister explain why, although she is so reluctant to detain asylum seekers on arrival in the United Kingdom, her Department is now considering building asylum prisons for those whose cases have been determined and who ought to be deported immediately? Does she understand just how horrified my constituents are to learn that, in spite of representations, her officials are still trying to find sites in North Thanet to build asylum prisons for people who ought to be deported?

Mrs. Roche: I am sorry to say that the hon. Gentleman completely misunderstands the position. We are talking

about further detention spaces for those at the end of the process. It is unpalatable but true that those whose claims are unsuccessful have to be removed at the end of the process, so they have to be detained. That is why we need an increase in that space. The hon. Gentleman knows—I have met and corresponded with him—that I am certain that that is the way to proceed. The previous Administration sought to introduce such an increase, but did not do so.

6. **Ms Oona King** (Bethnal Green and Bow): If he will make a statement on the progress of efforts to reduce the backlog of outstanding immigration cases at the immigration and nationality directorate. [126122]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mrs. Barbara Roche): The backlog is being progressively reduced and we aim to clear it by the end of July. We have streamlined the process for dealing with the intake of after-entry casework. We have introduced revised procedures to speed up the consideration of cases and have allocated all available resources to deal exclusively with backlog cases.

Ms King: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. I am delighted by the undoubted improvements that have occurred. May I ask her about the evidence and inquiry unit? She will be aware that when an entry clearance officer abroad asks the Home Office for a statement of the case, it comes from the evidence and inquiry unit, but often takes six months to arrive. Bearing in mind the fact that many applicants have already waited a year to get an interview, will she consider increasing the allocation of staff at the evidence and inquiry unit? I understand that six hard-working individuals cover the globe. Will she ensure that re-applicants are interviewed in less than a year, because the failure to do so is keeping many families apart in heartbreaking circumstances?

Mrs. Roche: I well understand the important points that my hon. Friend makes. She will know that there is some good joint working between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Home Office, with the establishment of the joint entry clearance unit. In the context of that work, I undertake to consider her proposals to find out what we can do to assist in the matter.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): The Minister will know that there are reports that many of the Kosovans who were given leave to remain have extended the time that they have been allowed to stay in the country. Doubtless, many of them will apply for asylum. I wonder how long it will take to process their cases simply because such people are kept in limbo while their cases are processed—often for a long time, which is grossly unfair. It is not a question of statistics; real people are involved and the longer they are kept in limbo, the greater the problems for them and everyone else. When will the cases of those Kosovans be dealt with?

Mrs. Roche: I completely understand the hon. Gentleman's point and appreciate the context in which he makes it. More than half those who came on the humanitarian programme have now returned. The great majority of those who remain have claimed exceptional leave to remain rather than asylum. I assure the hon. Gentleman and the House that we shall deal with the cases of those who have made asylum claims as quickly as we possibly can.

Human Rights Act 1998

7. **Ms Candy Atherton** (Falmouth and Camborne): What discussions he has had with the magistracy about the implementation of the Human Rights Act 1998. [126124]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): Lay and stipendiary magistrates have been closely involved in preparations for implementing the Human Rights Act 1998. They have contributed to the programme of seminars and working groups that the Government have organised to ensure that the courts are ready for 2 October, and have been actively involved in devising and delivering, as well as receiving, the nationwide training organised by the Judicial Studies Board. I know that my colleagues in the Lord Chancellor's Department regularly discuss with the magistracy issues about implementation of the Act.

Ms Atherton: I thank my right hon. Friend. Is he confident that, in both urban and rural areas, the Act will be implemented well by magistrates, the police and the probation service? Is he confident that they have the right training programmes in place to ensure full implementation of the Act?

Mr. Straw: We have invested a considerable amount of money, time and effort with the magistrates, the police and the probation service to ensure that everyone involved in the criminal justice system is properly apprised of the requirements of the Act when it comes into force on 2 October, but I respectfully remind my hon. Friend that we have been subject to the convention for more than 50 years, so an awful lot of what it contains will not be new to any of the criminal justice agencies.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): Having been on a Judicial Studies Board course on the Human Rights Act, I can tell the House how good that course was. I have heard from magistrates in my area that they have much benefited from the course that they have been on. However, what concerns me is that Ministers seem to be woefully ignorant of the terms of the Act. Is the Home Office making arrangements for Ministers to attend courses, so that they can learn about their own legislation?

Mr. Straw: I would require more details to answer that question. Home Office Ministers are pretty well apprised of the terms of the convention. We do our best to observe it, but I am glad to learn from the hon. and learned Gentleman, who played quite a role in the passage of the Human Rights Bill, that there continues to be support for that important measure on the Conservative Benches; it was welcomed by Conservative Front Benchers on Third Reading.

Mr. Patrick Hall (Bedford): I understand that, in publicising the Human Rights Act, my right hon. Friend plans to hold a competition for schools looking for creative ways of giving expression to the rights and responsibilities within the Act. Will he join me in congratulating a firm in my constituency, Crayola, on its

work with children to promote creativity, positive self-expression and problem solving through today's launch of the first ever national colouring week?

Mr. Straw: On balance, having thought about the question, I think that the answer is yes. I should like to congratulate my hon. Friend, his constituents and Crayola, whose products I used at school with such astonishing effect.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Although the Home Secretary is right to say that there has been a lot of all-party support for the Act, what we have repeatedly questioned is whether the Government's estimates of the costs in taxpayers' money of the implementation of the Act are accurate. In the light of further indications that far more cases relying on the Act will be brought before the courts, have the Government massively increased their estimate of the costs in taxpayers' money of implementation?

Mr. Straw: I am glad to have that further reminder of the constructive role that the Conservative Opposition took in the passage of the Bill and of the way in which the then shadow Attorney-General, the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell), wished it well from the Opposition Front Bench and advised his colleagues not to vote against it—indeed, he advised them to support it on Third Reading. It is possible that the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) has been going on and on about the cost of the measure. It is the first time that I have heard him raise it. I do not recall such matters being raised to any degree during the passage of the Bill. By definition, we cannot exactly predict the behaviour either of defendants or, more particularly, of the courts. However, there have certainly been no major revisions of the estimates that we previously made public.

Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill

8. **Mr. John M. Taylor** (Solihull): What estimate he has made of the cost to internet service providers of complying with the provisions of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill. [126126]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): The Government have estimated that the cost to internet service providers of complying with the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill will not exceed £20 million in aggregate over the first four years' operation. I am satisfied that the requirements that we have in mind will be consistent with comparable countries. I should also draw to the hon. Gentleman's attention the fact that Parliament will have a further chance to scrutinise the detailed technical proposals before the requirements come into force and before any costs are incurred.

Mr. Taylor: What does the Minister have to say in response to the British Chambers of Commerce report that the Bill will cost the economy £46 billion? *[Laughter.]* Yes, £46 billion. Will he give an outright commitment that the Bill will not drive British business out of the United Kingdom?

Mr. Clarke: My short answer is that that is total nonsense, as I have told the British Chambers of Commerce. I point out to the hon. Gentleman that on our website, we go through the BCC figures; they are nonsense. We also do not accept the charge that e-commerce will be driven out of the country, although I emphasise that we have entered very close dialogue with the industry to try to ensure full agreement. A requirement for the Act to work effectively will be close working with business. We are extremely conscious of that at every level.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): Does my hon. Friend agree that people who oppose the Bill are playing right into the hands of some of the most evil criminals on this planet? Are not charges already imposed in countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Sweden and France for internet service providers in this field?

Mr. Clarke: I half agree with my hon. Friend. He is right to identify the benefits to crime of the way in which the internet can operate and we need to contest it. Examples of his point are clear. In 1996–97, through using such surveillance, there were 1,200 arrests, and the seizure of drugs with a street value of more than £600 million and of more than 450 firearms. I only half agree with my hon. Friend because although some people are motivated in the way that he described, some are partners in dialogue—I mentioned business in this context—who are worried about the process, and it is incumbent on us as a Government to work closely with them. I do not impugn their motives, although I impugn the motives of some of those who have made some of the arguments.

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): Given the worries about which the Minister has just spoken, and the increasing concerns of Members of both Houses of Parliament and ordinary, law-abiding citizens who use the internet, will he tell us what changes he intends to make to the Bill?

Mr. Clarke: We are looking at two or three specific changes. The first is to make explicit issues on cost, of the kind with which I dealt in answer to the hon. Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor). The second is to consider definitions of certain aspects of collection of communications data about which questions have been raised. My noble Friend the Under-Secretary commented on that last week. The third is to make more explicit in the Bill the fact that we are principally requiring plain text rather than any encryption key in order to get the data that we want, about which there has been some concern. A number of those points will arise during the third day's consideration of the Bill in Committee in the other place.

Asylum Seekers (Housing)

9. **Mr. Peter L. Pike** (Burnley): If he will make a statement on the problems being experienced with housing asylum seekers in the areas to which they are being dispersed. [126127]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mrs. Barbara Roche): The arrangements for dispersing asylum seekers are working well. As of 9 June, 2,650 asylum seekers had been dispersed to national asylum support service

accommodation around the country. All accommodation has to meet strict criteria and is inspected on our behalf by independent property surveyors.

Mr. Pike: Is my hon. Friend absolutely certain that there have been all necessary discussions with local authorities and health authorities on arrangements for receiving dispersed asylum seekers? Is she absolutely certain that cowboy landlords are not charging exorbitant rents for appalling properties—despite what she has said about accommodation?

Mrs. Roche: I know of my hon. Friend's concerns in these matters and that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has met his council leader and officers and, indeed, written to him. I am confident that we ensure that all the proper procedures are in place for inspection and consultation. However, I shall keep a close eye on the matter and, if a specific meeting is needed, I shall be delighted to arrange it.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): Will the Minister clarify the circular dated today which the Home Secretary sent to all Members of Parliament? It states, in paragraph 3:

> A central feature of the new . . . arrangements involves . . . dispersal . . . from London and the South East,

and continues, in paragraph 5:

> Our policy is to disperse away from London and Kent.

Does she appreciate that that will cause confusion and depression in places like Southend-on-Sea—which recently had the pleasure of a visit by her—which are in the south-east, but not in Kent?

Mrs. Roche: I understand entirely the hon. Gentleman's points. I was delighted to undertake my visit to his constituency and I found it useful. We are dispersing those who seek asylum away from hard-pressed areas in London and the south-east, and the areas to which people are currently being dispersed are concentrated in the north-west, the north-east and Scotland.

Mr. Jim Marshall (Leicester, South): May I urge my hon. Friend to keep a close eye on the workings of the national asylum support service? It recently entered into an agreement to provide accommodation on one hotel site in Leicester for 400 people, but the local authority was not informed at an early stage. Will she ensure that there is adequate dialogue between NASS and local authorities, so that they are able to provide the services needed to support those 400 new people in Leicester?

Mrs. Roche: I understand my hon. Friend's points. I assure him that I hold regular meetings with NASS. Not only do we make sure that local authorities are informed through the regional consortium—that is why we encourage local authorities to sign contracts with us—but we notify health authorities as well.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): How many asylum seekers disappear while on dispersal?

Mrs. Roche: The hon. Gentleman is confused. Dispersal relates to when asylum seekers make application to NASS because they are destitute. The system replaces the shambolic arrangements left by the previous Government. The hon. Gentleman is talking about temporary admission, but that is completely different.

Closed Circuit Television

10. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): How much funding his Department will provide in the current financial year to support CCTV schemes. [126128]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): Under the crime reduction programme CCTV initiative, we are investing £153 million over three years in new or extended CCTV systems in England and Wales. Nearly £60 million of capital funding has already been allocated to crime and disorder reduction partnerships to support more than 340 CCTV schemes. Partnerships have begun to bid for the remaining £90 million under a rolling programme of funding that will run until the end of 2001. Details of any new CCTV awards will continue to be posted on the Home Office website.

Mr. Chapman: My hon. Friend will be aware that several CCTV schemes in the Wirral have been or are about to be approved and that such schemes are effective in reducing crime. However, there is a related issue of the trading environment: for example, in my constituency, the shopkeepers and licensees of New Ferry are collaborating to improve the trading environment in a small community shopping area; they believe that CCTV's effect on youth theft and vandalism, general crime and night-time disturbances would be such that local people's shopping facilities could be much improved. Does my hon. Friend agree that, although the money made available so far is welcome, far more needs to be made available, so that areas such as New Ferry can tackle such issues?

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which explains why the guidelines for the further rolling-round that we published in February emphasise, first, the need for joint bids from local authorities and local business, because there are significant economies of scale to be made, and secondly, the need to go for schemes on small shopping precincts outside the city centres, which have not always been economic. The guidelines on the web set out clearly how that can be achieved. I hope that my hon. Friend's crime reduction partnership in the Wirral will produce proposals which meet that point and the points that he raised in his question.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): CCTV cameras are quite effective against young vandals, but if the young vandals were not on the streets in the first place, that would be even more effective. How many child curfew orders have been issued since the Crime and Disorder Act 1998? If, as I suspect, the answer is none, how great has the impact of such orders been in keeping young vandals off the street? Is this a new example of zero tolerance, or perhaps of the third way? The first way is to do something, the second way is to do nothing, and the third way—the Government's way—is to do nothing but put a spin on it.

Mr. Clarke: The hon. Gentleman's cynicism is uncharacteristic. It is unfortunate that the various

anti-social behaviour orders and child curfew orders—[HON. MEMBERS: "How many?] There have been very few. Those orders have been opposed down the line by the Opposition. We are doing our best, as my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary described, to roll out the anti-social behaviour orders. CCTV is an effective weapon to help to ensure that young people in all areas of towns and cities behave in a social way. We intend to keep on funding that programme to a much greater extent than the Conservatives ever did.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): Does my hon. Friend accept that the guidelines issued by the Data Protection Commissioner for the use of CCTV have largely allayed the fears expressed by some people about their operation? Will he accept the congratulations of people in Beeston and Kimberley in my constituency, who greatly welcome the imminent arrival of the cameras as a major step forward in combating youth crime in our area?

Mr. Clarke: As my hon. Friend says, some of the doubts that existed have been allayed by the guidelines. I know that many constituents of many hon. Members are delighted by the CCTV schemes that we have introduced and paid for, which are setting about reducing crime and disorder consistently and effectively.

Public Safety Radio Communications Project

11. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): What estimate he has made of the impact on police budgets of the public safety radio communications project. [126129]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): Once the service is fully established across England and Wales, the cost of the public safety radio communications service is estimated to be £157 million per year at today's prices for the police service. Currently, that represents about 2 per cent. of police authority budgets in England and Wales. In addition, there will be costs to forces in buying control room and radio terminal equipment and so on, but many of those costs would be incurred irrespective of the public safety radio communications service. The allocation of £50 million from the capital modernisation fund to the service, which my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced in September 1999, will go towards reducing the cost of the service during the first few years of operation.

Miss McIntosh: I thank the Minister for that reply. Does he share my concern that although the Government have agreed with North Yorkshire police to top-slice its budget, the rurality factor should be taken into account? It must be recognised that the new equipment cannot be shared in sparsely populated rural areas such as North Yorkshire. Is the Minister aware that 16 per cent. of North Yorkshire's operational budget is currently spent on retirement pensions, and that 50 per cent. of it goes on early retirement for police officers? Will that also be taken into account in future budgets?

Mr. Clarke: I have discussed with the chief constable of North Yorkshire—the force covering the hon. Lady's constituency—the important benefit of the national police project to her constituency, perhaps more so than to many other police authorities, because of the geography of the area. The police force recognises what we are doing. On rurality, may I point out to the hon. Lady that my right hon. Friend announced 10 days or so ago an extra £15 million for rural forces in the current year to meet some of the costs associated with rural forces? The Government can say that we are doing a great deal for rural forces and will continue to do so.

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East): Now that Ray Mallon and seven Cleveland officers have been cleared of any criminal charges, what will the Government do to bring Operation Lancet to an end? It has been a great drain on public resources, on the police budget—

Madam Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but that does not relate to the question at all.

Police Manpower (Essex)

12. **Mr. Simon Burns** (West Chelmsford): How many police officers were *(a)* in place and *(b)* funded on (i) 31 March 2000 and (ii) 31 March 1997 in Essex. [126130]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): The Essex police had 2,961 police officers on 31 March 1997, which I understand was in line with their budgeted plans. I have been informed by the chief constable that the Essex police had 2,809 police officers on 31 March 2000 compared with a budgeted figure of 2,859. It is for chief officers to determine the number of officers to be funded within the overall resources available to them. Specific funding is being made available to Essex under the crime fighting fund to enable it to recruit 103 officers in addition to existing plans over the coming two years.

Mr. Burns: However likeable the Home Secretary is, it would help if he would cut some of the flannel and spin, because the figures show that there are fewer police officers in Essex now than in March 1997. Does he accept that, notwithstanding the 103 funded officers for the future about whom he spoke, his announcement on Friday of the increased money for the Metropolitan police has produced the double whammy that people in Essex who want to be police officers will be drawn to the Met to serve because they will earn more money, and existing officers in the Essex constabulary will resign and move to the Met because the financial differentiation will be £6,000?

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman's initial criticism was not well placed. I answered the questions that he asked, and just that.

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): Shame.

Mr. Straw: That is always my aim in the House, from wherever questions come, as it is my hon. Friend's too.

I was delighted to announce to the House last Friday that, from next week, Metropolitan police officers appointed after 1 September 1994 will receive an increase of £3,300 in their allowance, because there have been specific recruitment and retention problems for those

groups of Met officers in London. We understand the concerns of police forces in the outer London area and in the home counties. My hon. Friend and I have had a number of discussions with the chief officers concerned—of Thames Valley police in my case, and Essex and a number of other services—

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): And Surrey.

Mr. Straw: And Surrey.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): And Hertfordshire.

Mr. Straw: And Hertfordshire, and Kent.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): And Staffordshire.

Mr. Straw: Staffordshire is not a home county.

We have told all those chief officers that we understand their concern, but that we need detailed evidence from them on recruitment problems of the same kind that we had from the Metropolitan police service in respect of its problems. If we have that evidence we can take steps to deal with the problem.

Human Genome Project

3.33 pm

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): Madam Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the human genome project.

This morning the Wellcome Trust and the Sanger centre in Cambridge announced, together with their international partners, that the initial stage of the work to map the human genome had been completed. The work, which has been carried out in 16 centres across the world, has led to 85 per cent. of the human genome being accurately deciphered. Work in hand and still to be finally checked will lead to 97 per cent. of the genome being read.

That is an enormous scientific achievement and represents the culmination of an international project which will be of benefit to all humanity. The project has been a co-operative venture from the start and I should like to pay tribute to the central role of the United States and the other countries—Japan, France, Germany and China—with which we have worked to achieve our goal.

The international collaborative nature of this work stems from co-operation which began in the 1980s between John Sulston, working at the MRC laboratory of molecular biology, and Robert Waterston from Washington university. They first produced an outline of the genome for a particular type of worm, called C elegans. But their ultimate goal was to sequence the worm's genome in its entirety. Their success proved that sequencing the human genome, while far more ambitious, would be possible in principle. However, with the techniques available in the 1980s, it would have taken more than 1,500 scientists an entire century to complete the work.

John Sulston was key to the plan to set up the Sanger centre in 1992 with funds from the Wellcome Trust. The centre is named after Fred Sanger, who received his second Nobel prize for his pioneering work on the sequencing of DNA. The centre has played an important role in the development of the new and faster sequencing technique, which has led to the completion of the work far earlier than originally foreseen.

I pay particular tribute to the wisdom and foresight of the Wellcome Trust in largely funding the work in this country. British science is very fortunate that it has been supported by the huge resources of the Wellcome Trust, and that those resources have been used to such good effect.

The structure of DNA was discovered in Cambridge in 1953 by Francis Crick and Jim Watson, by their fellow Nobel prize winner Maurice Wilkins, and by Rosalind Franklin, who tragically died in 1957, before the Nobel prize was awarded. At that time, no one would have believed that by 2000, almost the whole of the human genome would have been sequenced. It is fitting that almost 50 years later, scientists at Cambridge should again be involved.

We should not underestimate the magnitude of that achievement. There are 3 billion chemical building blocks or bases in the human genome, packaged into 23 pairs of chromosomes. The order of those bases forms the code of life, providing instructions for the genes that help to make each of us who we are, and give us our particular characteristics. Our genes make us susceptible or resistant to certain diseases, and affect the way in which we react to different medicines.

Now that we have the sequence information, we shall be able to identify why changes in the usual code can lead to the development of diseases. Ultimately we should have a better understanding of the causes of major killers such as cancer and heart disease, and be able to develop effective treatments for them. We also have the prospect of personalised medicine, which means that both the course of treatment and the drugs prescribed will be tailored to suit the individual's genetic make-up.

It is because of the enormous potential of the human genome for increasing our understanding of human disease that in March 2000, President Bill Clinton and the Prime Minister announced in a joint statement that they would like to see "unencumbered access" to the sequence data.

President Clinton and the Prime Minister held a video conference this afternoon. They agreed that the common property of the human genome should be used freely for the common good of the human race, but that the implementation should not be abused, as the Prime Minister has said, to make man his own creator or to invade individual privacy.

As we proceed to use the new knowledge that the structure of the genome offers us, it is inevitable that a range of social and ethical questions will arise. We need to be sensitive to those issues, and to the different views and values that individuals will hold, and we need to debate them openly. The Human Genetics Commission, which we have recently set up to advise us on strategic developments in human genetics, will have an important role in that process and will consult widely. It will also, as far as it can, look into the future and advise us of the important issues that may arise.

There will be a continued need for international co-operation. President Clinton and the Prime Minister also spoke about that today, and concluded that the United States of America, the United Kingdom and other Governments throughout the world will now need to work together to develop the ethical, moral and legal framework that will ensure that this scientific leap forward benefits the many not the few, and strengthens all societies.

The sequencing of the genome is the end of one journey, but it is also the start of another. The Government are committed to being involved in that new journey. In the last comprehensive spending review, we increased the budgets of the relevant research councils by £142 million over the period to 2002 for research into human genetics.

I believe that in years to come, people will look back on this day and see it as the key to humanity's understanding of itself. We congratulate all the scientists involved on their remarkable achievement, and wish them every future success in taking that exciting work forward.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I thank the Minister for making her statement available to me earlier this afternoon; it is one of those statements about which there is genuine cross-party delight. We all understand its importance and we join the Minister in congratulating the international collaboration on the work, and especially British scientists on their work over the decades. I have an appointment, which has been in my diary for some time, to visit the Sanger centre next Tuesday, and I am genuinely looking forward to that.

[Mrs. Angela Browning]

I should declare an interest—as many hon. Members will—in that I have honorary positions with the National Autistic Society and the Alzheimer's Disease Society. Others will have their own personal interests. We are overwhelmingly encouraged by the news, and I hope that the project will come to fruition. I join the Minister in stating clearly that we will need to issue a word of caution to the general public so that expectations raised by today's marvellous announcement will not lead people to think that there will be an immediate solution for many conditions. However, the speed of progress in the past couple of years has been first class, and welcome.

There is a challenge to Governments. Will the Minister outline how the Government see the question of the cost of some of the treatments and medications that are likely to come from the research? Some will be disproportionately high for the few when we see them in reality in a few years' time. How is that influencing the hon. Lady's thinking and that of the Government in terms of treatments being available across the board, when science such as this creates new opportunities, with attendant costs?

The Minister announced that the United States and the United Kingdom have today jointly said that they hope that there will be "unencumbered access" to sequence data. How will that be affected by the new global agreement on patent law to which the UK and the US—if not all EU countries—are signatories? How does the Minister see the future in terms of patenting in this context?

Ms Hewitt: I thank the hon. Lady for her response and her questions. I agree that it is immensely important not to give the public the impression that there will be immediate solutions and treatments for terrible illnesses as a result of today's announcement. The hon. Lady asked about the costs of new treatments that will be developed on the basis of the human genome analysis. We have recently announced a record level of new funding for the NHS, which will give us the basis for expanding the range of treatments available to individuals.

It is worth adding that we should not assume that all the new treatments that science will make available will necessarily be more expensive than those available now. Some may be cheaper, not least because they will be more effective and better targeted than those available now. Also, we have established the National Institute for Clinical Effectiveness—[Hon. Members: "Excellence."] I am grateful for that correction. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence will evaluate the cost-effectiveness of different treatments.

On patent protection and the crucial issue of making human genome data freely available, we have clear rules in the UK—soon to be reinforced by the EU directive on biotechnology patents—that will ensure that basic gene sequence information will not be patented and will continue to be available to all researchers and scientists. Companies, of course, will seek patent protection for inventions of their own that are based upon that freely available genetic discovery. That is necessary if the new diagnostic tools and therapies are to be developed. I believe that we have the right regime here in the UK which is soon to be enforced across the EU.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Although my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) has had a Westminster Hall Adjournment debate on the human genome, could we have some indication that, at least in the autumn, the Commons will be able to discuss this extremely important subject properly? In the meantime, might it not be helpful to have a Green Paper setting out the complex patent position? It is all very well for the President and the Prime Minister to say that they want open access—I am sure they do. But what is the likely position in the American courts, where the opposition to this is determined to do what some us think is quite intolerable, and patent the alphabet?

My final question is very complex and should be addressed at an early stage. What information will be made available to insurance companies? Some of my student contemporaries who worked on this matter, such as Jim Watson, would be the first to be appalled if the information were used for purposes of exploitation by insurance companies. That was not what those people were about.

Ms Hewitt: My hon. Friend has raised some extremely important points. I know that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, who is in her place, has heard his request for a debate, and I am sure that she will consider it. There are several outstanding patent applications in the US, and I understand that the US patents office is currently reviewing its policy on patents and biotechnology. As I have already said, we think that it is enormously important to get the regime right and to continue to ensure free and open access to the basic alphabet of the human genome. Therefore, we will keep a close eye on developments in the US.

My hon. Friend also mentioned insurance, and there is real concern that we could end up with a genetic underclass of people who find it impossible to get insurance or employment because genetic tests predict that they might develop some disease. We want to prevent the unfair and inappropriate use of genetic information, and the new Genetics and Insurance Committee will allow the industry to use only specific genetic test results that are relevant to the setting of insurance premiums. This year, the GAIC will assess tests for inherited conditions that are covered by the Association of British Insurers voluntary code of practice on genetic testing.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): The Liberal Democrats share the delight at the Minister's announcement of the exciting news from the scientists in Cambridge and the US. Indeed, her statement reminded me of the excitement of genetics as I studied the subject at the medical school in my constituency in Oxford, which is full of talented geneticists. Many of the concerns that I wished to raise have already been mentioned by the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), but on the question of genetics and insurance, does the Minister understand that people are concerned that the Government's position is too close to that of the insurance companies, and that there should be a moratorium on insurance companies being able to require individuals to reveal information about their genetic tests, which should be used for health purposes, not insurance ones?

Does the Minister recognise that the concentration of NICE on new treatments rather than existing treatments creates a barrier—unique to this country—to the introduction of radical new treatments that may at first appear difficult to afford? Drug and other companies may

choose to innovate in other countries, because of the barriers set up by NICE. Does she recognise the concerns that exist in the scientific community that investment such as that which the Wellcome Trust made in the project might not be able to be repeated in public science today, unless further investment is made in the science base in the comprehensive spending review? The careers of young scientists in this country must also be nurtured, not abandoned.

Will the Minister also accept a word of caution that none of the new and exciting developments will be able to deal with much of the ill health that occurs in the developing world? We must ensure that we offer innovation and funding to those areas as well.

Ms Hewitt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I acknowledge the fact that he and his colleagues share our excitement. On a more personal note, his father was, until recently, the distinguished dean of medicine at the Leicester university school of medicine, with which I have had some connection.

Insurance companies cannot now require anybody to take a genetic test, and that is as it should be. However, we have asked the Human Genetics Commission, recently established by us, to consider the wider social and ethical issues related to the use of personal genetic data in insurance and in employment. We shall continue to monitor developments in human genetics, and the possible need for a change in legislation to guard against genetic discrimination.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the issue of the possibly prohibitive cost of medicines based upon human genome research. I stress that we should not assume that these new treatments and diagnostic tools will necessarily be more expensive than those now available. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence is about promoting—not inhibiting—the take-up of effective medicine, and about getting rid of the present lottery of prescribing by postcode from which we suffer.

The hon. Gentleman raised the importance of strengthening our already excellent science base. As I have said, in the last spending review we substantially increased investment in the science base, specifically to ensure that there is full exploitation of the extraordinary potential of the human genome study.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): The Minister drew attention to the positive implications for health care of the finding of information on the human genome. Is the ministerial taskforce on science discussing the implications for all Government Departments of human genome information? In particular, is the Department of Health closely considering the implications for the reorganisation of primary care, if the national health service is to be able in due course to ensure that the information is used in the best possible way to inform people's treatment?

Ms Hewitt: Yes, the ministerial taskforce is and will be considering the implications of those developments. My right hon. and hon. Friends in the Department of Health are also considering the implications for the future organisation of primary care. I stress that we do not expect immediate developments in the treatment and diagnosis of disease. As we look further ahead beyond the next decade, we need to take into account the social and ethical implications, and the implications for health care, of these developments. I am pleased that the Human Genetics Commission has been jointly established by, and will jointly report to, the Department of Health and the Department of Trade and Industry.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): I add my warmest congratulations to my constituents at the Sanger centre near Cambridge on their achievements announced today. My constituents there and at the laboratory of molecular biology, which is also in my constituency, next to Addenbrooke's hospital, will be aware that there is now an important job to do, of exploitation of the human genome. In effect, we have a map but we do not know yet where the treasure is buried. There is a great deal of discovery to be done to find it.

The LMB, and the Wellcome Trust at Hinxton, are sites around which a biotechnology industry cluster will develop. The Minister and her right hon. and hon. Friends have made several pronouncements on promoting biotechnology cluster development, especially in the Cambridge area. What additional measures is she now proposing that will be geared specifically to utilising the development, given that the prospects for expansion at Hinxton are now very good, and likewise at Addenbrooke's hospital?

Ms Hewitt: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the exciting plans that the regional development agency for the Eastern Region is helping to co-ordinate for building upon the existing biotechnology-based cluster in and around Cambridge, and expanding it into a triangle of excellence between Cambridge, Norwich and Ipswich. My noble Friend the Minister for Science is working specifically on the further development of the biotechnology cluster in and around Cambridge. I shall ask him to write to the hon. Gentleman with further information in response to his question.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): I am sure that my hon. Friend will share my concern about the poor reporting of this important science over a number of years, from the ridiculous headlines about Dolly the sheep right through to today. Will she discuss that with her colleagues, particularly in the Department for Education and Employment, with a view to using this opportunity to increase the public understanding of science? This is a matter of massive importance, and we must not allow people to go down the road of thinking that we have instant cures at our fingertips, or to be misled by some of the ridiculous stories.

Ms Hewitt: I entirely agree about the importance of high-quality rather than over-excitable reporting on scientific issues. I am glad to say that Geoffrey Watts, a distinguished journalist and the presenter of BBC Radio 4's "Leading Edge", is one of the members of the Human Genetics Commission. I hope that such excellent scientific programmes, and at least some of the scientific reporting in the daily newspapers, will give the public a rather better briefing on the enormous implications of the discoveries that have been announced today.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): The Minister is right to signal the leading role that the United Kingdom

[Mr. Ian Taylor]

science base and UK-based scientists have played. I hope that the friendly relationship between President Clinton and Tony Blair is one in which the Prime Minister fully understands the implications of American policy. When I was a Minister with responsibility for science, when Dolly the sheep was cloned, the first call that I took was from the American special adviser on science to the President, who said that the President wanted quick answers to two questions: could the Americans steal the UK's scheme for a human genetics advisory commission, and why the hell did the Americans not do the science in their country?

The Americans are going to watch very closely to see how the project unrolls, and will try to take a leading part in it. Can the Minister clarify the question of patents? Of course patents should not be taken out on the human genome project and its broad findings, but unless the biotechnology industry can patent applications and innovative steps, there will not be progress in the application of drugs and cures arising from the basic knowledge. That is an important distinction.

Can the Minister help to solve, not simply stress, the problems that we might have with the insurance industry and with employment? One of the exciting things to come out of the project is that people can move into areas of preventive care, and can understand a little about how they might alleviate the effects even of hereditary diseases, because of our better understanding of the total picture of the human genome.

Ms Hewitt: On that second point, I entirely agree about the need to present a balanced picture and to understand the implications both for good and for potential harm.

The hon. Gentleman raised the vital issue of patenting. Under current UK law, human genes in the cells in our bodies cannot be patented. That is clearly right. As I said earlier, a European Communities directive will come into force later this year, establishing the same basic principle right across Europe. It will rightly make it clear that, as is already the case in the United Kingdom, patents will be available only for the invention of new technical solutions. That is also necessary to give companies the incentive that they need to make what may well be very substantial investments in creating new intellectual capital, and of course they will seek to protect those intellectual property rights.

Mr. Hilary Benn (Leeds, Central): My hon. Friend rightly said that insurance companies cannot require individuals to disclose genetic information, but does she not recognise that as genetic testing develops, there is nothing to stop them inviting people to do so in return for a lower premium? Is it not likely that we will have to find a new way of pooling risk in insurance, if we are to avoid the sort of genetic exclusion that many hon. Members are worried about?

Ms Hewitt: I think that I said earlier that the Association of British Insurers already has in place a voluntary code of practice on genetic testing. It is as concerned as we are to get this right, in order to ensure that people are not discriminated against and unfairly prevented from getting insurance, but that insurance companies can continue to do their job properly. That is one of the major issues that we will ask the Human Genetics Commission to consider and advise us on, as they examine in greater detail the implications of the greater availability and accuracy of genetic testing.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): I join the Minister in welcoming the announcement of joint publication by the American and British researchers, and I agree with her declaration that the work is about six sevenths of the way through. Clearly, there is much more work to come.

Applications for patents have been submitted in the United States. The Minister said that no such applications would be granted in this country, but will she say whether any have been made? Will Government funds be needed to oppose patent applications, given the implications that will arise if a patent is granted in the United States? Will she join me in saying that there would be no objection to a patent on a diagnostic test or a treatment, but that we would object if such a patent blocked the introduction of better and cheaper tests and treatments? Is not the point of patent protection that it allows advance and progress, as opposed to freezing research and allowing no further change?

Ms Hewitt: I have already set out the legal position in this country. I am not sure whether applications for patents in respect of the raw data have been made here, but no such patent would succeed. Applications for patents on the raw data have been made and are pending in the USA, but the US Patent and Trade Mark Office is reviewing its policy in this area.

I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the joint statement made in March by President Clinton and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister:

> To realise the full promise of this research, raw fundamental data on the human genome, including the human DNA sequence and its variations, should be made freely available to scientists everywhere. Unencumbered access to this information will promote discoveries that will reduce the burden of disease, improve health around the world, and enhance the quality of life for all humankind.

In the video conference that they held half an hour or so ago, President Clinton and my right hon. Friend reiterated their commitment to open access to the data.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): I add my congratulations to all those involved in this great discovery, not just in Cambridge and in America, but all over the world. I liken the research to a marathon: the starting gun was fired in 1953 with the discovery of the double helix, and today we are just passing the first mile-post.

I believe that future research will depend on three things. First, finance will be needed, as the pace of research will increase from now on. Secondly, the crowd must be kept cheering, so it is vital that the general public are kept informed and on the side of the scientists. Thirdly, legislators must keep a close eye on the race, in case the rules have to be changed from time to time. Does my hon. Friend agree that those three elements are essential if the research is to be kept going?

Ms Hewitt: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I stress that the most recent comprehensive spending review increased the budgets of the relevant research councils to ensure that research into human genetics could proceed. Further announcements will be made when the current

spending review is complete. However, much of the next wave of research into how the information can be exploited for diagnostic testing and treatment will come from the private sector.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): The Minister rightly paid tribute to the work of the Wellcome Foundation in making possible the British effort towards mapping the human genome. In the United States, commercial investment in the Celera company has pushed the project forward. That company appears to take an aggressive stance, and it is clear that it wants to hang on to certain parts of the intellectual property in this matter. What discussions has the Minister's Department had with that company to establish whether its approach is compatible with the United Kingdom approach that she outlined? Here, the approach is to make the information open and available to all scientists, but that does not match the impression that I get of Celera's attitude.

Ms Hewitt: It is fair to say that the competition from Celera has helped to speed up the work of the human genome project. In this field, as in many others, competition has produced real benefits. We will be watching with great interest to see, for instance, what statements have been made today by the director of Celera about the terms on which medical and scientific researchers will have access to the human genome data that they have decoded.

It is also worth saying that because Celera took a different approach to the decoding of the human genome alphabet, there may well be real advantages to come as scientists compare the different alphabets arrived at through the different scientific methods.

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement on a major event in the progress of scientific understanding. What plans are there to publish the benefits of this breakthrough for the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of illness, and to indicate the regulatory process? In that way, public fears may be answered and reduced, and will not impede the application of this new science, in which Britain excels.

Ms Hewitt: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is worth stressing that we should not expect immediate changes in the treatment or diagnosis of disease as a result of the work that has so far been done by the human genome project. The project has created the genetic map that will provide the foundation for a revolution in medical diagnosis and treatment that is yet to come. We can see, even from the publicity that there has already been about today's announcement, that the public will soon come to appreciate the extraordinary implications and the scale of importance of the milestone that has been passed today.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): The Minister is right to play down expectations of immediate cures. I believe that Gray's "Anatomy" was first published in 1858, but it was some 70 years before people realised the link between the islets of Langerhans and insulin.

Can the Minister assure the House that the Government will take no steps to prevent any further research into human stem cells or similar tissue? That is the key that can open the door to the cures for many dysfunctions, including cancer and other congenital diseases, yet there are many siren voices who argue that any research on human cells should be banned.

Ms Hewitt: I am advised that the chief medical officer's working group is considering that issue. His advice has not yet come to the Government, and we have therefore not yet made a decision.

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): I add my congratulations to the many scientists internationally who have achieved this wonderful goal today. It has already been likened in importance to the invention of the wheel. However, many right hon. and hon. Members have echoed the real worries surrounding the issue, and I am pleased that the Minister has already accepted that there is the possibility of a genetic underclass. We need to be very careful about how the technology is rolled out.

May I call for an early and swift debate on this matter? Public opinion is quite sensitive at the moment, because of genetically modified foods, BSE and the like. I urge my hon. Friend to ask her ministerial colleagues if we can have a debate as soon as possible on the wide and significant issues raised by this extremely important discovery.

Ms Hewitt: I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will take notice of that further request for a debate on these important issues.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Are the Government not being uncharacteristically modest about the human genome project? Should they not at least have said a word of praise for the experimental laboratories in Walworth road and Millbank, whose successful trials in human cloning have led to the results that are so evident on the Government Back Benches?

Ms Hewitt: I had hoped that questions on the statement would pass without unfortunate references to human genetic treatment of such a kind. I shall resist following the hon. Gentleman.

If I may clarify the answer that I gave a moment ago, the working group led by the chief medical officer has completed its work, but the Government have not yet made a decision on it.

Point of Order

4.9 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. On Thursday, the Leader of the House announced that today's business would be a motion on the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill followed by consideration of the Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate Bill. She then spent 40 minutes explaining why a number of important issues raised by myself and other Members could not be discussed because of lack of parliamentary time. You, Madam Speaker, will have noticed that the Order Paper does not contain a motion on the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill, and that the House has been left with a very light diet indeed. Given all the pressures on parliamentary time, does not today's business represent a missed opportunity?

Madam Speaker: Does the Minister want to raise a further point of order?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. As the right hon. Gentleman said, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House made an announcement about a motion for the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill last Thursday. During the course of Friday, we were pleased to receive assurances—both through the usual channels and through wider discussions—that the matter could be concluded satisfactorily without recourse to a guillotine. It is perhaps best for the House to proceed by consensus on matters such as this.

Orders of the Day

Census (Amendment) Bill *[Lords]* [*Money*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

4.11 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): I to beg to move,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Census (Amendment) Bill *[Lords]*, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable out of money so provided under any other enactment.

The Government proposed in the White Paper on the 2001 census, published in March 1999, that a new question on religion should be included in the census in addition to the existing question on ethnic group. An amendment to the Census Act 1920 is necessary because the schedule to the Act, which specifies those matters of which particulars may be required to be stated in census returns, does not currently provide for particulars on religion. This Bill received its Second Reading in the House on 20 June. I commend the resolution to the House.

4.11 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): My hopes soared when the Minister rose to move the resolution. Such hopes were unusual in these circumstances and I had hoped that he was setting a precedent. However, I was then profoundly disappointed by the opacity of his announcement. Even the most casual reading of the resolution would tell one that it contains the potential at least for a very large amount of expenditure about which we still know nothing.

For a Treasury Minister to come to the House to ask us to underwrite the expenditure of an unspecified amount is bad enough, but this resolution goes beyond even the usual pronouncements of a money resolution, in two or three important respects. The first is that it states:

for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Census (Amendment) Bill *[Lords]*.

That leads us to suppose that we are being asked to sign a blank cheque that could arise not from the Bill as we now know it, but from the Bill which may emerge after its Committee and Report stages. The Government are therefore pushing their luck more than somewhat. It would be bad enough if we knew the text upon which we are being asked to write a blank cheque, but we are now being asked to write a double or triple blank cheque, in that the resolution refers to the Act that may emerge from the parliamentary process that was initiated, not finalised, by the introduction of the Bill. A huge amount of speculation will arise in that respect.

The resolution then adds impertinently that the Government want the House to approve

any increase attributable to the Act.

The formality of the blank cheque has been set before us but, most important, the resolution continues:

in the sums payable out of money so provided under any other enactment.

Normally one might not be too alarmed by such a statement, but this is a highly controversial Bill. We discovered that on Second Reading, when the House

divided. Some of my hon. Friends and I expressed considerable disquiet at its content, and that disquiet has not diminished with the passage of time.

The worrying aspect of the seemingly innocuous phrase "under any enactment" arises from the pronouncements of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed), who is the Bill's supposed promoter, and of the Economic Secretary to the Treasury. Their pronouncements led to a suspicion that we did not have much of an opportunity to explore on Second Reading. On 20 June, in a text which I wonder whether my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire wrote, because it does not sound like him to me, although I shall accept his assurances if he wants to give them, my hon. Friend said:

> If we are to deal with discrimination in the provision of health, housing, schools, welfare and community care services, we require better information. We require better information about baseline figures against which racial disadvantage and social exclusion within particular minority groups can be monitored. This information would be useful in the planning of religious education—

I may come back to that in a moment—and

> it would have relevance in the regeneration of inner cities; and I would expect it to aid the very valuable work of voluntary sector religious groups.—[*Official Report*, 20 June 2000; Vol. 352, c. 266.]

That is what my hon. Friend said as reported in *Hansard*, if I may put it that way, when he was introducing the Bill.

The Minister said later:

> The basic reason for collecting such information, however—

that is, information resulting from the census, as it would be altered by the Bill—

> is so that it can be used to inform planning, policy and services.—[*Official Report*, 20 June 2000; Vol. 352, c. 305.]

Flowing from all that is not just the suspicion but the near certainty that the mechanism that would be initiated by adding the question to the census that the Bill suggests will, if it has any meaning at all, result in considerable additional expenditure in some areas, not least the planning of religious education. The matter was touched on on Second Reading, and we received no further information. Everyone seems to want to be coy about it. Will the phrase "under any other enactment" in the money resolution lead us to an unspecified and possibly unlimited amount of expenditure across the board of social policy?

I am not sure what "social exclusion" means. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire is obviously happy with it as a concept. Perhaps he could explain it to me, if not now, then subsequently. References have also been made to the regeneration of inner cities, no less, and then the Minister tells us that the information will be used to inform planning, policy and services.

So contained within the wording of the Bill as it now is, never mind as it may emerge from Committee and Report, is the potential for considerable extra expenditure.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): My right hon. Friend's frugality is legendary. Do I take it that he thinks that the activities that will flow from the Census (Amendment) Bill could involve every Government Department, without exception? Or can my right hon. Friend think of an exception, and would he care to divulge to the House which Department he thinks would be exempt?

Mr. Forth: I suppose that it is possible that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will escape the clutches of this ghastly little provision, and perhaps the Ministry of Defence. My hon. Friend raises an important point because, to go back to the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire—

> health, housing, schools, welfare and community care services—

the Bill seems to encompass almost the entire range of domestic spending Government Departments, in which case the potential for additional Government expenditure and taxpayer commitment is considerable. If that were not so, there would be no point in including the question in the census.

Hidden within that, as we teased out on Second Reading, is the concept that, as a result of asking people to divulge their religious affiliation voluntarily, Government policy will direct additional funds to some people of some religious affiliations. I assume that if I put "none" in answer to the question on the census form, I would not get much extra money, although that was not made clear. It appears that people of no religious faith will not be very fortunate as a result of the provision.

We seem to be in the dark about whether different elements of the Christian faith would benefit from the process. That seemed to be doubtful from the way Second Reading went. One can only surmise, as has been hinted at—indeed, we have almost been told—that if enough people specify other religious faiths in answer to the question, there will be a policy rush by the Government and, presumably, by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire, to direct money to people on the basis of their religious affiliation.

I do not wish to rehearse the matters that we debated on Second Reading: you would not want me to do that, Madam Speaker. No doubt, those matters will come up in Committee and on Report, when we shall discuss them at length as, indeed, we should. I simply wish to make the point that, as a result of the Bill's peculiar circumstances, the wording of the money resolution which, on the face of it, appears to be fairly standard, gives rise to an unusual number of questions about the final form that the Bill will take if it is enacted; and, following the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), about the enactments to which the resolution might relate and the sort of commitment that it contains.

Of course, we know nothing about that, as the Government have not told us anything about the extra expenditure that they envisage: either they do not know or they are not telling us.

Yet again, the House is faced with the difficult problem that so often confronts us in relation to money resolutions. We refuse to be a rubber stamp; we regard it as our duty as Members of the House of Commons to extract as much information from the Minister as we can. When the Minister comes to sum up, I hope that he will grace the House with far more information than he was prepared to give in his wholly inadequate introduction.

4.21 pm

Mr. Timms: As the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) suggested, this a standard form of words for money resolutions. The timing of the money resolution, after Second Reading and before Committee, is standard and familiar.

The right hon. Gentleman asked several questions about the spending that is envisaged and about costs. The inclusion of the new question is not expected to lead to

[Mr. Timms]

an increase in printing or distribution costs. Costs that may arise relate to the processing of additional information that is collected. They cannot be precisely estimated, but we anticipate that they are likely to be about £100,000 for the 2001 census. That is certainly containable within the existing allocation.

Compared with the £203 million that the 2001 census for England and Wales is expected to cost, that additional sum is modest, and represents a good investment in the context of the value that will be gained from the information collected. As the remarks of the hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed), quoted by the right hon. Gentleman, demonstrate, that information will help local authorities, health authorities and others to plan services to meet the needs of their current population. Asking a question in future censuses after 2001 may lead to a small increase in the total costs of those censuses, which is another reason why we need the money resolution.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman asked which enactment the money resolution referred to. The reference is to the Census Act 1920, the schedule of which is being amended by the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Speaker: With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

JUDGMENTS

That the draft Civil Jurisdiction and Judgments Act 1982 (Amendment) Order 2000, which was laid before this House on 5th June, be approved.

CONTRACTS

That the draft Contracts (Applicable Law) Act 1990 (Amendment) Order 2000, which was laid before this House on 5th June, be approved.

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the Northern Ireland Act 2000 (Restoration of Devolved Government) Order 2000 (S.I., 2000, No. 1445), dated 27th May 2000, a copy of which was laid before this House on 5th June, be approved.

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the Northern Ireland Act 2000 (Modification) Order 2000 (S.I., 2000, No. 1446), dated 27th May 2000, a copy of which was laid before this House on 5th June, be approved.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft London Local Authorities (Charges for Stopping Up Orders) Regulations 2000, which were laid before this House on 8th June, be approved.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Question agreed to.

Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate Bill *[Lords]*

As amended in the Standing Committee, considered.

Clause 2

FUNCTIONS

4.24 pm

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): I beg to move amendment No. 1, in page 1, line 18, at end insert—

', which inspection shall include consideration of the internal employment practices of the Service with particular reference to equal opportunities issues.'.

Madam Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 2, in page 1, line 20, at end insert—

'( ) inquire into the findings of an Employment Tribunal consequent upon a complaint against the Crown Prosecution Service under the Race Relations Act 1976 or Sex Discrimination Act 1975.'.

No. 3, in page 1, line 23, at end insert—

', which report shall contain a section considering the work done in the year under report by the Service to eliminate discriminatory practices both within the Service's internal employment and management structures and in its prosecution policies and prosecution decisions.'.

Mr. Dismore: I do not normally table amendments to Bills except, perhaps, on Fridays. As I am following the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), and given the number of people in the Chamber, there is a sense of déjà vu and a Friday feeling about the debate.

Any criticism that I may make of the Crown Prosecution Service is not meant to be a reflection on the personal commitment of my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor-General to combating racism in the CPS and more widely. Similarly, I express no criticism of the position of my noble Friend the Attorney-General. I also have the highest regard for him and his work in this area. However, we need to address two issues in relation to the CPS and racism, both of which are dealt with by the amendments.

The first issue is CPS prosecution policies and practices, which have received a lot of publicity over the years. A great deal of progress has been made on those. The other issue is the service's internal employment policies, which have only recently started to come to public attention. Until I came across a case concerning a constituent, Mrs. Bamieh, a prosecutor with the CPS, I was not as aware as I am now of problems in the CPS, and I have been horrified by some of what I have found out since I started to take an interest in these issues.

A starting point is Sylvia Denman's preliminary report on race discrimination in the CPS. She says:

> The CPS Inspectorate . . . has a limited role in relation to the implementation of equal opportunities practices within the Service . . The Inspectorate's stated purpose is "To promote the efficiency and effectiveness of the Crown Prosecution Service through a process of inspection and evaluation; the provision of advice, and the identification and promotion of good practice."

Each CPS Area is inspected once every two years. "Equality" is a theme identified as falling within the Inspectorate's "wider remit" for carrying out its Area inspections.

My amendments would move the issue of equality, with particular reference to race, further up the inspectorate's agenda, so that it starts to pay greater heed to some of the problems that have emerged, including those that I am about to describe and those that have been widely canvassed in the media.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I recognise that the burden of the hon. Gentleman's case is that the CPS is guilty of discrimination on racial grounds, but is he also contending that it is guilty of discrimination on grounds of sex or sexuality, or both?

Mr. Dismore: I make no comment on those issues. There is some suggestion, particularly in the case of Mrs. Bamieh, of discrimination on the grounds of gender. There is more general evidence in the media of possible discrimination on the grounds suggested by the hon. Gentleman, but that is not the thrust of my argument. The evidence that I have come across relates primarily to issues of race, and that is what I intend to focus on. That is not to say that I give the CPS a clean bill of health on the other issues, but I do not seek to make a case about them today.

There has been progress on the prosecutions policy. The 1997–98 annual report of the racial incident monitoring scheme showed that 1,506 cases were sent to the CPS for prosecution and were identified as racial incidents, and 1,324 of those were prosecuted, which is an increase of 10 per cent. on the previous year. The CPS identified 63 per cent. of cases as racial incidents, and the police identified only 37 per cent. of cases as such, so the CPS has a good record of spotting the cases in question. Prosecutors highlighted racial features to the courts in 85 per cent. of the cases prosecuted, and the courts increased the sentence in 22 per cent. of those cases.

In 1999, a Home Office publication, "Statistics on Race and the Criminal Justice System", highlighted the suggestion that

compared with white defendants, the CPS discontinued a higher proportion of cases involving black defendants on evidential grounds and were more likely to reduce charges . . .

Progress is being made.

The CPS response to the Lawrence inquiry made it clear that all prosecution advocates should know that they should never accept a plea of guilty on condition that evidence of a racist motivation is excluded. That is a welcome development, as is the work by the CPS in multi-agency panels in the community which involve the police, the probation service and local authorities.

That is all very good news, as is the report that was published by a university of Hull researcher, Dr. Mhlanga, last October. That seemed to suggest that defendants from ethnic minorities are not receiving a harsher deal than white defendants. Against that must be balanced the Denman report's comments on the university of Hull work which suggest that the CPS may simply be redressing the balance in respect of action taken by the police. There is concern among CPS ethnic minority lawyers about the suggestion that there might still be discrimination against black and Asian defendants. The problem was again highlighted last year in Judge Gerald Butler's report on CPS decisions about prosecutions arising from deaths in custody. That is all that I shall say on prosecution policy because, although such mixed evidence exists, progress is being made.

4.30 pm

Under amendment No. 1, I suggest that the inspectorate should highlight in its report the progress that has been made to eliminate discriminatory practices from prosecution policy and decisions. That would be a useful tool to allow progress on prosecution policy to be monitored. It would perhaps provide an additional spur to those in charge at the CPS and down the chain of prosecutors, and ensure that not only the policies on which they act, but the individual decisions that they take, would be non-discriminatory. It would be welcome and beneficial if the inspectorate were asked to prepare such submissions for its report.

As I have said, my main concern is less about prosecution policies than about CPS internal employment policies, which is what I address primarily in amendments Nos. 1 and 2. I am concerned that, although there is increasing evidence of discriminatory policies and practices in the CPS, its management seems not to have taken them on board as well it perhaps should. That is why the inspectorate should be charged with a much stronger role in overseeing such matters. We should be satisfied that it would re-examine them. That would encourage management to get their act together and to report progress in the annual report.

This is a serious issue. On 11 May, *The Guardian* reported that there have been no fewer than 22 employment tribunal claims against the Crown Prosecution Service since 1993. Three cases were decided last year, all of which involved my constituent, Mrs. Bamieh. A case involving Mrs. Amin was decided the previous year. The Commission for Racial Equality referred in its 1997 annual report to the complaints about discrimination in the CPS that it had received from ethnic minority barristers and solicitors. In its 1998 annual report, the commission said that it continued to receive complaints from ethnic minority staff about unequal access to promotion opportunities. An employment tribunal took the unusual step of referring specifically to the CRE's powers of investigation to address some of the wider issues. If the inspectorate were charged with properly investigating such issues, there might be an additional reason why the CRE should not have to investigate the CPS, but I shall return to the CRE's role shortly.

Mrs. Amin's case was decided in 1998. Four days later, she was relocated against her will and claimed that she had been victimised. Her complaint was ultimately supported. My constituent Mrs. Bamieh has brought four cases against the CPS so far, one of which was settled. I understand that the others went to hearings. She was subjected to discrimination even while her cases were under way. One of her cases last year arose out of the CPS's failure properly to consider her for promotion. She went before a promotion board on 18 February 1999, and was told on 26 February that she had passed. In the meantime, in March and April 1999 an employment tribunal heard the case arising from the failure to promote her previously, but no decision was promulgated. On 19 April 1999, she was given feedback by the Director

[Mr. Dismore]

of Public Prosecutions himself. That was after the evidence had been taken and the tribunal had heard her case, but before it had given a ruling.

The DPP said to her—it is what he admits to having said:

> If you now obtain a promotion, you will be seen as a trouble maker rewarded. If you did not, you would feel you were being punished for being a trouble maker.

That betrays the fact that there is the wrong sort of attitude at the top of the CPS. By any stretch of the imagination, that is potentially a discriminatory, if not victimising, statement by the DPP. I for one am very concerned that although the Minister may be doing all he can to eliminate discrimination within the CPS, we may still have a problem with the management. The Denman report identified that the issues raised by employment tribunals are not being addressed. That is why I suggest that the inspectorate should have the role of inquiring into tribunal findings.

The tribunal that examined Mrs. Bamieh's case gave its decision on 8 June 1999. It found unanimously that she had been discriminated against and victimised. She had made two previous applications: in 1995 and 1997. Two cases involving co-applicants, Mr. Shah and Mr. Navapurkar, had been settled. They arose out of the conduct of the same promotion board.

The tribunal found that the promotion board conducted its interviews and marking system subjectively; it abandoned the guidelines that it had been given; it failed to give full account to performance reviews; it failed to keep a proper record of its discussions; and it did not fully mark Mrs. Bamieh's performance. One of the people on the board was intemperate towards her and failed to mark on that very question, which led to the remark about which she complained. His notes were marked with the words "extra care". The tribunal found that that was simply a reference to her previous tribunal cases. It found that she had suffered a detriment, and that she had been victimised in the way that she had been treated. The inference was that the reason for that was her race.

I have quoted only briefly from the tribunal judgment. It is a full decision. It seems that the CPS management has yet to take on board the lessons from those conclusions. My amendment suggests that such decisions should be subjected to study by the inspectorate. That would be a good way in which to try to take that issue forward.

After or around the time of the judgment, the DPP spoke to a meeting of ethnic minority lawyers. He said in response to a question from my constituent—why were people with "racist minds" still in senior positions—that he preferred finding "non-confrontational ways" of dealing with staff. He added:

> Every offence, whether it be an offence of a racist kind or any other, has to be looked at in the round . . . The CPS can ill-afford to lose lawyers of real talent.

In the context of what has been going on in the CPS, that comment was disturbing to my constituent and to many other ethnic minority staff within the CPS because, again, it does not seem to show that the people at the top have taken on board the lessons from the race awareness training that they had, or should have had, or the real need for reform.

In May 1999, in an article in *The Lawyer* magazine, the DPP said

> I have conceded previously that the CPS is far from perfect—

that goes without saying—

> but I do not believe it is "inherently racist".

That goes in the face of all the evidence that has come out and the conclusions of the Denman report.

To add insult to injury, three of the people who were involved in that employment tribunal case were later promoted. Those are the sort of issues that the CPS inspectorate should look into. It should look into why the three people who were directly involved in the complaint to the employment tribunal, and whose role was examined by the tribunal, were thereafter promoted in preference to the complainant, who should have been promoted in the first place.

If the inspectorate is serious about its role of looking at the way in which the CPS operates, that is exactly the sort of issue that it should look at. Why are the people whom the employment tribunal effectively found guilty—in the general sense—of direct or indirect discrimination promoted, while my constituent, who was found worthy of promotion—the employment tribunal found that she should have been promoted—is denied promotion?

That is a serious issue which is yet to be addressed by the CPS management, but could be addressed by the inspectorate in studying the conclusions of employment tribunals, as suggested by amendment No. 2. It could ultimately, I hope, come to conclusions, which it could refer to in the annual report—which is suggested by amendment No. 3—in order to deal with those criticisms.

I mentioned the role of the Commission for Racial Equality, which was planning to hold a formal investigation into the CPS and its employment role. Unfortunately, that seems not to be going ahead. That goes back to my point about the need for the CPS inspectorate to adopt an on-going monitoring role on such issues rather than the CRE conducting a one-off, big-hit investigation.

On 28 July, the CPS published an equality statement, and there has been a plethora of similar statements and policy documents since. None the less, the problems continue. I refer briefly to the second employment tribunal decision last year for my constituent Mrs. Bamieh. Again it was found that she had been directly discriminated against on the grounds of her race and sex while employed at the Artillery Row branch. I raised the issue with my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor-General during Question Time on 21 October last year. In reply, he rightly referred to the equality statement and the setting up of the equality committee to promote a programme of change. He continued:

> An action plan on race will be drawn up by the end of the year. The selection and appointment of a new diversity manager is in hand.—[*Official Report*, 21 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 568.]

All those issues need to be considered by the CPS inspectorate, especially the appointment of the diversity manager, for reasons to which I shall shortly come.

Some race awareness training has been introduced, but it is generally accepted that it is inadequate. The CRE announced that it was no longer to conduct its inquiry solely on the basis of the Sylvia Denman inquiry, to which I have just referred and on which I will need to comment again.

The last employment tribunal decision that I shall mention was that of 31 January, again for my constituent Mrs. Bamieh, which resulted in the tribunal awarding her £39,000, or thereabouts, in compensation and being ordered to change its policies on the awarding of temporary, acting-up posts of prosecution team leaders.

The aggravating factors identified by the employment tribunal are entirely damning and ought to be looked into by somebody. My concern, which is supported by Mrs. Denman's conclusions, is that the CPS management simply does not seem to be addressing many of the issues. If the management is not able to address them, who can? The answer must be the CPS inspectorate, as suggested in amendment No. 1.

The aggravating factors included the management's intemperate attitude and the scorn with which my constituent was treated; allegations that she was lying;

the . . . decision which it is now clear lay behind all

the CPS' dealings with her, that it expected her to leave and would negotiate only on that basis; the

publication of a newsletter proposing . . . a meeting

which never happened;

the hollowness of an apology

that she received; failure to take her complaint seriously; and the absence of any constructive system on the part of the respondents. The tribunal found that the conduct of the CPS had

fallen below that which we would have expected of a corner shop,

and that the CPS wished to

rub her face in the dirt.

Those are very serious findings. They have not been properly addressed by the CPS because my constituent still believes that she has been discriminated against. If the management—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Gentleman must maintain a careful division between advancing a particular case, for which there are other devices in the House, and using it to supply supplementary evidence to back up his amendments. I have a feeling that he has steered a little too far into the individual case. He must confine his remarks, which are otherwise becoming repetitious, to the amendments.

Mr. Dismore: I had hoped that I could illustrate my case, but may have done so in a little too much detail and take your point on board, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

4.45 pm

The Denman report neatly pulls together all the issues. The Director of Public Prosecutions' response to the report states:

This is a hard-hitting report which makes uncomfortable reading for all managers in the CPS.

I hope that he includes himself in their number. In respect of the issues that I believe the CPSI should examine, the report addresses the reasons why ethnic minority staff are

seriously under-represented, both in the higher administrative grades and the higher lawyer grades

in the CPS, adding that:

"No cogent historical explanation for the under-representation of ethnic minority staff at senior grades has been put forward by management

and that, and in certain geographical areas, ethnic minority personnel are seriously under-represented in total.

The report concludes that the CPS

responded slowly to the existence of modern equal opportunities legislation

and that

The recent plethora of statements and actions plans on equality/diversity lack coherence and are heavy on ambitious declarations of intent.

It continues:

The Personnel Directorate does not appear to have taken a strong strategic lead on equal opportunities within the CPS. This is perhaps understandable given that the Equal Opportunities Unit, in particular, has been under-resourced and recently overwhelmed by casework occasioned by internal grievances and Employment Tribunal complaints.

I mentioned that there have been 22 complaints in recent years and I have referred to three of them so far. The CPSI must examine, on the one hand, the extent to which employment tribunal work is distorting the picture, and, on the other, the reasons why the lessons of the tribunals' conclusions are not being fed in to improve CPS operations. Mrs. Denman says that

equal opportunities monitoring has been patchy and unreliable . . . Training . . . would not appear to have kept pace with the demands of modern management . . . There is a lack of confidence in the Equal Opportunities and Workplace Bullying Complaints Procedure amongst ethnic minority staff.

She says that many staff feel discriminated against, but that

There is little evidence of any positive action

and that the volume of complaints is increasing, especially in London.

I do not propose to go through the remainder of the report's conclusions because, despite my earlier remarks, I recognise that this is not a Friday. I shall, however, quote Mrs. Denman's finding in respect of senior management:

With some exceptions, the instinct of those managers was to seek to play down the possibility of race discrimination. When confronted with statistical evidence, their first reaction was to seek an "innocent" explanation, other than discrimination, for the under-representation of ethnic minority staff at senior levels.

She notes that

recognition was clearly contrary to their instinctive or emotional feeling about the issue,

and that

A few remained inclined to "blame the victim".

That is precisely the problem that I have tried to identify today. It is a problem that starts at the top and works its way down throughout the CPS management. There is a prima facie, if not stronger, case that the CPS is institutionally racist, especially when viewed in the light of the Macpherson conclusion that:

It is incumbent on every institution to examine their policies and the outcome of their policies and practices to guard against disadvantaging any section of our communities.

That is an issue that the CPSI should be concerned about and should be looking into. If we are serious about eliminating racism within the CPS, amendment No. 1, which refers to internal employment practices, together with the Macpherson conclusions completes the triangle.

[Mr. Dismore]

Finally, let me quote Mrs. Bamieh once again. She says:

> The CPS are still victimising me. I recently applied for a post of Diversity Manager. The criteria was changed after I applied and I only discovered the changes when I appealed.

Discrimination is continuing. I hope that my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor-General will respond to my criticisms, which are aimed at the CPS, not at him; I know that he is trying to sort out the problem. If management will not do what is needed, the inspectorate must.

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): I am grateful for the opportunity to comment on the amendments. First, I declare an interest in that, over a number of years, I have appeared as agent on behalf of the Crown Prosecution Service and, before that, its predecessor, the county prosecution service.

Even if I were in a position to comment on the cases raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) and attempted to do so, you would rule my comments wide of the mark, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, it is my impression, over a period of some 25 years practising in the criminal courts in Essex, that from an early stage the county prosecution service, and then the Crown Prosecution Service, engaged solicitors of a high standard from all obvious ethnic groupings. My observation goes back to the early 1980s, and does not relate just to modern times. Solicitors engaged by the service have universally been of an extremely high standard.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon did not introduce the topic of discrimination against women or against those of any sexual persuasion, but I know that from an early stage, there have been high-ranking and able women in the CPS.

I cannot comment on the national position in the Crown Prosecution Service. Were any undue practices taking place there, to which my hon. Friend referred, it would be right and proper for such matters to be brought to the attention of the Attorney-General by way of a report, as proposed in the Bill. On the face of it, the Bill is an innocuous piece of legislation giving the inspector wide-ranging opportunities to inspect whatever he or she chooses in the workings of the CPS.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon mentioned, but did not dwell on, the question whether there were discriminatory practices in the decision to prosecute or not to prosecute. Again, my impression when I prosecuted and when I defended was that the Crown Prosecution Service acted in an even-handed and responsible manner and, was sensitive to current issues and feelings.

There are particular problems owing to pressure on the CPS, partly as a result of increasing administration and increasing functions outside the courts and the legal decision-making process, which make the job of the CPS much harder than it once was.

We should monitor the effect of Narey hearings on whether considered judgments can always be made. I am sure that those present in the Chamber are aware of Narey hearings, which in the jargon are called fast-track hearings. That means that the defendant in more minor cases will appear in court within a few days of being charged. Hon. Members will apprehend the potential danger that because matters move so quickly, the Crown prosecutor may not have the time for judicial appraisal of possible racial or other discriminatory elements in the case. I have not come across that problem so far in the Narey process, but the inspector should consider the matter in an early report.

The Solicitor-General (Mr. Ross Cranston): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) for the interest that he has taken in the matter over a considerable time. It is important that the Crown Prosecution Service should be accountable to the House. I hope that my hon. Friend will continue to take an interest and to make sure that the CPS is accountable.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst), who has long experience in these matters, for his comments. I shall return to the subject of resources.

My noble and learned Friend the Attorney-General and I take extremely seriously matters relating to race equality. That applies to individual cases as well as to the more general concerns articulated in the interim report by Sylvia Denman. In response to a comment from my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon, I should say that the purpose of the Denman report was to examine the very matters that a formal inquiry by the Commission for Racial Equality would address. We hope that Mrs. Denman's report will sufficiently address the matters to preclude the appointment of a CRE inquiry.

I take this opportunity to outline some of the steps taken by the CPS and the inspectorate to ensure that the diversity issues raised by my hon. Friend are more effectively addressed. In the light of what I say, I shall invite my hon. Friend to withdraw the amendments.

The action plan, to which my hon. Friend referred, developed during the past year and revised in the light of the Denman report, will, I believe, produce real improvement. A diversity unit has already been established to take forward the strategic aspects of equality and diversity. The new diversity manager has been appointed and she will shortly take up her post.

My hon. Friend referred to the under-representation of ethnic minority people at the higher levels of the CPS. In that regard, we have set targets for the CPS. It must identify the grades in which ethnic minorities, women and disabled staff are under-represented, and increase their number in middle and senior management.

The equality committee has been established and is doing good work. In particular, it has re-examined training programmes to ensure that the golden thread of diversity is found throughout the service.

I come now to the subject of the Bill—the inspectorate. I assure my hon. Friend that the Director of Public Prosecutions and the chief inspector take racial issues seriously. There is no place whatever for racially discriminatory practices in any aspect of the work of the CPS. If such practices are identified we, at a political level, have clearly said that they must be robustly challenged and firm action must be taken.

The chief inspector is seeking to develop within the inspectorate an ethos which ensures that diversity issues automatically permeate all aspects of the inspection process, from casework through to the selection of external advocates and the treatment of victims, witnesses

and staff. Racial issues must be taken seriously in all those regards. Each area of inspection examines the handling of CPS cases and includes those matters, as well as matters such as the taking up of racially aggravated offences.

As I have told the House on previous occasions, the new method of inspection developed by the CPS inspectorate focuses not simply on the quality of casework, but on the broader aspects of management and operations. For example, the inspector will consider how the area business plan can be developed to ensure that equality is properly addressed. The inspector will seek to ensure that decisions on staff recruitment, deployment and promotion are fair and non-discriminatory. The inspector will also examine the manner in which each area sets its goals and objectives for equality, and how they are delivered.

With regard to the external work of the CPS operations, the inspectorate will consider the links that each area has with community organisations. In particular, it will consider recruitment and what steps are being taken locally to encourage members of ethnic minority communities to seek employment in the CPS.

5 pm

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon mentioned casework, and the Hull university report. The inspector will shortly embark on a thematic review. The House will remember that the inspectorate will conduct not only area inspections, but thematic inspections. In the next year, handling casework with an ethnic minority dimension will be the subject of a thematic review, which will examine cases involving allegations of racially aggravated offences—my hon. Friend mentioned such cases. The review will examine cases involving defendants from ethnic minorities and cases of incitement to racial hatred. It will also consider whether Crown Prosecution Service arrangements for monitoring cases of racially aggravated offences are effective.

Amendment No. 1 would create a specific statutory obligation on the inspection process to examine equality issues in relation to CPS staff. That amendment does not fit comfortably in the structure of the Bill, and would mean singling out one specific aspect. My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon would acknowledge that other important matters should also be considered. As I said at the outset, my hon. Friend is right to be anxious about the matter, but he is pushing at an open door. As I said, the chief inspector is devising a methodology to cover the wider remit that the Glidewell report recommended.

When my hon. Friend spoke about amendment No. 2, he mentioned the case of Maria Bamieh, about which I do not want to comment. Several tribunal hearings reached particular conclusions, and the matters have been settled. Mrs. Bamieh is in CPS headquarters and, in her current job, contributes to carrying the diversity agenda forward. It would be wrong to use the inspectorate, which should deal with the performance and overall operations of the CPS, in the way in which amendment No. 2 proposes. As I said, the circumstances that the employment tribunals explored have been tackled.

On amendment No. 3, I do not believe that it is right to pick out specific topics for coverage in the annual report. It is right that the CPS is accountable to the House, but there are other important topics to consider. Disclosure has been discussed on various occasions in the House, and whether the prosecution discloses properly to the defence. Victims have also been considered. My hon. Friend could ask, "If diversity is to be singled out, why not the other topics?" I assure him that the annual report will consider all issues. The inspector will send to hon. Members the area reports that are relevant to their constituencies.

The combined effects of the amendments have been the promotion of an important issue. However, I hope that my hon. Friend is sufficiently reassured to agree that they should be withdrawn.

Mr. Dismore: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Order for Third Reading read.

5.5 pm

The Solicitor-General: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The Bill is a short and straightforward one. Its purpose is to establish an inspectorate, independent of the Crown Prosecution Service. It places the chief inspector on a statutory footing. The Bill sets out the functions of the chief inspector, whose primary function will be to arrange for the inspection of the CPS. On Report, I said that Parliament will be kept informed of the work of the chief inspector. Members will be told also about the area inspections relevant to their constituencies.

I know that concerns have been expressed about the funding of the CPS by my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) and by other colleagues on previous occasions. Earlier this afternoon, my right hon. and noble Friend the Attorney-General was able to announce that an additional £15.8 million had been allocated to the CPS budget for this year. That is a useful step in the right direction. It includes £4.5 million from the police modernisation fund, which has been transferred to the CPS by the Home Office. The matter was agreed some weeks ago, but it has taken some time to put the agreement in place procedurally.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): Does the additional £15.8 million mean that, this year, the CPS will be expected to allow for and provide efficiency savings of 3 per cent.? Will the deficits rolled up from previous years be overcome by the additional funding?

The Solicitor-General: This sum more than overcomes the 4.5 per cent. figure to which the hon. Gentleman has referred on previous occasions. In terms of a budget of some £300 million-odd, £15.8 million is quite a considerable sum. The funding will allow the CPS to implement a diversity programme; some £2.5 million will be allocated for that purpose. That very issue was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) on Report.

In addition, the £15.8 million will be used to increase investment in new information technology. I know that the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) has taken an interest in that matter; frankly, the CPS is in the dark ages as far as IT is concerned. It is only in recent months that matters have advanced.

Some £5 million will go to improving the CPS's performance. It will do that by targeting additional resources to areas where significant improvements in

[The Solicitor-General]

performance can be delivered. As a result, the total budget allocated to the CPS's 42 areas in 2000–01 will be higher than for 1999–2000, in cash terms and real terms.

The funds recognise the important role of the CPS and the contribution that it can make to improving the performance of the criminal justice system, including the police and other agencies. It is especially important that the £15.8 million includes a contribution of £4.5 million from the Home Office. That demonstrates that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, the Lord Chancellor and my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury have all provided full support to the CPS's case for improvements in its levels of resources.

Mr. Burnett *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the hon. Gentleman intervenes, I must say that the debate is moving into wider territory than it should. This is about the inspectorate to be set up for the Crown Prosecution Service: it is not a general debate about the financing of the CPS.

Mr. Burnett: I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but we do not wish to overload the inspectorate by having inadequate funding for the CPS. I wish to ask the Solicitor-General whether the £4.5 million to which he has referred is the same as the £5 million that is mentioned in *The Independent* today, and which is to be used to develop closer links between prosecutors and police officers?

The Solicitor-General: I think that the hon. Gentleman is referring to the Narey project and the criminal justice unit project, which my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree mentioned earlier. Certainly, there is a contribution to those projects in the overall CPS budget. The close working of the CPS and the police is important, but I fear that if I say too much about that matter, I will trespass on other issues.

So far, the Bill has received a unanimous welcome in both Houses. The proceedings were very brief and I thank all hon. Members for dealing with the matter so speedily. I commend the Bill to the House.

5.11 pm

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): On Second Reading, I am reported as saying:

> The Bill has been described as modest, short and uncontroversial. In some quarters, those epithets might lead people to think less of it, but, despite, or even because of, its brevity, narrow compass and inoffensiveness, it should command the support of the House.—[*Official Report*, 23 May 2000; Vol. 350, c. 882.]

I have not changed my view.

5.12 pm

Mr. Hurst: Like other hon. Members, I generally welcome the Bill, but I have one note of caution to add. Inspection is a fine thing as long as it goes wider than criticism alone. I am sure that those who serve in the CPS sometimes feel that they are the Aunt Sallies of newspapers, politicians and others who wish to criticise results in law cases that they would sooner not see, even though the law dictates the result. Therefore, while the inspection of the functions of the service will be wide ranging, one would hope that, on occasion, those inspectors' reports will give credit for the hard work and dedication of Crown prosecutors throughout the country.

5.13 pm

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): I endorse the comments that have just been made by the hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) because there are many hard-working and dedicated individuals in the CPS. I have also noted what the Solicitor-General has told the House this afternoon about funding. On Second Reading, there was considerable debate on that point, and matters have gone from bad to worse in the CPS. It is no good the Government creating new crimes and boasting of their law and order agenda when the CPS is unable to mount a compelling prosecution.

I hope that the CPS inspectorate will have sufficient personnel, especially as I have heard speculation that the CPS will take over the prosecution role of Customs and Excise. I wonder whether the Solicitor-General can tell the House, at this late stage, what role the CPS inspectorate will have, if any, in the matter of the independent prosecution agencies in this country, such as Customs and Excise.

The Solicitor-General: At present, the inspectorate will be confined to the CPS. Together with the Treasury Solicitor, Judge Gerald Butler is considering the wider issue of the future of prosecutions by Customs and Excise. At present, it is not intended that the remit of the inspectorate will be wider than the CPS itself.

Mr. Burnett: I am grateful to the Solicitor-General for that reply. I am glad, as the House will be, that the prosecution role of Customs and Excise and of other independent agencies is being considered carefully. There have been errors in the past.

We welcome the Bill; we hoped that it would have speedy progress through the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill read the Third time, and passed, with an amendment.

Animal Breeding Establishments

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

5.15 pm

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): I express my gratitude to Members on both sides of the House for speeding through the Bill, thus allowing us such a sizeable slice of time to develop the themes that arise in this debate. The regulation and inspection of animal breeding establishments are important issues.

The way a society treats animals is a clear indicator of its wider values. For a nation that is reputedly kind to animals, it is little surprise that here in Britain there are hundreds of organisations and millions of individuals who care passionately about animal welfare. Sadly, the laudable British concern about the wide range of creatures that share this part of the planet with us too often coexists with our inhumane treatment on a grand scale of other sentient beings.

As a parliamentary candidate in the long run-up to the 1997 general election, I was delighted to be campaigning on a party manifesto that had a good deal to say about animals and their treatment. Of the mass of material that the campaign office sent out, perhaps the most requested and the best received was a colourful and well designed document entitled "New Life for Animals". I do not dissent from much that the leaflet contains. It spells out a coherent set of policies that seek to eliminate cruelty and to protect the welfare of animals, not only because there are powerful economic, environmental and health incentives for that, but even more important, because it is morally right so to do.

Like many of those who became my constituents, I was at best uneasy about the scale and nature of animal experimentation. I looked forward enthusiastically to the delivery of our campaign promise to set up a royal commission to review the effectiveness and justification of animal experiments, and to examine the options.

Closely associated with animal experimentation is the welfare of animals that are bred only for that purpose. Laboratories' requirements can be difficult to meet. Experimentation becomes more complex and sophisticated, with animals needing to comply with ever higher standards. If a laboratory needs dogs for an experiment, it will not be adequate to buy them from the town centre pet shop. An animal would obviously be most useful when a complete medical history was known and when there had been no exposure to any infection. Optimal results are gained if a family history is available to enable comparison of test results with those of animals of a similar background. These factors and others have led to the growth of a specialised industry to supply animals to the world of medical and pharmaceutical research.

I take a particular interest in the topic because there is an animal breeding establishment, operated by Harlan (UK), which is located near Belton, in my constituency. Harlan (UK) is the largest breeder of laboratory animals in the UK. Its American parent company is the world's largest privately owned producer of such animals. The regulatory and inspection regimes that cover centres such as Belton are detailed in the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, and in the associated codes of practice.

I backed the Labour party's call in opposition for a complete review of all aspects of that legislation because I believed it to be seriously inadequate. It is my purpose now to spell out my key concerns. Many animal welfare campaigners find it impossible to separate their disdain for animal experimentation from their disdain for the breeding establishments which supply the animals to the laboratories. Nevertheless, I believe that it is possible to adopt a more rational approach which is not ruled by immediate emotional reactions.

Honest debate and constructive comments about operational standards at breeding centres should not be distorted or disfigured by some of the disgraceful incidents that have been triggered by the tiny number of animal activists who use violence and intimidation as their stock in trade. Harlan (UK) staff members and their families were threatened, harassed and injured last year by such extremists. Such unacceptable behaviour is condemned by decent animal welfare groups. Those actions were both illegal and totally counterproductive.

Partly as fact finding on animal welfare and partly in response to the events that I have described, I went to the Belton complex in June 1999 to talk to management and staff about their work and the environmental and welfare standards to which they operate. I visited the animal areas and spoke to numerous employees. I saw for myself the conditions in which animals were bred, kept and transported.

It was only a brief visit—not in any sense an inspection—but I saw nothing major to raise with local management, especially as I was reassured that husbandry standards, breeding policies and disposal practices conformed to Home Office guidelines. I am sure that they did, and that they still do. However, I had cause to reflect on the adequacy of the guidelines when Harlan received hugely adverse national publicity just a few days after my trip round the plant.

A document published by the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection accused the company of a variety of violations of the animal welfare standards required by the 1986 Act. The allegations were based on the testimony of a BUAV sympathiser who worked undercover as an employee at the plant for about 10 months and collected 40 hours of video footage and extensive documentation.

The Home Office launched an immediate investigation by the inspectorate, commencing in July, although it did not report to the Minister until just before Christmas. After protracted negotiations with the BUAV on confidentiality, the report, with just a few blocked-out sections, was at long last published this March.

In short, the inspectorate's findings did not bear out the BUAV charges in relation to Harlan's beagle breeding operations. The charges included poor care and husbandry, overcrowding, lack of human contact, premature mating, excessive culling of surplus dogs and inadequate staffing, training and record keeping.

In response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman), the Minister said:

> Generally, the establishment was found to be well run and the level of compliance generally good.—[*Official Report*, 8 March 2000; Vol. 345, c. 662W.]

I know that the BUAV found the report a huge disappointment, and it has now made a detailed and critical response to the Home Office about the interpretation of evidence and what it sees as a desire to exonerate Harlan at every turn.

[Mr. David Taylor]

I do not intend to make any further reference today to the specific dispute between the BUAV and Harlan and the Home Office about facts and conclusions, save to call for an independent element in such investigations in the future, to reassure the outside world.

I want to deal with the industry-wide concerns that many people and groups such as the RSPCA have about the breeding of animals for experimentation and the general inadequacy of the standards and inspection regimes. I should say at the outset that, while the Home Office codes of practice contain minimum standards, in no way can they be considered best practice.

It is vital that animals bred for research and testing be provided with a good quality and quantity of space, including environmental enrichment that is appropriate for the species in question. That is, I am sad to say, far too frequently not done. The code of practice for breeders and suppliers, covering standards for the housing of animals, does indeed recommend a minimum floor space for dogs, but there is no upper limit for pen size; and as large pens, containing 20 or more dogs, predispose them to fighting and bullying and make it difficult to handle or inspect individual dogs, a maximum number per pen ought to be specified.

Animal lobby groups allege that code of practice animal welfare guidelines are being routinely ignored. For instance, the National Anti-Vivisection Society states that, in 10 years of investigations, it has never seen bedding provided for dogs, despite the fact that the code of practice states that bedding and nesting material should be provided unless it is clearly inappropriate. There are persistent charges in relation to the inadequacies of metabolism cages and the housing of pigs and mice at a variety of different establishments. Those matters, too, need to be rectified urgently.

In relation to over-breeding, there are currently no legal requirements for establishments to state how many animals they breed or cull. Reliable figures are available only for Government-run laboratories such as Porton Down, where—as was revealed through parliamentary questions put by the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker)—80 per cent. of mice and 85 per cent. of rats were killed as surplus in each of the last two years for which figures are available.

The Daily Telegraph estimated that an astonishing annual total of 5 million animals were being killed as surplus to requirements. On 14 August last year, an article in *The Independent on Sunday* put the number of "excess animals" at up to 9 million. Those are astonishing figures. I do not know how many of those animals are killed in breeding establishments, but, like the Animal Procedures Committee, I urge that the 1986 Act be amended to require the 170 breeding and 75 supply establishments, which already record the provision of more than 2.5 million animals for experiments, also to record how many animals are bred but found not to be required and subsequently euthanised, or killed for their blood products or organs.

Extensive research by animal welfare groups suggests that correct killing procedures are not always followed and personnel are not always properly trained. The public have a right to know about the mode and scale of the animal slaughter that takes place in our country. The code of practice has been criticised by the BUAV in relation to weak controls on ages for breeding—especially for dogs. The code of practice should specify a minimum age at which female bitches can first be mated and should give guidance on the age at which they should be retired, or perhaps on the maximum number of allowable litters.

Inspection is inadequate. My research reveals that, in 1998, there were 284 establishments liable for inspection; 4,964 projects that needed monitoring; and almost 15,000 licence holders. And how many inspectors are there? Just 21. They have to assess all new projects, many of which will be at the leading edge of research. They have to examine those projects and apply, wherever feasible, the principle of the three Rs—reducing the number of animals used; refining experiments to cut down on suffering; and replacing them, where possible, with non-animal methods.

Inspectors must ensure that all licence holders receive up-to-date training and education, and that all conditions of project licences are kept. In the light of its range of duties and the size of the industry, the size of the inspectorate is patently far too small. It is certainly unsurprising that the number of unannounced visits—which prevent staff from cleaning up and hiding away problems—is low. Would it not be desirable to recruit more inspectors who would emphasise the possibilities of the greater use of research into non-animal methods of experimentation?

I conclude my analysis of the weaknesses of the current legislation and regulation with a brief look at the ethical review process under the provisions of the 1986 Act. In April 1999, it became mandatory for every breeding establishment to form a local ethical review committee. Those committees should provide independent advice, give due consideration to animal welfare, and adopt best practice on the three Rs—reduction, refinement and replacement.

The guidance notes suggest that lay people should be involved. I was quite impressed by Harlan's approach to those requirements when I discussed them with local management. However, evidence from elsewhere is rather less satisfactory. The appointment of lay people seems to occur rarely and, to the knowledge of Naturewatch, animal welfarists have never been invited to take part in any review processes. The code of practice talks about a wide group of people being involved in ethical review, including those who are independent of the establishment. That is not happening in practice.

Like most animal welfare campaigners, I should much prefer it if no animal experimentation took place in this country. However, if that goal is not immediately achievable, the next best aim is to ensure that all animals used are kept to the highest possible welfare standards.

The only realistic direct influence that Members of Parliament can exert is on UK breeding establishments under UK jurisdiction. However, the dilemma is that, if campaigning pressure closes breeding centres, the only alternative sources of supply may be firms abroad, with consequently longer travel times to the research establishments. More important, there would be little opportunity to monitor or influence the welfare of animals produced in foreign countries.

It is probably true that animal welfare regimes in our country are the most rigorously regulated in the world, although many people believe that the standards are still

not high enough. Maximising the benefit to animals of even the present standards requires that those standards be much more effectively policed. The Government could do most to benefit animal welfare by reducing the need for animal data and by funding more research into alternatives to animal experiments, but those are topics for a separate debate.

In conclusion, the emotions generated by animal experiments often overflow into unjustified negative feelings towards establishments that breed animals for experimentation. However, unless there is a reduction in the use of animals, the eradication of UK breeding establishments would degrade animal welfare, not improve it.

I therefore urge my hon. Friend the Minister to take on board the much needed improvements that I have spelled out this evening. We have far too few inspectors to police what many people consider inadequate standards of animal husbandry. The figures that are published fail dismally to give the public a true and accurate account of the extent to which animals are used in the experimentation industry. There is a conflict of interest in ethical reviews within establishments, and there are concerns about the independence of those on whom we rely to develop ever higher standards and to monitor existing organisations and operations.

If we really mean what was said in the document "New Life for Animals", to which I referred earlier, it really is high time for us to do something about it.

5.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): It is a great pleasure to reply to this debate on what is an enormously important matter. The thoughtful way in which my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) set out his case is an approach that needs to be encouraged on all sides of the argument. Too often, issues relating to animal experiments are presented in a very emotive and purely emotional way. Newspapers carry pictures of monkeys with electrodes in their brains, but I sometimes think that those pictures should be accompanied by pictures of children having convulsions, as those two images would encapsulate the serious moral dilemmas with which the debate presents us.

Scientists claim that developments in medicine have largely depended on the use of animals in research and that, without the many advances that have been made in medical knowledge, many more people—and animals—would have died. They say that it is therefore necessary to carry out animal experiments.

The more extreme of the animal welfare organisations say that no research is ever justified if it involves the use of animals, as human beings have no right to use animals for our personal gain. The more moderate elements in the animal welfare lobby say that some experiments may be allowable but that, in all cases, suffering should be minimised, and that only an absolute minimum of animals should ever be used. That is a far more reasonable position.

The Government believe that, at the moment, it is necessary to carry out some scientific research using animals. It should minimise the anguish or injury caused to animals and maximise the level of care, in so far as we can, commensurate with ensuring that we get the scientific results that are often necessary to save lives—not only those of human beings, as I said, but those of animals.

The way forward is through the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. It makes provision for the protection of animals bred, kept or used for scientific or other experimental purposes. Protection is currently extended to all vertebrate animals and one invertebrate species—the common octopus.

Section 7 of the Act requires that all establishments in Britain that breed and supply laboratory animals of the types listed in schedule 2 for use in scientific research and testing must be designated by a certificate issued by the Home Secretary. Schedule 2 includes, for example, the commonly used rodent species, ferrets, cats, dogs and non-human primates. The legislation also regulates the breeding of all protected animals that have been genetically modified or are considered to be "harmful mutants".

The certificate of designation sets out the detailed conditions that approved establishments must meet in carrying out their day-to-day operations. In the case of harmful mutants and genetically modified animals, conditions on project and personal licences enforce additional requirements.

Establishments designated under the 1986 Act are required to provide a high standard of care and accommodation, and trained and competent staff, and to treat animals with care and respect at all times. All certificates identify by name the expert staff responsible for advising on the accommodation and care of animals, and vets to advise on animal health and welfare. The 1986 Act also provides for the inspection of establishments licensed under the Act. Inspections are performed by the animals scientific procedures inspectorate. The inspectors all have medical or veterinary qualifications.

The purpose of the inspection programme is to assess standards and compliance with legislative requirements, to report any non-compliance and to advise on the action to be taken. The inspectorate broadly promotes the best standards of accommodation and care; it is proactive in identifying and spreading best practice, thus continuously raising national standards. It is playing an active role in the development of improved standards of care and accommodation proposals being drafted by the Council of Europe.

There are 300 or so designated establishments. The 21 inspectors currently carry out 1,800 visits of inspection each year, spending of the order of 5,500 hours on site. On average, each licensed establishment is inspected six times a year. I can reassure my hon. Friend that two thirds of these departmental visits of inspection are performed without prior notice being given. Visits are generally made with notice only when it is necessary to meet with or interview specific members of staff. The inspectorate has access to all the detailed records that must be maintained by all designated establishments and to all parts of the establishments where animals are held or procedures are performed. Summary details of the inspectorate's inspection programme are published annually in Home Office annual statistical reports of animals used in United Kingdom laboratories.

In addition to the conditions set out in their certificates of designation, breeding and supplying establishments must also comply with the standards laid down in the code

[Mr. Mike O'Brien]

of practice for the housing and care of animals. This code of practice exists to ensure good husbandry, and to safeguard animal welfare. It was issued after extensive consultation within the scientific community, with laboratory animal breeding organisations, and with organisations concerned with the welfare of animals. Its publication was welcomed by a number of animal welfare organisations, including the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare. In the case of genetically modified and harmful mutant animals, similar provisions are made in a code of practice for the accommodation and care of animals used in scientific procedures.

With effect from 1 January 1999, schedule 2 to the 1986 Act was amended to include ferrets, gerbils, sheep and pigs, if they are genetically modified. I will shortly be issuing new codes of practice for the care and accommodation of ferrets and gerbils bred for laboratory use, and for the welfare of high health-status genetically modified pigs that may, at some stage in the future, be used as source animals for organs to be used for xenotransplantation.

Mr. David Taylor: Will my hon. Friend confirm that the housing standards for animals that are already covered by the code of practice and regulations are kept under continual review? I referred to pens where the minimum size of pen per dog is specified, but the maximum size of pen is not. That causes problems for those who run the establishments.

Mr. O'Brien: We try to keep the codes under regular review to ensure that they comply with the standards that we require. As I have already said, the objective of the inspectorate and the codes of practice is not just to maintain a basic level for as long as the codes operate, but to look at ways in which we can constantly improve on the quality of care that is available to animals that are used in scientific experiments.

The answer to my hon. Friend's question is yes, we keep the codes under review, but I cannot assure him that they will be changed very regularly. That would have implications. It is better to have codes of practice that people can work to for a period of time. In due course and following a proper review, the codes can be amended and improved.

The new codes of practice were drafted by the inspectorate in collaboration with leading UK experts, and the Animal Procedures Committee has advised me on their content. The Home Office code of practice sets out minimum standards for the accommodation and care of the animals. As breeding animals are typically kept for longer than animals used in animal procedures, the codes also pay particular attention to the need to ensure that the environment provides for the behavioural as well as the physiological needs of the animals.

As well as generally applicable standards, the codes of practice also set minimum standards to meet the specific requirements of individual species. Although I have described them as "minimum standards", the standards set out in the Home Office code of practice represent current good practice. These standards meet—indeed, generally exceed—the requirements of the relevant guidelines for the protection of animals bred and kept for laboratory use appended to the Council of Europe's convention ETS 123 and the European Union directive 86/609 EEC.

Nor do we rest on our laurels as regards the application of the standards. Through its inspections and contact with establishments, the scientific community and animal welfare representative groups, the animals scientific procedures inspectorate closely monitors developments and best practice in the housing and care of animals and facilitates changes in practices and standards when this will bring about improvements.

For example, the publication and implementation of the good practice recommendations contained in a recent inspectorate audit of the accommodation and care of dogs bred and kept for laboratory use has been welcomed by a number of organisations with an interest in laboratory animal welfare, such as the RSPCA and the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare. The inspectorate also supplies expert advice to other organisations working on initiatives to improve the welfare of laboratory animals.

As my hon. Friend is aware, the inspectorate's investigation at Harlan Hillcrest UK was instituted in July 1999, by my predecessor as the responsible Minister, following receipt of allegations—including allegations of breaches of welfare standards—received from the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection. The allegations were based on the evidence of a sympathiser working undercover at the establishment. Harlan is an establishment that was designated under the 1986 Act.

I received the inspectorate's report in December 1999 and published it in March 2000. The inspectorate's investigation took more than 1,000 man hours to complete and looked critically and in detail at every aspect of Harlan's standards and performance. Generally the establishment was found, on inspection, to be well run. The level of compliance with the legislative requirements and the expected standards of care and accommodation was found to be generally good—and, again, I add "on inspection." Inevitably this degree of scrutiny also highlighted some shortcomings—though in no case was animal welfare found to have been compromised as a result.

I did, however, take action against one breach of a condition of certification. On two separate occasions during a two-year period, one animal room housing rodents had apparently not been checked at least once a day as required. The certificate holder was admonished for this lapse. The inspectorate report also expressed concern that when key staff were absent, the establishment's staffing levels resulted in junior management tasks being compromised as manpower was re-assigned to make proper provision for the care of the protected animals. I have therefore also sought and received assurances from management about Harlan's future staffing levels.

I am not of the opinion that the findings of the Harlan investigation, or the other findings of the national inspection programme, have identified any significant welfare problems with respect to proper implementation of the current codes of practice.

We are working within Europe to develop revised standards that make best provision for the housing and care of laboratory animals based on their biological and behavioural needs. I believe that all reasonable efforts

must be made to ensure that the standards are not compromised and that welfare is not diminished unnecessarily in the name of secrecy.

My hon. Friend the Member for North–West Leicestershire suggests that some independent element should be present when the inspectorate conducts investigations similar to that into Harlan. BUAV and others have made a similar request. I am giving some thought to how that might be taken forward, but we have not yet reached a final judgment. It would be premature to give my hon. Friend a definitive answer, but I have some sympathy with the view that he has expressed, and I am considering how best we can provide the inspectorate with safeguards against allegations of partiality, which I believe the inspectorate would also wish to avoid.

Mr. Taylor: I welcome the possibility of change in that respect. Is movement possible in respect of the recommendations by the Animal Procedures Committee of wider publication of the statistics on animals culled because they are no longer required or are of the wrong type or whatever? The figures produced by *The Daily Telegraph* and other newspapers are horrific.

Mr. O'Brien: We want to respond on those issues, and I am giving some thought to how we might do so. I shall make a few points along these lines shortly, but the issue that my hon. Friend raises is a very important one. We are looking carefully at how we can best deal with it.

My hon. Friend made particular reference to the fact that there was no upper limit on the size of pens for dogs. He concluded that large pens make fighting and bullying more likely and to some extent, impede the handling and inspection of individual dogs. The inspectorate investigation at Harlan specifically looked for a link between the size of dog pens, the maximum number of animals held in pens and the level of aggression, but was unable to find such a link.

The inspectorate investigation did, however, identify a number of issues that will be of interest to all certificate holders and others. Where they reflect current perceived best practice, they will be incorporated into Home Office initiatives to raise awareness and further raise national standards. For example, plans are being made for some of these to be taken forward with all dog breeding establishments licensed under the 1986 Act to raise awareness and ensure the highest possible welfare standards.

Like my hon. Friend, I am aware that certain laboratory animal breeders and suppliers have been subjected to what can only be called a systematic and organised campaign by animal rights activists in order to undermine those businesses. Some of the activities have involved intimidation and violence against individuals conducting their lawful business, and damage to property. I spoke recently to two ladies who had had their cars burnt out outside their homes. Their children were at home and the car suddenly exploded into flames. It is a matter for the police whether protesters were involved in those instances, but I understand that they occurred on the same night and that the two individuals worked for the same laboratory. In those circumstances, clearly there was a great deal of trauma and distress for the individuals involved, as well as their families and their children.

I share my hon. Friend's revulsion at that kind of behaviour. If protesters were involved, it is a reprehensible act on their part and I hope that it undermines whatever support they might otherwise get. While supporting the rights of organisations and individuals to campaign lawfully and peacefully—as many of them do, perfectly properly—the Government condemn unreservedly those who use repellant tactics such as violence and intimidation, and wholeheartedly support the police in their continuing efforts to combat those who use such repulsive tactics.

Turning to the overbreeding of animals for laboratory use, the Animal Procedures Committee examined that subject as part of its review of the 1986 Act, as my hon. Friend said. The Committee concluded that, while some overbreeding is unavoidable, it should be minimised, and put forward some basic principles of best practice. The Laboratory Animal Science Association has also reviewed the topic, and information collated by it suggests that the extent of overbreeding is far less than suggested in recent newspaper articles. The Animal Procedures Committee has said that it will take the results of LASA's considerations into account before finalising further advice to the Home Secretary later this year. Once we have received that advice, we shall be in a position to take forward some of the issues raised by my hon. Friend.

My hon. Friend mentioned the ethical review process, which stems from "New Life for Animals", which said that larger establishments would have to set up welfare committees. As defining larger establishments would have been difficult, we decided to require all establishments to set up a local ethical review process by 1 April 1999, which was achieved. Those processes examine ways in which the welfare of animals could be reviewed and review project licence applications before they are submitted formally to the Home Office. Recognising that establishments vary in size and nature and in the type of work that they conduct, we described what those processes must achieve, rather than how they should work. They are not meant to increase bureaucracy or replace the inspectorate, but help foster and promote the principles of the 1986 Act and a culture of care within establishments. Scientific researchers have recently indicated that they have some concern about the level of bureaucracy entailed by the procedures for making applications.

We have no intention of allowing the proper welfare of animals to be undermined or of unnecessarily relaxing procedures, but at the same time, we have no intention or wish to have unnecessary bureaucracy or red tape that prevents proper scientific research. It is a matter of getting the balance right and of ensuring that procedures to consider the ethical nature of an application are conducted speedily and properly and that they look fully and robustly at the ethical issues involved.

I want carefully to consider the way in which the ethical review process works. I do not want a situation in which, as a result of our deciding to adopt a relatively light touch on regulation, which lets the establishments devise much of their own ethical review process, some inadvertently gold-plate their own procedures and therefore create unnecessary bureaucracy and delay. There may also be other areas in which we can ensure that we protect the welfare of animals effectively and fully, while ensuring that unnecessary bureaucracy is minimised.

Mr. Taylor: Can my hon. Friend reassure me that there is at least the possibility that the people who may be independently appointed to ethical review committees will

[Mr. Taylor]

include individuals with an animal welfare perspective? In its research, Naturewatch had not found that any such person had been appointed to an ethical review committee, and that is an important point.

Mr. O'Brien: Certainly we want to ensure that the ethical review committees include people who are concerned about the welfare of animals, as well as the necessity of conducting proper scientific experiments and research. I will not reassure Naturewatch that it can decide who is to be appointed to particular research establishments; that would not be acceptable.

However, we will want the establishments to include on their ethical review bodies people who are known to have a concern for animals and their welfare. We want to ensure that a lay member, who may be drawn from the establishment or from outside, is also involved, but we particularly want outside lay members to be involved at all establishments, and we will continue to encourage that. I cannot ensure that such members are always from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals or other such organisations, but I say to establishments that such people should not be excluded. I am told that the establishments' approach is not to exclude members of reputable animal welfare organisations. I shall look into that issue for my hon. Friend.

My hon. Friend is right to say that the whole debate about animal research has all too often been shrouded in emotionalism. It is perhaps right that when animals are suffering we should have an emotional response, and it is right too that when other animals or people, particularly children, are in need of medical advances to cure their illness, we should respond emotionally. It is understandable then that there is an aura of emotionalism around the debate.

At the same time, however, it is important that we do not allow the debate to fall into two polarised camps of those who believe that it is all about protecting animals and others who believe that it is all about making sure that science moves forward to establish cures for illnesses. We must get the balance right so that we allow proper scientific development. In the course of doing so, we must ensure that we do not in any way abuse our power over animals and that we have proper concern for their welfare and protection.

The Government are committed to high standards of animal welfare in those important areas of work, and we are keen that standards should be raised where demonstrable welfare benefits can be obtained. I thank my hon. Friend for raising those important issues and for his suggestions, to which I shall give further thought.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at two minutes to Six o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 27 June 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

Order for Third Reading read.

To be read the Third time on Tuesday 4 July.

GREENHAM AND CROOKHAM COMMONS BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Tuesday 4 July.

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Ferry Services

1. **Mrs. Ray Michie** (Argyll and Bute): What recent discussions he has had with the European Commission about the implementation of the 1992 European regulations on maritime transport (Council Regulation 3577/92); and if he will make a statement. [126336]

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): I recently met representatives of the European Commission to discuss a range of issues relating to transport, including ferry services.

Mrs. Michie: Can the Minister throw any light on why the tendering of Caledonian MacBrayne ferry routes has come up under these regulations? Why is the Commission suddenly interested? Does the Minister know who alerted the Commission? The regulations have been in place since 1992 and it appears that, when exemptions and derogations were being negotiated by France, Spain, Portugal and Greece, there was no mention of Scotland. That makes me assume that the previous Conservative Government did not send a Scottish Minister to the negotiations. I know that the Minister is concerned that we hold together the Caledonian MacBrayne services because they give a lifeline to our islands.

Mr. Wilson: I am, indeed, very concerned, as the hon. Lady fairly points out. I am certainly of the view that the best interests of the taxpayer and of the public are served by an integrated ferry operation on the west coast of Scotland, with all the flexibility and economies of scale that offers—an operation that is committed to public service and has no other reason for existence.

I cannot answer as to why the European Commission has recently escalated its interest; I can only point out to the hon. Lady that matters relating to safeguarding the services and consulting on how tendering should take place are now devolved. Certainly, everyone who supports CalMac and agrees that the company is the best answer right along the west coast should be making that case heard and well known—not least in Brussels.

Mr. Calum Macdonald (Western Isles): Will the Minister confirm that the Government have doubled the operating subsidy to Caledonian MacBrayne? Does he agree that allowing CalMac to bid for the routes to the northern isles would give the strongest possible vote of confidence to CalMac staying in the public sector?

Mr. Wilson: I agree with everything that my hon. Friend said. He was, of course, a Transport Minister in the Scottish Office before devolution, when most of the increase occurred. We put a load of extra money into Caledonian MacBrayne. That is a vote of confidence. In Opposition, we long demanded for CalMac the right to bid for other routes; I am delighted that, in government, we have delivered it.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of the regulations on the volume of trade and on port state control in the European Union?

Mr. Wilson: I have made no such calculations, but I shall be delighted to write to the hon. Gentleman.

Assisted Areas Map

2. **Mr. David Stewart** (Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber): If he will make a statement on the exclusion of Inverness, East, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey from the assisted areas map. [126337]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): Following the publication of the proposed assisted areas map on 10 April, I received representations from my hon. Friend and others on the exclusion of the area. Revised proposals have now been submitted to the European Commission.

Mr. Stewart: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. He will be well aware of the rundown of the Barmac fabrication yards, with the loss of more than 3,000 jobs that are highly skilled and well valued in the highland economy. Does he share my view that that strengthens the case for my constituency remaining within the assisted areas map, as indeed it does under the highlands and islands special transitional programme? Will he undertake to visit my constituency to add his weight to the campaign?

Dr. Reid: I am, of course, aware of the effects of the developments at Barmac; we all take them very seriously. I recognise the general strength of the arguments that have been expressed by my hon. Friend about parts of his

constituency. I assure him that, during the consultation process, we listened carefully to the views expressed on the matter. As he will be aware, the final decision is for the European Commission, but he will not be entirely disappointed with the outcome of our reception of his representations nor, hopefully, with the outcome of the review itself.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): Does the Secretary of State recognise that, by no criteria, are the interests and needs of Inverness to be compared with those of the fragile areas on the periphery of the highlands? Those areas are sparsely populated and have long lines of communication. Does he agree that, although a case can be made for Inverness, related to Barmac, it would be no triumph for highland development if moneys for assistance simply drained into the centre on the ground that what is good for Inverness is good for the highlands because it is of pan-highland benefit?

Dr. Reid: The right hon. Gentleman makes a pertinent and important point. The question by my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart) referred not only to Inverness, but to Badenoch and Strathspey. The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the proposals published on 10 April gave the highlands and islands more than 70 per cent. coverage. We also need to remember that they will still benefit from the special transitional programme, which is valued at 308 million ecu—that is £192.5 million for those Conservative Members who do not like to deal with anything in European terms—and which will run for the period from 2000 to 2006.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): Does the Secretary of State accept that the impact of the job losses at Barmac has repercussions in many areas of the highlands and islands? Although we welcome, for example, the development of Cap Gemini at Forres, does he recognise that the enterprise areas of Inverness and Nairn and of Moray, Badenoch and Strathspey would welcome assisted area status? That would help them in their attempts to attract a variety of jobs into the area to ensure that we can absorb the redundancies that have taken place. Otherwise, we shall lose people from the area.

Dr. Reid: Yes. I have already said that I appreciate the effect of what has happened at Barmac. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Minister of State and my hon. Friend the Member for Central Fife (Mr. McLeish), who is on the Scottish Executive, will meet Barmac in the very near future—tomorrow, I think. I have already referred to the highlands and I recognise the strength of the argument of my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber, which applied to some extent to the area around Strathspey and Badenoch. I hope that that shows that we have listened to the representations that have been put forward.

I should stress that the European Commission has the final say. The hon. Lady will be aware that our first proposals were targeted in such a way as to get the maximum effect throughout Scotland. Those proposals were not acceptable to the European Commission, so we are going back with a new set of proposals.

Special Advisers

3. **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): How many special advisers he has appointed; and what their official duties are. [126338]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): I have two special advisers and one unpaid special adviser. They advise on the development of Government policy and its effective presentation.

Mr. Brady: When it took the Secretary of State a little while to respond, I thought that that might have been because he was trying to think of something for his advisers to do so that he could answer my question. Given that his Department is no longer a policy-making Department, what possible purpose could there be to his having three special advisers to advise him on policy?

Dr. Reid: The hon. Gentleman should recognise that my Department contributes towards the decision-making process in Cabinet Committees. We have the not unimportant job of helping to transform the governance of the United Kingdom by establishing a relationship between the two Parliaments. If we were to judge expenses and what is paid out only on the basis of what decisions are made, it would be astonishing to find out that the Short money that goes to the Conservative party has been tripled to more than £3 million to allow it to increase its policy and presentational staffs. The House may think that that money has not been well spent, and to spend that sort of money on a group of politicians who decide nothing, influence nothing and contribute nothing raises a far bigger question than the one about my special advisers.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): The Secretary of State will be aware that his departmental budget has gone up by 7 per cent. more than inflation in the past year and that it now stands at about £14 million. He has mentioned his special advisers, but he has not specified whether they advise him or people who are unable to answer parliamentary questions. Is not the number of the Secretary of State's special advisers disproportionate to what his Department does, given the fact that all his Executive functions have been given away?

Dr. Reid: We have given the Conservative party an extra £3 million for researchers, and it cannot even add up. My Department's budget is nothing like £14 million. The budget, as the hon. Gentleman is probably being advised by his unpaid adviser, the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack), is about £5.8 million. That is to be compared with the budget which we are involved in negotiating with the Scottish Executive of between £16,000 million and £17,000 million.

I have two advisers and the Government have 79. We are told by the Opposition that these advisers will swamp 460,000 civil servants. Our advisers amount to 0.0001 per cent. of the entire civil service. I think that the hon. Gentleman can sleep easy in his bed at night.

Mr. Grieve: The Secretary of State's reply is entirely unsatisfactory. He has still not explained what he uses his special advisers for. His comments about Short money are peculiarly specious. Is it not the reality that his

Department has turned into the first propaganda ministry that the Government have yet put together? The only purpose of his Department is to put out knocking copy against its opponents and beef up Labour Back-Bench Members when their morale slumps.

Dr. Reid: This is all very churlish. First, my Department does not put out any party political propaganda, any more than any other civil servants under any Government put out such propaganda, as the hon. Gentleman will know.

Secondly, in the context of the presentation and development of Government policy,

> We believe that special advisers have a valuable role to play, precisely because they are free to act and advise in a way that a politically impartial civil service cannot.

Those are the words used by Lord Neill in his report, when he considered these matters. To say that there is no role for special advisers or that 0.0001 per cent. of the civil service will dominate the rest of it is surely, even for the present Conservative party, raising nothing other than political propaganda.

Economy

4. **Mr. Alasdair Morgan** (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Scottish Executive concerning the current economic environment for businesses in Scotland. [126339]

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): My right hon. Friend has regular contact with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and with Scottish Executive Ministers to discuss a wide range of matters.

Mr. Morgan: Specifically in relation to the effect of the climate change levy on small businesses, the Government have set aside about £150 million to assist such firms. What specific steps has the Minister taken in Scotland to ensure that the take-up among small firms is a fair one and that such firms are aware of the existence of this money?

Mr. Wilson: It is clear from the wide range of correspondence that the climate change levy has engendered that there is a high level of awareness of it within business. I would welcome any suggestions from the hon. Gentleman or from any other quarter of what we could do more specifically in Scotland to ensure that awareness is heightened.

Mr. David Marshall (Glasgow, Shettleston): I give a warm welcome to the Glasgow employment zone, which the Minister launched recently. How will the initiative benefit both business and employment in Glasgow?

Mr. Wilson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. The Glasgow employment zone is important. It is one of a few zones that have been designated throughout the United Kingdom that contain an increased battery of measures, greater flexibility and additional resources. They are designed to try to crack the tough core of long-term employment. The scheme fully involves employers, who have backed it enthusiastically. It is much in the spirit of the new deal, where the maximum resources are provided and the maximum personal needs of the individual are met, to get them back into the labour market. The more that people know about what is available within the employment zone, the better. I pay tribute to the work that the Employment Service and others have done in putting it together.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): In his discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, is the Secretary of State making sure that the concerns that I heard at the royal highland show from both farmers and those in the food processing industry about the delay in getting into the euro and preparing for it are being fully reflected, together with the Scottish economy's dependence on agriculture and on trade with Europe?

Secondly, will the Minister ensure that the Chancellor is fully aware that the issue is not only a relationship with the euro, and that he should ignore the calls from the Conservative party to pay no heed to the relationship with the dollar? Dollar investment in the oil industry is crucial not only to the economy of the north-east of Scotland, but to the whole of Scotland and the United Kingdom.

Mr. Wilson: I am pleased to hear a Liberal Democrat acknowledge the dollar's importance—that is a major statement. The Government are committed to Britain entering the euro; we have set five tests and when they are met, we shall put the issue to the British people. That is the proper way in which to proceed. There is a world of difference between us and the Tories: we recognise the importance of the euro to Britain and vice versa. However, the timing and the conditions must be right—we shall not compromise on that.

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): When making representations to Brussels about adjustments to the assisted area map, will my hon. Friend take into account that the settlement previously offered for Clackmannanshire, which is part of my Ochil seat, contained an error tantamount to a slip of the pen, whereby the Sauchie-Carsebridge area was denied access to financial support, which could have serious implications for attracting new employment to the area? Will he ensure that that matter is drawn to the attention of Commission officials?

Mr. Wilson: We have done everything possible to secure the most effective conceivable result for Scotland on the basis of the population allocation and the rules set by the European Union. It simply is not possible to go around Scotland, the UK or any other EU member state cherry-picking every area that has investment potential or unemployment black spots; there has to be contiguity between the selected areas and their populations. Because of that difficulty, our original map was not accepted by Brussels. We have done our best to get the optimum result for Clackmannanshire and every other part of Scotland. I am afraid that that is the only reassurance I can give my hon. Friend.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): How many times in the past six months has the Secretary of State met the Chancellor of the Exchequer? When he goes to such meetings, does he take with him the First Minister—to whom we all send warm good wishes for a

proper recovery—and, if so, who argues for what? What particular things does the Secretary of State argue for that the First Minister cannot argue for?

Mr. Wilson: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that meetings take place bilaterally, unilaterally, multilaterally, and every other way, so he can rest easy that there is a sufficiency of meetings with the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The purpose of our meetings with the Chancellor and other ministerial colleagues is to ensure the best possible deal for Scotland—especially in those matters that account for 50 per cent. of all public expenditure in Scotland and are still funded from Whitehall Departments—and to ensure that the Scottish Parliament and Executive are properly funded for the other 50 per cent. of public expenditure in Scotland. In other words, our lives are committed to getting Scotland the best possible deal under a Labour Government.

Ms Rachel Squire (Dunfermline, West): Does my hon. Friend agree that the recent order for 22 Mega-3 rail freight wagons for Rosyth dockyard is an example of the Government's economic policies and defence diversification policies securing jobs in an area that was devastated by the previous Government? Does he also agree that the greatest risk to the economic regeneration of Rosyth and other parts of Scotland would be the return of a Tory Government and a Scottish National party-style divorce?

Mr. Wilson: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. I pay tribute to her for the assiduous interest she has taken in this matter, which has yielded excellent results for her constituents, and for her general work in making Rosyth's future look brighter than it did a few years ago under the previous Administration. I can assure her that every job in Scotland is fought for: we fight to defend jobs and to create them. That the unemployment rate is now less than 5 per cent. for the first time since the mid-1970s provides a pretty reasonable testimony to our efforts.

NHS Policy Co-ordination

5. **Mr. Ian Bruce** (South Dorset): What role he is playing in co–ordinating NHS policies between the NHS in England and the NHS in Scotland. [126340]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): I am a member of the joint ministerial committee on health, which enables best practice to be shared across the United Kingdom. I also ensure that there is effective liaison between UK Departments and the Scottish Executive.

Mr. Bruce: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. May I bring a particular case to his attention? I had discussions with the agency in the NHS in England that is trying to achieve consistency in information technology and standards across the board, so that patients' records can be transferred between general practitioners and hospitals. The problem is that the NHS in Scotland is doing its own thing. Will the right hon. Gentleman look into that and into the auditing of doctors and nurses, to make sure that the medical services in England and Scotland have access to each other's records, and that we do not have three separate services in Wales, England and Scotland?

Dr. Reid: The whole purpose of devolution is to allow more sensitivity and more efficient government in local areas. There are common purposes and objectives before the British Government and the Scottish Executive, and it is important that we come together to co-ordinate areas in which we gain strength from unity of purpose and practice, through the joint ministerial committee chaired by the Prime Minister. I do not know about the specific issue raised by the hon. Gentleman, which will be the responsibility of the Scottish Executive, but we have an extremely able and effective Scottish Health Minister in Susan Deacon. If the hon. Gentleman writes to me on the matter, I will raise it with the Scottish Health Minister, and I am sure that she will give it her attention.

ADVOCATE-GENERAL

The Advocate-General was asked—

Human Rights

26. **Mr. Desmond Browne** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): If she has been consulted about the proposal to set up a commission for human rights in Scotland; and if she will make a statement. [126361]

The Advocate-General for Scotland (Dr. Lynda Clark): The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice announced on 7 June that the Scottish Executive would publish a consultation paper in the autumn and that, following the consultation, a decision would be reached in due course, possibly next year. I will consider in due course whether to make formal representations in the consultation process.

Mr. Browne: The incorporation of the European convention on human rights into the domestic law of the United Kingdom may in the long term be the most significant and radical constitutional change that the Government have made. In the short term, however, the Scottish experience shows that although there have been a number of very important cases, a plethora of ill-founded and spurious cases has been taken before the courts on the basis of the convention. Does not that suggest that we should await the incorporation of the convention in October and let it settle down, before putting in place the institutions that we need to enforce it?

The Advocate-General: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. Decisions about such sensitive matters should not be taken in haste. The consultation that the Scottish Executive is carrying out will no doubt have time to consider alternative models for scrutiny and enforcement of convention rights, taking into account, for example, existing constitutional arrangements, statutory bodies and the best use of limited financial resources.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): But may we take it that the Advocate-General will press hard for the establishment of a commission to deal with human rights matters in Scotland, and in particular to ensure that that

commission extends to political parties? How else are we to ensure that the treasurer of the Scottish National party is not the subject of a motion of no confidence moved in his absence?

The Advocate-General: I am sure that the right hon. and learned Gentleman will press on behalf of his party for whatever policy he considers most appropriate. For my part, I will wait until I see the consultation paper, then I will make representations, if appropriate, taking into account the United Kingdom position.

27. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): What recent advice she has given on the implications of the incorporation of the European convention on human rights into United Kingdom law on the number of cases brought before *(a)* the High Court and *(b)* the Court of Session; and if she will make a statement. [126362]

The Advocate-General for Scotland (Dr. Lynda Clark): The incorporation of convention rights into Scots law following devolution has resulted so far in about 700 devolution issues being raised under the Scotland Act 1998. To date, the vast majority have arisen in the context of criminal trials.

Miss McIntosh: I am grateful to the hon. and learned Lady for that answer. Has she given advice concerning the number of cases and the extra number of sittings that will be required? In England, it is estimated that the number of judicial review applications alone will double to 2,800, and that the number of sitting days in the High Court and Court of Appeal will lead to an annual increase in costs of £60 million. Has the hon. and learned Lady made a similar assessment of the costs in Scotland? How will she find the money to cover the additional costs?

The Advocate-General: The hon. Lady will remember that my role is to advise the UK Government. Obviously, the Scottish Executive have their own officers to advise them about such matters. I have certainly kept UK Government Departments well informed about the types and numbers of cases and some of the implications of experience in Scotland.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

The Parliamentary Secretary was asked—

Judicial Training

30. **Mr. Geraint Davies** (Croydon, Central): What plans he has for further in-service training on sentencing for judges. [126365]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): Judicial training is the responsibility of the Judicial Studies Board. All circuit judges and recorders receive in-service training from the board at three-yearly intervals and locally based training each year. All these seminars include sessions on sentencing. Specialist courses are also held for judges who try cases involving fraud or serious sexual offences.

Mr. Davies: Given the profound and far-reaching impact of the Human Rights Act 1998, what plans has my hon. Friend for training judges in the pending implementation of the Act in October?

Mr. Lock: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point. It is an important issue. The Judicial Studies Board has organised a programme of 54 one-day seminars on the Human Rights Act and the European Convention on Human Rights for all full-time and part-time judges in England and Wales. The programme will have been completed by the end of July, well in time before incorporation takes effect in October. Thereafter, human rights issues will be incorporated into the board's core training for judges and form part of their core training from then on.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Will this in-service training incorporate the more senior members of the judiciary? Following the embarrassment of Lord Hoffmann over the collapse of the original Pinochet case because of his involvement with a charity, followed by the further embarrassment of the Minister's right hon. and noble Friend last week on another charitable matter, is it any wonder that many people are asking in relation to so many of the current Government's friends in another place "Who do these people think they are?"

Mr. Lock: It is disgraceful for hon. Members to impugn the independence of the judiciary and to cast aspersions on the very good work that its members do. As far as I am aware, there is no suggestion that the rules on disclosure of interests have anything to do with the European convention on human rights. The hon. Gentleman's attempted link is entirely spurious.

Magistrates

31. **Mr. Phil Sawford** (Kettering): What steps she is taking to encourage greater openness and transparency in the appointment of magistrates. [126366]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): The process is open and transparent. My noble Friend the Lord Chancellor revised the directions to which his local advisory committees work in 1998, in order to establish a national unified system for recruiting magistrates. A copy of the directions is in the Library. The local committees actively seek to encourage applications from all parts of the community by using a range of methods, including advertisements in local newspapers, leaflet drops and local radio and television programmes.

Mr. Sawford: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. I welcome all the efforts that are being made to encourage greater openness and transparency, but I fear that in all too many cases there is still a shroud of secrecy over the appointment process through the advisory committees. Will my hon. Friend consider more steps to encourage

greater openness, not only in that appointments process, but in the manner in which the advisory committees are appointed in the first place?

Jane Kennedy: I hear the point that my hon. Friend makes, but I repeat that we believe that the process is open and transparent. That is not to say that my noble Friend does not make every effort to ensure that the benches reflect the communities from which they are drawn. It might be helpful to the House and to my hon. Friend to know that the Northamptonshire advisory committee, which covers the area of my hon. Friend's constituency, has recently undertaken a number of activities to encourage recruitment and raise the profile of the magistracy. While my hon. Friend raises fair concerns and makes legitimate comments, we make every effort to ensure that the benches reflect the community.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): We of course welcome as broad a variety of people as possible on the bench, but does the Minister agree that it is important for the best calibre of people to become magistrates, and that the sort of tokenism she described is wrong? We should not appoint people because they are women or because they are black. We must have the best calibre of people, irrespective of who they are.

Jane Kennedy: I find some comments that are made from time to time about the lay magistracy disappointing. The Lord Chancellor defined the personal qualities that an individual must possess to be suitable for appointment as a magistrate as: good character, understanding and communication, social awareness, maturity and sound temperament, sound judgment, commitment and reliability. Candidates for the bench are drawn from people who have all those qualities. However, it is fair to say that every effort should continue to be made to find more candidates who are women, and more candidates from ethnic communities, to be sure that the benches reflect the communities that they are there to serve.

Judicial Appointments

32. **Tony Wright** (Cannock Chase): If he will make a statement on revisions proposed by the Lord Chancellor to the system for judicial appointments. [126368]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): The Lord Chancellor keeps judicial appointments procedures continuously under review. Last year, he asked Sir Leonard Peach to conduct a scrutiny of the procedures, and he is now acting on Sir Leonard's recommendations.

Tony Wright: How embarrassed is my hon. Friend by the report that was recently published? It was commissioned by the Lord Chancellor's Department and shows that most lawyers would like an independent appointments commission. We know that the Lord Chancellor likes appointing judges—that is reasonable; it is an agreeable occupation—but everybody else, probably including my hon. Friend, believes that an independent commission should do it. Instead of endlessly peachifying the system to preserve it, why do we not simply get on with the job of changing it?

Mr. Lock: I assure my hon. Friend, who remains my hon. Friend, that I am not embarrassed at all. He has misunderstood the point. Press reports were about research into the factors that affect decisions to apply for judicial appointments and silk. The reports were unbalanced because they revealed respondents' perceptions of the system, but did not analyse the extent to which the system worked, or the factors that worked within the system. There is a difference between how the system is perceived from outside—I accept that it is important for the Government to know that—and its perception inside, which is the subject of the detailed report by Sir Leonard Peach. That will lead to the appointment of a commissioner for judicial appointments for England and Wales later this year. The two perceptions are entirely separate.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Does the Minister accept that, now that judges must interpret the European convention on human rights, they increasingly have to make political decisions about political policies, which were previously made by elected politicians in this place, and to seek a political balance between different rights? In those circumstances, does the Minister acknowledge that the judiciary is in danger of being politicised, that the selection of judges will be considered from a political point of view, and that in most other countries, such as the United States, those appointments become political as the result of such deplorable moves?

Mr. Lock: I am very disappointed that the right hon. Gentleman believes that giving rights to the British public is a deplorable move. Our judges' decisions under the Human Rights Act 1998 when the European convention comes into force will be no more political than they were when there were judicial reviews of the previous Government's decisions, for example, in the Pergau dam case. It is important that judges judge according to the law and that their appointment and work be entirely impartial.

Magistrates

34. **Angela Smith** (Basildon): What recent evaluation she has made of the social class of magistrates. [126370]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): Each local advisory committee tries to ensure that the bench reflects the political affiliation and occupational diversity of the local area. Those conditions are currently used as a proxy for social balance, although a viable alternative is being sought. Returns are made to my noble Friend the Lord Chancellor every year in respect of each bench.

Angela Smith: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that answer and her recognition that we need people from all backgrounds to give the magistracy legitimacy. However, does my hon. Friend agree that one of the most important factors that deters people from applying is the inability to get time off work? Many people in professions or managerial positions can get time off work, but those in manual work or lower down in their place of work cannot

easily get time off. That is a major hindrance to applying. Will my hon. Friend consider that matter and meet some of the larger employers to discuss it?

Jane Kennedy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the issue, as she regularly does, and for the opportunity to address it once more. We recognise the voluntary nature of magistrates' work and appreciate the commitment that they give to the service. We are committed to the concept of voluntary service but, as my hon. Friend rightly says, without the co-operation of employers, we cannot achieve the balance on the benches which, we all know, benefits everybody.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the hon. Lady confirm that quotas, targets and the pursuit of an antediluvian class war should have no role whatsoever to play in the appointment of magistrates, and that the only criterion for such appointments should be merit?

Jane Kennedy: As I have already said, these days, the use of political balance to introduce proper social balance on benches is regarded as a stereotype that no longer holds true. If we look at the results of the 1997 election, we also have to look seriously at other criteria and we are seeking to do that. Unnecessarily dismissive comments about the need to ensure balance on the benches do not give credit to the work of magistrates, who deliver an excellent service throughout the country and deal with 97 per cent. of criminal cases in their courts.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Why not start writing the manifesto for the next election? Why not be ultra-modern and democratic and elect magistrates and judges?

Jane Kennedy: My hon. Friend, as ever, comes up with a novel solution, which I shall consider carefully. However, we have procedures in place that will address some of the problems that he raises.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): In the light of experience in Scotland following the implementation of the Human Rights Act 1998, are the Government satisfied that it is still appropriate for political appointments of judges to be made in England?

Jane Kennedy: We are dealing with the appointments of magistrates, which are made after local advisory committees undertake an assessment of candidates and make recommendations to my noble Friend the Lord Chancellor.

Salaried Defence Service

35. **Mr. David Borrow** (South Ribble): What progress the Government are making towards setting up a scheme for a salaried defence service. [126371]

Mr. Lock: The Government and the Legal Services Commission intend to establish the criminal defence service on 1 April 2001. On 13 June this year, we published consultation papers on establishing a salaried defence service within the criminal defence service and on its clients' choice of representative. Responses are due by 22 September this year.

Mr. Borrow: I welcome my hon. Friend's reply and the progress that has been made in instigating a salaried defence service. What plans does my hon. Friend have to monitor the operation of the defence service once it is up and running, thus ensuring that the good idea that lies behind it is carried out in practice?

Mr. Lock: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. There are likely to be only six pilot salaried defence services out of a total of about 3,500 firms of solicitors in the criminal defence service, so we must keep the matter in context. The salaried defence service will be an independent stand-alone service within the Legal Services Commission, and there will be a research project following the establishment of the pilots to check that we can learn the lessons and ensure that we get the right quality and value for money from services provided by lawyers employed on salaries.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): During the progress of the Access to Justice Act 1999, we opposed the introduction of state defenders. How do the Government propose to overcome the inherent conflicts of interest that occur when the state acts both as prosecutor and defender?

Mr. Lock: That conflict arises in every case in which state funds are used both to prosecute and defend. Whether the lawyer is a salaried lawyer or receives a fee for the case, the paymaster remains the same. Independence is a matter of professional standards, attitude of mind and an impartial approach to the job that the defender has to do. It is not a question of whether the lawyer receives a fee or a salary cheque.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): We are still waiting for costing of the service: perhaps the Minister would share that information with us.

May I caution the Minister about the salaried defender scheme, which operates in many American states, such as Texas, and often results in a second-rate service for defendants? Mr. Gary Graham, who was executed last week, was provided with such a salaried defender by the state. He was convicted after a two-day trial on the evidence of just one witness, and many doubts were raised about whether his defence was satisfactory. In fact, it was utterly inept. May I therefore caution the Minister and ask him to insist that defendants get a first-rate defence service?

Mr. Lock: I entirely understand the hon. Gentleman's point, but poor quality defence services exist in many parts of the world and their quality is totally independent of whether they are salaried or paid by a fee per case. The issue is whether there is proper remuneration for lawyers and proper quality systems. We will monitor the quality of services under the pilots, but we will not accept any special pleading on behalf of existing private practice solicitors or barristers which would prevent us from finding out what benefits can be obtained from a mixed system.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

The President of the Council was asked—

Modernisation Committee

44. **Mr. Geraint Davies** (Croydon, Central): What plans the Government have to present proposals to the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons on making parliamentary adjournments coincide with school holidays. [126380]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business managers already take school holidays into account when arranging adjournments. Unfortunately, there is at present no common and consistent pattern of school holidays.

Mr. Davies: Will my right hon. Friend consider proposals to bring forward the summer recess, which is very long, so that, in nearly every case, it would embrace the full school summer holiday? Furthermore, the October half-term holiday could then coincide with a recess. That would entail changing the timetable of party conferences, but I am sure that that could be easily accommodated.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand my hon. Friend's concerns, as I am sure the whole House does. I have noticed, over the years, an increasing interest in having a different and more certain pattern for the parliamentary calendar, and I understand those pressures. I have to warn my hon. Friend that although he says that it would be comparatively easy to change the timetable of the party conferences, most are arranged a good number of years in advance, so I fear that it might not be as simple as he thinks.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Can the President of the Council confirm that the Modernisation Committee is seeking to obtain greater certainty for the parliamentary year, which would obviously help the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies)? Will the right hon. Lady also comment on the spate of leaks over the past few days not only on this subject but on others before the Committee? Can she confirm that it is her intention, and that of the Committee, to publish a report before the summer recess?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman is right to identify the sensitivity about matters being publicised which are under consideration by the Select Committee, although the Committee is in a slightly unusual position, in that its discussions affect the House as a whole. The hon. Gentleman is certainly correct to say that the Committee, as its earlier published reports show, is seeking and has consistently sought to obtain greater certainty. It is mindful of the fact that some Parliaments, albeit ones with traditions and responsibilities different from ours, have a fixed calendar. I hope that I will not be thought to be contravening the convention that governs the work of Select Committees if I say that it is certainly my strong hope that the Committee will publish a report, which I hope hon. Members will agree with, before the summer recess.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): What would the Minister think of a school that published its intended terms and said, "But if we haven't finished the A-level syllabus by 29 July, we will go on to 3 August"? That is, to some degree, the way in which we operate in this place. Could the Minister and her Committee put a very high priority on future certainty? I am not arguing for particular times; I am arguing for knowing where I will be on what day next year.

Mrs. Beckett: I sympathise with my hon. Friend and I know that greater certainty would especially assist the staff of the House in planning their work. As to what I would think of a school that was unable to give greater certainty, I might wonder whether it was full of rather unruly pupils.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Has the right hon. Lady received any request from the hon. Members for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) or for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), or from any other hon. Member who believes that parliamentary adjournments should coincide with school holidays, that the House should sit for as many weeks a year as schools work?

Mrs. Beckett: Indeed I have received such representations, and I am grateful to learn that the hon. Gentleman would be in favour of that suggestion.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Would my right hon. Friend like to tell me exactly which half of her legislative programme she is thinking of abandoning to make it easier for us to have longer holidays?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend will not be surprised to learn that I do not propose to abandon any of the legislative programme.

House Sittings

45. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): What proposals she has for changes to the times when the House sits. [126381]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): The Modernisation Committee is to review the experiment with Thursday sittings later this Session and other parts of its work may have some impact on sitting hours, but I have no other proposals for change at present.

Mr. Swayne: Has it occurred to the hon. Gentleman that, with the current pace of European integration and our giving away so many of our powers to other European institutions, we might avoid the inconvenience of having to sit at all?

Mr. Tipping: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will note that there are lengthy debates whenever European matters are discussed, such are the divisions in his own party.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Does my hon. Friend think that a considerable change in the hours of the House could be made if, instead of having Divisions after half-past 10 at night, we were to roll them over to the

following day? Would not those Opposition Members who make us sit ridiculous hours then soon lose their interest in democracy and debate?

Mr. Tipping: I understand the point that my hon. Friend makes. I simply say that there was a Division last Wednesday at 1.12 in the morning. My hon. Friend was there, together with 177 other Labour Members of Parliament, but only 18 Conservatives.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Following the helpful question from the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), can the Minister give an assurance that he will not support any proposal to reduce the sittings of the House that would compromise its duty to scrutinise Government legislation?

Mr. Tipping: That is a strong point, and part of the responsibility lies with the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues. Some Opposition Members believe that scrutiny should occur in the other place; the real and effective place for scrutiny is in this House.

The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Visitors

46. **Angela Smith** (Basildon): If the Commission will make additional facilities available to visitors to the House for the current year. [126382]

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (on behalf of the House of Commons Commission): Additional attractions and facilities for visitors this year include the reopening of the Line of Route, on a trial basis, for pre-booked guided tours on Mondays to Saturdays from 7 August to 16 September, as well as free admission to the "Voters of the Future" exhibition in Westminster Hall during the same period. A souvenir shop offering merchandise from both Houses and temporary lavatories are also being provided. In 2001, work should begin on establishing the new Westminster Hall visitors centre.

Angela Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that reply, but is he not aware that it is difficult for visitors to the House of Commons to go to the toilet or even get a cup of tea? I welcome the fact that the tours were advertised in the national press this weekend and this week, but will not visitors be disappointed with the facilities that we provide for them? Cannot we do better than temporary toilets?

Mr. Kirkwood: The point is well made. The Commission is well aware of the inadequacy of the current facilities, and they will change next year when the Westminster Hall cafeteria and visitors centre are properly developed. There may be difficulties, but the House took the view that the new trial basis of taking tours on the Line of Route and into Westminster Hall, giving people access to the "Voters of the Future" exhibition, which is part of the "String of Pearls" millennium festival across London, was the sensible thing to do. Later in the year, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association will use Westminster Hall, immediately after the exhibition ends.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): May I suggest that one of the aspects that is a disgrace in the House is that the only place we can meet our constituents is either in a corridor or at a table outside a Committee Room? There should be proper facilities in this place where one can have a confidential meeting with one's constituents. I hope that the House of Commons Commission will be able to consider that.

Mr. Kirkwood: Strictly speaking, any new facilities with a catering or refreshment aspect are technically the responsibility of the Catering Committee, so I would refer the hon. Gentleman to the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South-East (Mr. Turner). However, when Portcullis house comes on stream, Members will see a noticeable difference. They will be able to take people into some parts of Portcullis house. When the new Westminster Hall visitors centre opens—I hope as soon as possible after the work starts in 2001—I think that Members and visitors will be better provided for.

The President of the Council was asked—

"Shifting the Balance"

47. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): What recent representations she has received on the first report from the Liaison Committee, "Shifting the Balance" (HC300); and if she will make a statement. [126383]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): A number of Members have made informal representations to me, or raised the issue at Question Time. The Government response to the report was published on 18 May.

Miss McIntosh: Will the President of the Council and Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time on the issues raised in the report, which concern many of us who are members of important Select Committees such as that led by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody): the Transport Sub-Committee of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs? Will it be possible to have such a debate before the end of term, so that we can consider a structure alternative to the present one and give the Select Committees the real teeth that many of us believe they should have?

Mrs. Beckett: Of course that is a matter that should be discussed by the House. The hon. Lady may know that the Liaison Committee has invited me to give evidence to it, which I am very prepared to do. I had assumed that the Committee would prefer its debate to take place after that date. I cannot undertake to be confident of finding time

before the summer recess—if that is what she means—but I anticipate and hope that the matter will be discussed before the current Session ends.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich) *rose—*

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mrs. Dunwoody: As if I do not have enough trouble.

My right hon. Friend will be aware that the report is the distillation of a lot of experience of all the Select Committee Chairmen. It is a serious report; I know that she accepts that. I hope that the House will have the chance to look at it because, if we are looking at modernisation, that is the way to go. We can produce some real scrutiny of legislation. It is something that should be supported by every Member.

Mrs. Beckett: I share my hon. Friend's view that the report is weighty and has considerable implications for every Member. I also share her view that it should therefore be taken seriously by the House. I hope that that will happen in and before the debate to which she refers.

Modernisation

48. **Tony Wright** (Cannock Chase): If she will make a statement on her future proposals for the modernisation of the House. [126384]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons is examining some further proposals whose consideration flows directly from recommendations and experiments resulting from our earlier reports.

Tony Wright: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does she agree that two important questions to ask about the modernising programme are: has it strengthened Parliament in relation to the Executive; and has it done something to sort out the ludicrous hours when the House is expected to transact business? Has not progress on both those issues been disappointingly meagre so far; and will not the extent to which the current Parliament comes to be seen as a modernising Parliament be decided by the actions that the Government and the House take over the period ahead?

Mrs. Beckett: I know that, sadly, my hon. Friend was not able to be with us when we discussed the two principal experiments that have flowed from earlier reports of the Select Committee—the experiments with regard to hours and, to some extent, with regard to greater scrutiny. I am referring to the changed sitting hours with which we are experimenting on Thursdays and to the setting up of the parallel Chamber in Westminster Hall, which has provided 200 extra opportunities to scrutinise the Executive, including examination of Select Committee reports. I am sorry to hear him say that he thinks that that is meagre. It is, after all, more than most Governments have ever done.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): In answer to the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies), the right hon. Lady said that she had received a number of representations from her hon. Friends that we should adopt holidays similar to those of schools. I wonder whether any of those representations also concerned hours and suggested that perhaps we should only sit from 9 am till 3.30 pm.

Mrs. Beckett: I have received no representations suggesting those hours. However, I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is mistaken in the notion that all representations about the pattern of holidays and whether they should reflect school holidays come from this side of the House. They come from Opposition Members too.

Vaccine Damage Payments

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): With permission Madam Speaker, I would like to make a short statement on benefits payable under the vaccine damage payment scheme.

The Vaccine Damage Payment Act was introduced by the last Labour Government in 1979 in response to the Pearson commission on civil liability and compensation for personal injury.

The purpose of the vaccine damage payment scheme is to provide a single tax-free payment for people who, on the balance of probabilities, have suffered severe mental or physical disablement of 80 per cent. or more as a result of vaccination against specified diseases.

The scheme aims to ease the present and future burdens of those suffering from vaccine damage and their families. It is designed to recognise the extra costs falling on the families concerned.

Under the scheme, claims have to be made within six years of the date of vaccination or of a child reaching two years of age, whichever is later. Payment was initially made at a rate of £10,000. It was subsequently raised to £20,000 in 1985 and to £30,000 in 1991. In 1998, the present Government decided to raise it further to £40,000 for claims made on or after 1 July of that year. Also in 1998, my right hon. Friend Baroness Hollis announced in another place that a review of the scheme would be undertaken. Today I am announcing the outcome of that review.

First, I have decided that the six-year limit for making claims is too short in respect of young children, who account for the vast majority of claims. I propose to change this limit in line with Law Commission proposals which would have the effect of enabling claims to be made at any time up to age 21.

Secondly, I have decided that the disability threshold, which at present is 80 per cent. is too high. I therefore propose to reduce it to 60 per cent. The changes both to the time limit and to the threshold require primary legislation. We shall legislate at the earliest available opportunity. I have also reviewed how vaccine damage victims should be supported through the social security system.

People disabled from an early age at present qualify for severe disablement allowance. This will, of course, include recipients of vaccine damage payments. From next April, as a result of measures introduced in last year's Welfare Reform and Pensions Act, younger disabled people will be able to claim incapacity benefit without having to satisfy the normal national insurance contribution conditions. That will mean that they will be able to claim up to an extra £26.70 a week.

People with severe mobility difficulties or care needs also qualify for disability living allowance. From next year the Government have also extended help to disabled three and four-year-olds with higher-rate mobility needs. That will again include young children receiving vaccine damage payments. They will be able to claim £37 a week.

I have also considered the lump sum which is payable under the scheme. The Government recognise that caring for people who have suffered damage puts a considerable burden on their families and carers. In 1998, the Government raised the sum from £30,000 to £40,000. That sum is too low, so I propose that the sum payable to each individual should be raised to £100,000 for all new cases.

However, we must also recognise the situation of families who received lump-sum payments in the past who have not benefited from any of the previous increases. So I can announce that those who have already received lump sums will get top-up payments so that they are put on an equal footing in real terms with new claimants. These payments for the 900 existing recipients will range from £58,000 to £67,000. We will introduce regulations to make these payments as soon as possible. The cost of my proposals is around £60 million.

Nothing can make up for what has happened to these children, but we have a clear duty to support them and their families. I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will welcome the changes.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): Hon. Members on both sides of the House do, indeed, welcome the changes, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Eccles (Mr. Stewart) who has led the all-party campaign on the issue. I also pay tribute to Olivia Price, the chairman of the Vaccine Victims Support Group, who is coming tomorrow to lobby Parliament on the issue, for the fourth time since 1997. The Opposition welcome the statement and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) has already made clear, we recognise the need for a generous and sensible settlement for the grievance.

I have one question for the Secretary of State about his proposals. We have read that he has been involved in negotiations with the pharmaceutical industry about the possibility of its contributing to such a scheme, as happens in some other countries. The right hon. Gentleman made no mention of the pharmaceutical industry in his statement, and it would be interesting to know how those discussions proceeded.

The hon. Member for Eccles rightly observed in a previous debate on this subject that

> good policy is not made on the hoof, but this one has been around the paddock far too many times.—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 6 June 2000; Vol. 351, c. 1WH.]

That is certainly true of this announcement. In December 1998, the then Minister of State said that the Government hoped

> to conclude our review early in the new year.—[*Official Report*, 2 December 1998; Vol. 321, c. 817.]

That would have been early in 1999. We were told by the Minister in the Lords that an announcement would be made "as soon as possible."

Now we are told by the Secretary of State—*[Interruption.]* I shall remind the House of this, because it is very important. The Secretary of State now says that he will legislate at the earliest available opportunity. I make it clear to the Secretary of the State—and the Leader of the House and the Chief Whip, who are in their places—that we will co-operate in legislation at the earliest available opportunity and if he tables a simple Bill to amend the Vaccine Damage Payment Act 1979, which is a simple Act that should not be complicated to administer, we will ensure that it has full and fair passage

[Mr. David Willetts]

through the House. The challenge to the Secretary of State, after so much delay and so many promised reviews, is whether he will legislate before the next election.

Mr. Darling: When we consider the children with whom we are dealing, I do not think that the issue should be the stuff of knockabout politics.

The hon. Gentleman asked me one question of substance, the answer to which in part explains why the results of the review have been announced today. We did approach the pharmaceutical industry to see whether it would co-operate in part-funding a trust to be set up to make payments to the children affected by vaccine damage. The response from the industry was not enthusiastic and it struck me that it would take several years to resolve the matter. I felt that, rather than wait for discussions that might take months or years, it would be better for the Government to act to improve the vaccine damage payment scheme.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his welcome for the scheme. It was good of him to give it. Arguably, the children concerned have been waiting for 20 years for this statement. I believe that the Government are doing the right thing, and I hope that when we introduce legislation we will receive co-operation from Opposition Members on both Front and Back Benches.

Mr. Ian Stewart (Eccles): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement today. He has a record of being able to take hard decisions, but when we spoke to him and to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health recently, I pointed out to them that the hardest decision in the whole matter was the decision that the parents had to take when they chose to have a child born without impairment vaccinated. The first thing that we must say is that the vaccine programme has been a great success. It has reduced the number of cases from several thousand in 1979 to a handful a year now. We must say loudly and clearly to the public that the vaccine programme works—

Madam Speaker: Order. I realise that the hon. Gentleman has done a great deal in this campaign, but I must remind him that he is not speaking in an Adjournment debate at the moment; he is putting questions. There are other Members who want to ask questions, so I hope that he will put his question right away.

Mr. Stewart: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Will the Secretary of State join me in acknowledging that his statement today will be welcomed by the parents groups and the families? This is not just about the individual who has been damaged; it is a whole-family issue. The proposals go a long way towards providing the immediate help that those families need. Will my right hon. Friend join me in telling the families that the issue is not finished here, and that this statement is about the payment scheme only? The issue of compensation now needs to be addressed, and will be addressed by the all-party group and the parents groups.

Mr. Darling: First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Eccles (Mr. Stewart) for the work that he has done in the all-party group. Anyone who says that Back-Bench Members cannot make a difference is wrong. My hon. Friend has shown, along with his colleagues in the all-party group, that Members of Parliament can play a valuable role in helping the Government to formulate policy. I am grateful to him also for acknowledging that the Government announcement today will go a long way towards helping families who have lost out in the past. I hope that all the parents concerned will accept that we have made a number of changes which I hope will make a real difference to the problems and difficulties that they face.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, which illustrates why we worked so hard for a change of Government—although I am sorry that it has taken us a little while to get this far. I join in the congratulations to the hon. Member for Eccles (Mr. Stewart) and thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy), who put the issue on the agenda a couple of weeks ago. I particularly welcome the recognition of the need for backdating some of the payments. In many instances, we are talking not about children but about grown people and their carers. The Secretary of State has recognised that there is a need for no-fault compensation in this aspect of public health policy and NHS activity. Will he now explore the possibility of introducing no-fault compensation in other areas of national health concern?

Mr. Darling: On the hon. Gentleman's last point, nothing in what I said today makes the case for no-fault liability. That was raised by the Pearson commission in the 1970s and rejected by the then Government in 1983. Successive Governments have not changed the position so far as that is concerned. The vaccine damage payment scheme is a separate matter and is focused on a particular problem affecting a particular group of people. I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is mistaken on his last point.

I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's general welcome for the statement. The matter has been on the agenda since we came into office. We announced the review in 1998 and, last year, we announced an increase of some £27 a week in the amount of payments that go to severely disabled young people, as well as access for the most severely disabled people to disability living allowance. Today's announcement is a further step along the road to ensuring that we help people who have suffered a great deal over the years.

I am also grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reminding us that this is the first time that the payments are to be backdated. Some 900 recipients will receive between £58,000 and £67,000 a year as a result of what I am proposing today.

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Does he agree that, no matter what is said by Opposition Members today—mealy-mouthed or otherwise—thousands of families will thank the Government for proposing changes to the

scheme and that families affected by vaccine damage can look forward to better care from the state in the future than they have received in the past?

Mr. Darling: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for what he said. He is right in saying that many families have waited too long for this scheme to be put on a proper footing, but we have now done that.

Perhaps I could correct an earlier slip of the tongue, when I referred to an annual payment of between £58,000 and £67,000. I should of course have said that that amount is a lump sum.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): At least two families in my constituency will very much welcome the Secretary of State's announcement today. Cases such as theirs are appalling: perhaps it is because they are so few and so random that they are so sad.

My question concerns the top-up payments. In both the cases with which I am familiar, the families received the £10,000 interim payment in 1979 for injuries that occurred in the 1970s. How will the top-up payment be calculated in relation to the period of time that has elapsed since then?

Secondly, the child in one of my constituency cases has subsequently died, but her parents spent half their lives nursing her until she was 25. What will happen in cases such as that?

Mr. Darling: I can help the hon. Gentleman on both points. First, we aim to ensure that people who have received a payment in the past will receive a top-up payment so that they get the equivalent in real terms of the £100,000 total sum that is to be paid. All the relevant provisions will be set out in regulations. The lump sum, unlike the change in the threshold or the time limit for claims, will be dealt with in regulations which I hope to bring before the House at the earliest possible opportunity.

I shall deal with the point that the hon. Gentleman makes about children who have died. Although there are not many of them, there are a few, and I need to reflect on how to deal with such cases equitably. I certainly undertake to do so.

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke-on-Trent, South): I wish to add my support for my right hon. Friend's very welcome statement. I am especially pleased that he referred to families who were affected when the scheme began in 1979. Although those families received payments, they have nevertheless felt a serious sense of injustice over the ensuing 21 years—of which this Government have been in power for only three.

My right hon. Friend has assured the House that the regulations will be introduced and the primary legislation changed at the earliest possible opportunity. May I urge him to use all his endeavours to ensure that the necessary changes are introduced without any further or undue delay?

Mr. Darling: I want to bring the regulations forward as quickly as I can, as it is important that payments—especially those involving the lump sum—are made as quickly as possible. After waiting so long for an increase in the lump sum, most families will want to receive it as quickly as possible. That is what I intend to make sure happens.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): As a member of the all-party group, and on behalf of my constituent Hamish Thompson, may I thank the Secretary of State for what he has achieved in terms of removing the time limits, lowering the disability threshold and increasing the top-up payment? However, I have one practical request.

The Secretary of State will know that many parents will attend a lobby at the House of Commons tomorrow. They will have a lot of questions about the regulations, the primary legislation, the interaction of benefits and top-up payments. Would it be possible for an official in the Benefits Agency to be designated as the person with lead responsibility in this matter? That would mean that there would be someone for parents and hon. Members to contact and deal with. One of the frustrations for parents in this position has been that they feel that there is no particular point of reference for them to contact. That has caused confusion, and it would be very much appreciated by the families if they could get information by telephone from one person at one address.

Mr. Darling: I take the hon. Gentleman's point, but I am not sure that I can provide by tomorrow an official who could give chapter and verse on the number of matters about which I have just informed the House. Lobby groups and parents have been in contact with the Department. Once we have the details, we intend to write to them and set out the position. That might be the best way to proceed, as hon. Members will know that trying to run what amounts to an information stall is not always a practical response to lobbies in this place.

Mr. Andy King (Rugby and Kenilworth): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the welcome announcement that he has made today. I seek clarification on two small matters.

Two young women in my constituency have now gone into residential care. How will they benefit from what my right hon. Friend has announced? I hope that they will be able to get some protection, so that their families, who cared for them so many years, will benefit. Going back to 1979, some young people affected will now be over the age of 21, but would have been 60 per cent. disabled because of vaccine damage in the intervening period. Will they be able to seek some redress?

Mr. Darling: On the latter point, I want to ensure that people are not unfairly excluded simply because they do not come within the new scheme. Clearly, the primary legislation that is required will take longer to introduce because of other constraints, but I want to avoid the situation in which someone who would qualify now is barred because of the old rules. Not many people are in that situation, but it would be unfair to exclude them.

My hon. Friend asked about people who are now in residential care. That would not affect their entitlement to the increased lump sum, as I set out in my statement.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I join other right hon. and hon. Members in welcoming the statement. Will the Secretary of State underline the point made by the

[Rev. Martin Smyth]

hon. Member for Eccles (Mr. Stewart)? While we try to help those people who have suffered for reasons that some of us cannot fully understand, we should also be sending out the message that, on the whole, vaccination is helpful and safe. We must assure people that the vaccine programme should be followed through because it has been so positive. Having said that, I plead with the Secretary of State to look again with compassion on those parents who lost children as a result of vaccine damage: they have sometimes been left without any clear guidance concerning the real problem and have been fobbed off with reasons that are not acceptable.

Mr. Darling: All of us, as Members of this House or as individuals, have come across families who have agonised over that problem, to which there is no easy answer. As I know, nothing that I can say from this Dispatch Box will provide comfort to parents in that position. On parents whose children died, as I said in my statement, nothing can make up for what has happened. As a Government, all that we can do is to ensure that we provide help as appropriate for parents who have been in that dreadful situation.

On the general point to which the hon. Gentleman referred, I agree that the vaccination programme has brought great benefits to this country and to other parts of the world. The remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Eccles were extremely measured and I support what he said.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): In view of the frankly uncalled-for contribution from the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, in contrast with the contributions of Opposition Back Benchers, I remind my right hon. Friend that David Ennals had made the undertaking—and a Labour Government would have carried it out—on the delicate question of time limits which he has honoured, which was very much open to argument. In particular, I thank my right hon. Friend for generously topping up the lump sum. Will he, the Department of Health and other colleagues reflect, however, because that raises the thorny issue of medical negligence? Will he look sympathetically at the case put forward by Lord Justice Sir Philip Otton on medical negligence because, in one form or another, heaven help us, these problems may well arise again and we ought to tackle that question.

Mr. Darling: The statement was not about medical negligence, which is a matter for the Lord Chancellor, not for me. On the events of 1979, I understood that the then Labour Government certainly intended to complete the reforms, but unfortunately were not able to do so. I have nothing whatever to say about the comments of the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman to which my hon. Friend referred.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): I too offer a warm welcome to the statement from the Secretary of State. In reducing the threshold from 80 per cent. to 60 per cent. disablement, is the right hon. Gentleman considering altering some of the assessment procedures that are used? He, like all hon. Members, will know that one of the most distressing aspects is the definition of the threshold that enables people to be recipients of the benefits. Will that be included in the legislation?

Mr. Darling: No, I cannot promise that. I appreciate the point that the hon. Lady makes about medical assessments. There will always be some problems with them but, as I said in my statement, I consider the tariff level of 80 per cent. to be too high for the degree of disability, so I want to reduce it to 60 per cent. We always keep procedures under review, but I cannot promise to make specific changes in respect of this particular group of people.

Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): I thank my right hon. Friend for this act of justice. Labour Members take pride in the fact that, in doing something about this matter, the Government have done what previous Governments conspicuously failed to do. May I say, especially on behalf of those 900 people who are now in their 30s, many of whom are totally dependent, for whom life is a struggle and whose families often live in great poverty, that this action is vastly overdue? It was a scandal that when they had taken part in a public health programme and received a certificate to say that damage was caused by vaccine, they were rewarded with only £10,000. That was a scandal waiting to be addressed, and I am glad that the Government have now addressed it.

May I simply ask that the top-up payments, for those 900 people in particular, come through as soon as possible?

Mr. Darling: I certainly hope that they will. Now that the announcement has been made, people rightly want to see the sums that are due to them.

On my hon. Friend's general point, I believe that the course of action that we have announced today is the right one. I am only sorry that we have had to wait so long for Parliament to have a chance to make those changes. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his remarks.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I welcome the statement that the Secretary of State made and congratulate the hon. Member for Eccles (Mr. Stewart) most warmly on the important work that he has done, but may I suggest that the required legislation could be given greater priority if the Government were to relegate to the circular filing tray their planned legislation against hunting with dogs?

Mr. Darling: I believe that most Members on both sides of the House have recognised that this is a very difficult matter. We are dealing with children who have suffered serious damage as a result of what has happened to them, and I do not think that this is the time and place for Tory knockabout politics.

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): I welcome the statement. I urge my right hon. Friend to consider extending the principle underlying the scheme by joining forces with the Secretary of State for Health to re-examine the case for a no-fault compensation scheme for medical accidents.

Mr. Darling: This is not a compensation scheme, and never has been since it was set up in 1979. It exists in

recognition of the extra burden that families are obliged to shoulder. As I said in reply to some other hon. Friends earlier, the question of no-fault liability is a matter for the Lord Chancellor; it is not the subject of my statement.

The right thing to do now is to face up to the fact that some 900 children lost out in the past. Today we have an opportunity to resolve some of the problems that they face by increasing the lump sum, making back payments and ensuring that the process by which claims are entertained is much fairer than it was in the past. I am grateful to my hon. Friends and others on both sides of the House for the welcome that they have given today's announcement.

NEW MEMBER

The following Member took and subscribed the Oath:

David Lammy Esq., for Tottenham.

Points of Order

4 pm

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I seek your advice in relation to a written answer, reported at column 373W of yesterday's *Hansard*.

I put a written question to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions that was prompted by an exchange that took place during Report on the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill on 13 June. At that time, the Minister for the Environment said that he had taken advice on the implications on the Bill of the Human Rights Act 1998 and, indeed, of the European convention on human rights.

I know that one cannot ask a Minister or a Department for the advice itself, but the response of the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), to my written question was simply that the Government do not disclose the legal advice that they receive

nor the source of such advice.—[*Official Report*, 26 June 2000; Vol. 352, c. 373W.]

It would be helpful, Madam Speaker, if you could advise me whether the source of advice external to the Department should be a matter of disclosure. I do not want to know what was said; I simply want to know who advised the Department so that we may judge the quality of the advice.

Madam Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. and learned Gentleman for kindly supplying me with the question and answer to which he referred. As he knows, I am not responsible for the responses given by Ministers to questions. I can only suggest that the hon. and learned Gentleman is sufficiently ingenious as to table other questions or to raise the matter through the Order Paper in other ways—by such means he might be able to obtain the information he seeks. I understand and take his point; he does not want to know the advice that was given—he wants to know its source. He may find other methods—in questions or other exchanges on the Floor of the House—whereby his question will be answered.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. Sometimes, ministerial answers provide a block on further questions of a similar nature. As that answer was unprecedented—as far as I am aware—can we be sure that, until the Government provide some justification, it will be possible for Members to seek information from the Government on this and other issues, and that the Government will not use the answer as a way of blocking similar questions?

Madam Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has been a Member of the House for a long time. He and I both know exactly what is meant by the Government blocking further questions. I have not dealt with such a situation for some time, although in my early days as Speaker I had to do so. I cannot give him any guarantees, but I am aware of the point he makes.

Ministerial Conduct

4.3 pm

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for enforcement of the ministerial code of conduct.

I begin with a quotation.

> In issuing this Code, I should like to reaffirm my strong personal commitment to restoring the bond of trust between the British people and their Government . . . I will expect all Ministers to work within the letter and spirit of the Code. Ministers will find the Code a useful source of guidance and reference as they undertake their official duties in a way that upholds the highest standards of propriety.

The House will recognise the quotation. It is from the foreword to the ministerial code, written personally by the Prime Minister in July 1997.

In January, Lord Neill's Committee on Standards in Public Life found that:

> The effect of the foreword is to underline the status of the Code as the Prime Minister's document, written not only as guidance for Ministers but also as a pledge to the public.

It also said that the role of the Prime Minister should be clarified. It pointed out:

> The Prime Minister remains the ultimate judge of the requirements of the Code and the appropriate consequences of breaches of it.

Therefore, this is the Prime Minister's code; he is its author. To quote the Cabinet Secretary, it bears the Prime Minister's "personal imprint".

The Prime Minister, however, declines to enforce the code. As the House knows, the Deputy Prime Minister, somewhat grandly, has four residences—one a flat on Clapham common occupied by his son. That flat is owned by the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union and the Deputy Prime Minister is also the Secretary of State responsible for transport.

Hon. Members are probably not familiar with all the provisions of chapter 9 of the ministerial code on Ministers' private interests. Paragraph 113 deals specifically with trade unions. It says:

> There is.. no objection to a Minister holding trade union membership but care must be taken to avoid any actual or perceived conflict of interest. Ministers should arrange their affairs so as to avoid any suggestion that a union of which they are a member has any undue influence.

There can be no question but that the Deputy Prime Minister has failed to do that. I quote again:

> They . . . should receive no remuneration from a union.

The controlled rent on the flat is at least £12,000 a year less than the market rate. Although I do not suggest any improper behaviour by the Deputy Prime Minister, most people would see that as a considerable financial benefit.

Paragraph 114 states:

> Ministers must scrupulously avoid any danger of an actual or apparent conflict of interest between their ministerial position and their private financial interests.

Can anyone doubt that there is at the very least an apparent conflict of interest between the duties of the Secretary of State responsible for transport and his beneficial tenancy of a flat from a transport union? The principle is stated in paragraph 126:

> It is a well-established and recognised rule that no Minister or public servant should accept gifts, hospitality or services from anyone which would, or might appear to, place him under an obligation.

Paragraph 109 states:

> Ministers will want to order their affairs so that no conflict arises or is thought to arise between their private interests . . . and their public duties. Where there is a doubt it will almost always be better to relinquish or dispose of the interest but Ministers should submit any such case to the Prime Minister for his decision.

Sadly, the Prime Minister is unwilling to tell us whether this case has been put to him for his decision. Nor do we know whether the Deputy Prime Minister has consulted his permanent secretary, as required by paragraph 118. That becomes very relevant in considering the Transport Bill, on which the RMT not surprisingly made representations and on which the Deputy Prime Minister led the debate.

Even more relevant was the Rent Acts (Maximum Fair Rent) Order 1999, brought in by the Deputy Prime Minister's Department, which specifically capped increases in rent on flats such as his. Under paragraph 110 of the code, the right hon. Gentleman should have declared his interest to ministerial colleagues and

> remained entirely detached from the consideration of that business.

The Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards said that she would have

> expected Mr. Prescott to have made some mention within his Department of his interest in the subject matter of the order.

We should remember that this statutory instrument would have had a direct effect on the right hon. Gentleman's personal circumstances. The Parliamentary Commissioner also found that the Deputy Prime Minister

> should certainly have registered the benefit obtained from his tenancy of the flat.

Unfortunately, the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges overruled the commissioner for reasons best known to itself—a bizarre decision, in my view, especially because it then "invited" the Deputy Prime Minister to register the flat.

I hope that I have demonstrated that this is a very obvious breach of the letter and spirit of the ministerial code for which the Prime Minister is personally responsible. However, the Prime Minister has seen fit to ignore this contravention of his code.

In a letter to a Conservative colleague, the Prime Minister deliberately confused the code of conduct for Members—for which the House of Commons has responsibility—and his own ministerial code. He pretended that the decision of the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges "vindicated" the breaches of the ministerial code—when the Committee could not even consider the subject.

Yesterday, I received a letter from the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Richard Wilson. It said:

> It is not for me . . . to adjudicate publicly on Ministers' conduct. The Prime Minister is fully satisfied that John Prescott has done nothing which in any way, shape or form reflects on his integrity or his ability to do his job.

I accept that reply, but Sir Richard is, of course, responsible for the conduct of civil servants. I wonder whether and how he would have judged a civil servant who ignored the rules in such a manner.

The Prime Minister is wilfully blind to this clear breach of the ministerial code. Members must decide for themselves the cause of this blindness. It is not the Nelsonan blind eye which all Britons used to be taught

to admire. On the contrary, it exposes the dishonesty of the Government, and I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber might join me in condemning that.

Since RMT members complained and exposed the position of the Deputy Prime Minister, he has shown breathtaking arrogance. He has treated the parliamentary commissioner with disdain verging on contempt; he has ignored the request of the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges that he register his interest; and he still refuses to concede that the ministerial code might even apply to him. He has made no attempt to distance himself from his benefactor or to put the matter right. Had he been a Minister in the previous Conservative Government, he would have been obliged to resign long ago. He should resign now.

Who on the Government Benches recalls the Prime Minister telling all Labour Members—

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley) *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. Ten-minute Bills are not usually interrupted.

Mr. Robathan: Who on the Government Benches recalls the Prime Minister telling all Labour Members a week after Labour's election victory that they were not in government to enjoy "the trappings of power"? Does the Prime Minister believe that this is an illustration of the "highest standards of propriety" which he then demanded? Members may doubt it. This may explain why within the past month the Prime Minister has twice refused to give evidence on the workings of the ministerial code to the Select Committee on Public Administration. The right hon. Gentleman has therefore shown that he is neither fit nor capable to administer his own code.

Ten-minute Bills can be used to highlight many issues. I hope that the House, including some honest Labour Members, will agree that this is an issue—

Madam Speaker: Order. I have been listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman. He has kept within the bounds of the motion but he is now going far from them. I ask him to withdraw his last remark.

Mr. Robathan: I certainly withdraw, Madam Speaker. I hope that all Labour Members will agree that this is an issue of genuine and great concern. I feel that we should beware of over-regulating the behaviour of Members, but in the case of Ministers there can be no doubt, as the Prime Minister agrees, that the "highest standards" of behaviour and propriety should be seen to be enforced. This case makes a mockery of the words and spirit of the ministerial code. It can only further undermine public respect for Ministers and other politicians.

My Bill would leave the day-to-day workings of the code in the hands of the Prime Minister. However, it would provide for a final judgment to be allowed by Lord Neill's committee. I would not envisage that involving many cases, but they would be ones of great importance. The Bill would oblige the Prime Minister to ensure that his Ministers obeyed his own code and that his actions matched his empty rhetoric.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Andrew Robathan and Mr. Martin Bell.

MINISTERIAL CONDUCT

Mr. Andrew Robathan accordingly presented a Bill to make provision for enforcement of the Ministerial Code of Conduct: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 21 July, and to be printed [Bill 147].

4.14 pm

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I am genuinely concerned about the use of the ten-minute Bill procedure for individual venting of spleen, especially when the Select Committee on Standard and Privileges has dealt with the matter on behalf of the House. I am concerned that Members should be able somehow to circumvent the judgment of that Committee when the procedure should be used for other purposes.

Madam Speaker: That is not a point of order. As I explained during the speech of the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan), I listened carefully to every word he uttered and was ready to stop him if he went too far or failed to remain within our rules of procedure. However, let me say again those wise words of "Erskine May", which I have not repeated in the House for some time:

> Good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language.

I hope that hon. Members on both sides will take those words to heart.

Orders of the Day

Learning and Skills Bill *[Lords]* [*Ways and Means*]

4.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Malcolm Wicks): I beg to move,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Learning and Skills Bill *[Lords]*, it is expedient to authorise the making of provision for the manner in which payments to trainees are to be treated for the purposes of the Income Tax Acts.

This Ways and Means resolution is necessary to ensure that we can give effect to amendments to the Employment Act 1988 by means of the Learning and Skills Bill. The amendments that we shall introduce later this afternoon are necessary, in part, to ensure that money paid to trainees continues to be exempted from income tax. The Secretary of State is currently able to use his powers under section 26 of the Employment Act to ensure that money paid to trainees is not rendered subject to income tax. Money is paid to trainees by the Secretary of State by means of his powers under section 2 of the Employment and Training Act 1973.

Later today, we propose to amend the Employment Act 1988 by means of the Learning and Skills Bill to allow the Secretary of State to exercise similar judgments over persons who receive moneys in respect of training provided by the Learning and Skills Council and the National Council for Education and Training in Wales. The Learning and Skills Council and the NCETW will become responsible for securing provision for many of those trainees under sections 2, 3, 31 and 32 respectively, and they will be able to pay money to trainees under sections 5(1)(c) and 34(1)(c) respectively. The Ways and Means resolution that covered section 26 of the 1988 Act did not extend to persons who are in receipt of allowances under 5(1)(c) or 34(1)(c) of the Learning and Skills Bill. That is why we have introduced today's Ways and Means resolution.

Question put and agreed to.

Learning and Skills Bill *[Lords]*

Ordered,

That the Bill, as amended, be considered in the following order: new Clauses relating to city academies; amendments relating to Clauses 124 to 126 and Schedule 8; New Clauses relating to selective admissions policy; amendments relating to Clause 135; New Clauses relating to Part I; amendments relating to Part I; New Clauses relating to Part II; amendments relating to Part II; New Clauses relating to Part III; amendments relating to Part III; New Clauses relating to Part IV; amendments relating to Clauses 71 to 123 and Schedule 7; amendments relating to Clauses 127 to 134; amendments relating to Clauses 136 to 143 and Schedules 9 and 10; Remaining New Clauses; New Schedules; amendments relating to Schedule 11.

New Clause 20

CITY ACADEMIES: FINANCIAL PROVISIONS

' . In section 483 of the Education Act 1996 (city colleges: financial provisions) after subsection (3) there shall be inserted—

"(3A) If the school is a city academy, subsection (3) shall apply with such modifications (if any) as may be specified by the Secretary of State by order."'.—*[Mr. Blunkett.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

4.18 pm

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Amendment No. 84, in clause 124, page 59, line 13, leave out subsection (2) and insert—

'(2) In subsection (2), omit subsections 2(b) and (c) and insert "and either

(b) provides education for pupils of different abilities who have attained the age of 11 and who are wholly or mainly drawn from the area in which the school is situated, and has a broad curriculum with an emphasis either on science and technology or on technology in its application to the performing and creative arts, or

(c) provides education for pupils of high ability selected by examination, and has a broad curriculum with an emphasis on such specialisms as the governing body may decide.".'.

Amendment No. 85, in page 59, line 22, at end insert—

'( ) Mathematics;

( ) English language and literature;'.

Amendment No. 86, in page 59, line 23, at end insert—

'(2B) The city academy or college may select up to 10 per cent. of its admissions by reference to aptitude for each of the subject areas listed in section (2A).'.

Amendment No. 71, in page 59, line 32, at end insert—

'( ) After subsection (3A) insert—

"(3B) Before entering into an agreement under this section in relation to a school to be known as a city academy, the Secretary of State must consult the local education authorities referred to in subsection (3C) about the establishment of the school.

(3C) The authorities are—

(a) the local education authority in whose area the school is to be situated, and

(b) if the Secretary of State thinks a significant proportion of the pupils at the school is likely to be resident within the area of another local education authority, that authority.".'.

Amendment No. 75, in page 59, line 36, at end insert—

'(6A) Sections 84, 86, 88, 89, 90, 92 and 99 to 103 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 shall apply to city academies as if they were maintained schools insofar as they relate to the powers and functions of the Adjudicator.'.

Amendment No. 79, in page 59, line 36, at end insert—

'(6A) The Secretary of State may by order prescribe the proportion of pupils entering city academies each year who may be selected on the basis of their aptitude; and (notwithstanding section 139(2) of this Act) an order made under this subsection shall be subject to approval by a resolution of each House of Parliament.'.

Amendment No. 80, in clause 125, page 59, line 40, at end add—

(3) The Secretary of State shall make a report to Parliament each year on the operation of the provisions contained in Schedule 8'.

Amendment No. 81, in clause 126, page 60, line 4, leave out—

'if the condition in subsection (3) is satisfied'.

Amendment No. 82, in page 60, leave out lines 12 to 16.

Government amendment No. 107.

Amendment No. 72, in schedule 8, page 94, line 31, at end insert—

'(d) before making the scheme the Secretary of State consulted the authority.'.

Government amendments Nos. 108 to 123 and 106.

Mr. Blunkett: I shall try to set an example by being brief, because hon. Members want to raise substantive points relating to the new clause and we have a long day ahead of us.

The Government amendments relate to land transfer and are technical amendments arising from debate in Standing Committee. They provide a fallback position. Land may be transferred out of an education function, thereby triggering a land value that would have to be paid on purchase, rather than being an education transfer which would allow the land to continue to be used for education purposes if it was transferred back to the local authority. The amendments also require the requisite sum to be raised and provided to the authority should the city academy no longer continue to provide the function for which it was intended.

Amendment No. 106 is consequential. It relates to the relationship of authorities with the new Connexions service and will ensure that we have the necessary authority and powers.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): I shall endeavour to follow the Secretary of State's example and be brief. There are important provisions to come and I know that some hon. Members will want to speak about city academies.

The Secretary of State will be aware from proceedings in Standing Committee that the provisions relating to city academies were introduced at the last minute, long after the Bill had passed through the House of Lords—indeed, when the Standing Committee was on the last lap of parliamentary consideration. It was agreed in all parts of the Committee that the way in which the new policy was introduced was, to say the least, far from ideal. We have already commented on that.

Nevertheless, we share the objective of tackling the problem of underachieving schools, and we are not opposed in principle to city academies. Indeed, it would be difficult to oppose the provision in principle, because its legislative basis is a Conservative Act of Parliament—the Education Act 1996—as the Secretary of State is no doubt aware. There is little difference between city academies and city technology colleges, and they share some of the characteristics of grant-maintained schools as well.

Anyone who is inclined to try to see a difference between city academies and city technology colleges should consult clause 124, which makes it clear that the legislative basis of city academies is a bolt-on to the city technology college provisions of a Conservative Education Act. We are, therefore, waiting for Ministers to say a big thank you to the Conservative Secretary of State who pioneered city technology colleges—*[Interruption.]* However, given the reaction from the Secretary of State, we are not holding our breath for that. We are tempted to observe, though, that after three years of efforts by the Government to tackle underachieving schools, they have gone back to a policy first unveiled by Kenneth Baker in 1986.

Where does all that leave the Government's fresh start policy? We were told in Committee by the Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Mr. Wills), that city academies were not a replacement for fresh start, but he went on to say:

The academies are to be seen as one of the fresh start options.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee F*, 6 June 2000; c. 747.]

That sounds very much as though city academies will supersede fresh start.

There are three Opposition amendments in the group, reflecting our belief that a number of questions relating to city academies remain to be resolved. Amendment No. 79 deals with selection, which we apprehend will be of interest to the Secretary of State. City academies, let it be said, are selective schools. They may select 10 per cent. of each new intake on the basis of aptitude, and they may use banding by ability to admit the remaining 90 per cent.

We have no problem with that extension of selection. Where it leaves the Secretary of State is another matter, but that is a matter for him. Amendment No. 79 would allow the Secretary of State to prescribe the proportion of pupils selected on the basis of aptitude, and ensure that there was an opportunity for that decision to be scrutinised under the affirmative resolution procedure.

One issue that has not been considered at length—not surprisingly, given the rushed way in which the provision was introduced—is what happens to the pupils of an existing school when it is replaced by a city academy? The city academy prospectus is relevant, as is the revised prospectus, I think, although we received it only today, very shortly before the debate was due to begin, which is in keeping with the way in which everything about the Bill has been produced so far—in a last-minute and disorderly way.

The city academy prospectus tells us:

Where an Academy replaces an existing school, suitable arrangements will have been made to provide for the education of all pupils from the school being replaced.

[Mr. James Clappison]

That is rather vague. It hardly tells us anything at all. Of course, the education of pupils at the existing school must continue. There is a duty for them to continue to be educated. The issue is where are they to be educated?

We should be most grateful if the Secretary of State could now tell us whether the pupils of the existing school that is to be replaced by the city academy—it is in the nature of the city academies that they will replace existing schools—have the right to continue their education at that school. That is far from clear from the prospectus. If the answer is that not all the pupils of the existing school will have the right to continue their education at the city academy, which is what their old school has become, on what basis will pupils of the existing school be admitted to the new city academy?

I turn briefly to amendment No. 80, relating to schedule 8, which contains the power for the Secretary of State to transfer existing schools to the promoters of city academies. I pause—and do no more than that—to consider what the then Opposition would have said if the previous Government had brought forward such a measure. It was evident from hon. Members on both sides in Committee that there were a number of questions about how such schemes would operate. The amendment would simply require the Secretary of State to make an annual report on the matter.

Amendments Nos. 81 and 82 concern the question of children with special educational needs attending city academies, a matter that we were keen to raise in Committee. We note that the revised prospectus for city academies now states that city academies will be expected to admit pupils with special educational needs and with disabilities. There remains the question whether city academies will be regarded as maintained or independent schools for these purposes. This may be of some significance. In Committee, the Minister told us that this would be subject to consultation. Perhaps the Secretary of State will take this opportunity to tell us the timetable for that consultation.

Finally, I return to the revised prospectus, where the deadline of 7 July for written expressions of interest by promoters of the pathfinder projects for city academies no longer appears. It was in the previous prospectus, and has now been dropped. What is the significance of the Government's dropping their deadline of 7 July? We note in the revised prospectus that the Government still hope to agree the first pathfinder projects by the end of this summer, and presumably they still intend to start them in September 2001. The Government are now working on a tight schedule. They got off to what I have already said, with some justification, was a far from ideal start as regards this policy, and it now appears that the deadline for expressions of interest in the pathfinder projects has been shunted back. Will the Secretary of State explain why?

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): I am very pleased to be able to speak on this first group of amendments, relating to city academies, because the topic takes us back to a number of debates in which I have participated over the past three years or so when I have tried to understand the real, fundamental meaning of the education policies that the Government have been trying to implement. The more I look, the more I have become involved in the debates, and the longer the Secretary of State and his colleagues proceed, the more opaque the Government's destination seems to become.

One of the first things the Government did in this Parliament was to abolish the assisted places scheme, thereby removing from many children, particularly in inner-city areas, access to some of the better schools, often selective schools, which provided great opportunities that were frequently lacking elsewhere. I think of schools in Manchester in particular, which provided opportunities for Manchester's high proportion of inner-city children with very low-income backgrounds.

One of the big priorities in the next year of the Government's term of office was, through what became the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, to look at a number of proposals that dealt—although they said "standards", not "structures"—entirely with structures; that was particularly relevant to their views on grammar schools. We shall hear more of that later.

4.30 pm

Now that the Government are in their fourth year of office, it is odd that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) said, they are adopting some of the ideas that were central to the previous Government's drive to raise standards in education. That is especially true of the policy on city academies. However, it is regrettable that Ministers do not appear to have the courage to pursue some of their sensible, correct and logical ideas to their logical end.

If the Government believe that the scheme constitutes a formula for raising education standards in the inner cities, and that the new arrangement of establishing private, independent schools, which are funded by the state, and are able to select pupils on ability or aptitude, is a means of raising standards in some schools, why do they limit that agenda to schools that have failed and are being closed down? I have frequently asked Ministers that question, but I have yet to receive a convincing or plausible response.

If raising standards can be achieved by giving greater freedom to inner-city schools, allowing them to select at least a proportion of their pupils and to interview all applicants to the school, which means that they exercise a sort of selection over the whole intake, why will not that method raise standards in all schools in the inner cities and perhaps more widely? Why do Ministers believe that the scheme is relevant only to urban areas? Would not it be appropriate to explore its wider application?

Amendments Nos. 84, 85 and 86 attempt to widen the application of the scheme. I have tabled the amendments in a spirit of hope that Ministers will start to elucidate some of their thinking, and perhaps let hon. Members and the outside world into the secret of their aim. Apparently, they dare not speak its name. They are prepared to establish—*[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State is chuntering quietly. I hesitate to step into the schoolmaster's role, but if he has something to say, perhaps he will share it with the whole class. I suggest that he does not know what the end result of his policies will be. If he does, he must realise that it has far-reaching implications. He is beginning to lead us down a road that has some attraction. I compliment him on his first steps on the road.

If the Secretary of State believes that it is appropriate to remove failing schools from the control of local education authorities and that that is a recipe for raising their standards, why does not he accept that the lesson has a far wider application? If he goes further—he seems determined to do that—and provides that not only control of the school, but even its ownership should be transferred from the local education authority, why should the policy apply only to a few failing schools in urban areas? If he believes that it is possible to raise standards in some of our failing schools in inner cities by, like the previous Government, allowing selection on the basis of specific aptitudes or abilities—for example, technological, scientific, artistic or sporting expertise—why will not he tackle the point that I made in amendment No. 85?

Why does the Secretary of State not believe that it is also possible to raise standards by allowing schools to select 10 per cent. according to their aptitude or ability in mathematics, or English language or literature? There is no logic about why it is possible to raise standards for education in the cities by allowing selection according to some areas of skill and aptitude, but not others. We await the Secretary of State's response.

Mr. Blunkett: Oh, I will respond.

Mr. Brady: The Secretary of State promises a response, and it would be nice to imagine that it will be coherent and sensible. He oscillates between saying something that he apparently means and then dismissing it as a joke, so we have not really received any intelligent comments from him on the issue. Apparently, he does not think that these are legitimate matters for debate and he is not prepared to be straightforward and clear with the House or the public about his objectives.

The Secretary of State's city academies are leading in a clear direction which, as I said, may be positive. However, he must answer my questions if he is to convince anyone at all that he understands the implications of his own policies. To say that it is possible to select 10 per cent. of a school's intake according to aptitude for technology, but not to accept that it is possible to select 10 per cent. for aptitude for technology, 10 per cent. for science and 10 per cent. for sports is illogical. That might not be appropriate for all schools. Indeed, I am sure that it would not be. However, it would be sensible— *[Interruption.]* I am pausing in the hope that the *Hansard* Reporters can pick up the Secretary of State's response, as I would certainly be intrigued to hear it.

Amendment No. 86 puts forward the following option. Why is it possible to improve standards in schools only by allowing selection according to one small defined element of aptitude? Why not two? Might it not be worth pursuing that? How about sport and mathematics, or sport and languages? Those are perfectly sensible combinations which do not necessarily add up to 100 per cent. selection according to general ability. I have yet to hear a cogent explanation of the Government's position.

I have tabled three amendments which, taken together, would advance the Secretary of State's policy a few years and accelerate it in the direction in which he is already moving. Amendment No. 84 would make it possible to allow 10 per cent. selection in a school predominantly for local children which teaches a broad curriculum. It would also permit an option—not a requirement—which would add a further string to the Secretary of State's bow and allow some city academies to select pupils on the fair, not arbitrary, basis of ability.

The Secretary of State believes that it is possible to assess children's ability on the basis of an interview and to see how suitable they are for a sporting, scientific or technical college. However, apparently he has some difficulty with the idea that one might undertake that selection by means of examination. Again, I fail to see what sets his mind so firmly against the idea of examination. Arguably, given that the Government and Secretary of State speak so much about social exclusion, they might possibly—indeed, logically—take the view that an interview is a more difficult hurdle for someone from a working-class background in an inner-city area to cross than an examination. Indeed, the Secretary of State's right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer apparently thinks that that is the case. Of course that is why he thought that entry to some of our best universities was unfair, and he attacked them partly because of their practice of allowing entry by interview. The Secretary of State was one of the few members of the Government to back up his right hon. Friend on that ill-considered foray into the media.

If the Secretary of State strongly believes that it is wrong to allow universities to select by interview because that is an agenda for social exclusion, why does he not feel the same about selection to the schools that he wants to set up under the Bill? Why does not he believe that allowing pupils to be interviewed for places at city academies will also involve a form of social exclusion?

I do not want to be prescriptive or to push schools in one direction or another. I want to allow people to follow another avenue and use another option under amendment No. 84. There may be a need or an opportunity for schools, especially those in some of our bigger cities, which choose to select pupils of high ability by examination—arguably the least arbitrary way in which to assess the ability of applicants—to pursue a less broad, perhaps more academic curriculum. That is only a short step away from the Secretary of State's proposals, and it could be possible under a small amendment that would simply allow another option—additional specialisation in some city academies. I should be interested to know why the Secretary of State thinks that that cannot work.

I want to hear a sensible response from the Secretary of State on why it is possible to select pupils according to ability in some spheres, but why he thinks it unfair, immoral or elitist—I do not know which—to select them according to their ability in other spheres. Why it is good to select according to scientific or technical ability, but never according to mathematical ability? That is the odd position in which he has lodged himself.

Why does the Secretary of State believe that it is right to select on some occasions, but not on others? Why does he apparently believe—he was reported as having said this—that the selective system at Trafford in my local authority, where we achieve the best results in the north-west, is reducing opportunities and standards of attainment in local schools? I am sure that even he, in his serious moments, would accept that that is a fairly odd assertion. However, a little way down the road in the centre of Manchester, he would be happy to set up an education system in his new city academies that would replicate some of the elements that work so well in my own area.

[Mr. Brady]

The House has covered some of that territory in considering legislation on grammar schools, which are dealt with in another group of amendments, but the Secretary of State cannot avoid or brush aside many of those matters given that he wants to introduce city academies. There is no real distinction of principle or logic between what he wants the city academies to do and what he apparently objects so vehemently to in other schools. He and his colleagues have given no reasonable, cogent justification for the Government's different stances on those different, but related policies.

I tabled amendments Nos. 84 to 86 in the hope that the Secretary of State would take the opportunity to explain—

Mr. Blunkett: I will if the hon. Gentleman gives me a chance.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. May I appeal to the House? It is not helpful if we have sedentary comments from the Secretary of State and then hesitation or, indeed, repetition from the hon. Gentleman.

4.45 pm

Mr. Brady: It is not I who seeks to be repetitive in these matters, but the Secretary of State, who insists on revisiting these areas of policy. One day he says that there will be no further selection by interview or examination; the next he is happy to propose new amendments to the Bill which would introduce further selection. It is not I, but the Secretary of State who is inconsistent in these matters.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Amendment No. 84 refers to children

who have attained the age of 11.

Does he agree that if children aged 13 or 14 were given the opportunity to select which subjects they wanted to pursue, selection might be even more effective?

Mr. Brady: I have considerable sympathy with what the hon. Gentleman says. Of course, coming from Northern Ireland, which has excellent educational results and a very fine selective system of education, he has good reason to understand what he is talking about.

I do not seek a closed and narrow interpretation of how schools may select according to aptitude or ability, which may be one and the same thing; I seek an open and inclusive approach which would allow all schools some flexibility in respect of selecting from applicants, the means of selection and the age of selection.

The Secretary of State seems to be on the verge of a breakthrough. He seems to be overcoming the obstacle of the out-of-date ideological obsession that Labour Members have had with the idea of selection. He has now reached the point of understanding that selection can work and that in some circumstances, it can raise standards. He has set out some of those circumstances in the Bill. I am urging him on in that breakthrough to go a little further and to understand the opportunities that he is beginning to offer our educational system. If he is open minded and accepts some of the principles in the amendment, we will make progress a little faster towards the end which he and I apparently share.

Mr. Hilary Benn (Leeds, Central): I assure the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) that Labour Members do not have an ideological obsession with selection; we have a practical objection, but that is a matter for the next group of amendments and I shall not be tempted to dwell on it now.

It is fair to say that we had a lively exchange in Standing Committee about city academies, and that all hon. Members share my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's interest in inner-city education. Like him, I represent an inner-city area where raising standards is absolutely central to the opportunities and chances of the young people whom I represent.

I am sure that my right hon. Friend will be aware of the concerns that have been raised, in particular on the part of schools that think that they might be considered for city academy status, but whose results are affected by the fact that they take in large numbers of refugee children. That applies particularly to one school in the area that I represent. I am grateful for the consideration that Ministers are giving to that very difficult and important question.

I want to address two of the amendments in the group. The first relates to the need for proper consultation with local education authorities on the establishment of city academies. There is no question whatever about the fact that the proposal will work only if it is a partnership. It would be the worst course of action where local education authorities and local communities were bitterly opposed to innovation in the interest of raising standards. I hope that my right hon. Friend will accept the amendment that relates to the need to ensure that there is proper and effective consultation with local education authorities.

The second issue that I want to address is the subject of amendment No. 75. In Standing Committee there was considerable discussion about the way in which city academies will operate. Ministers said repeatedly that city academies would be expected to abide by various requirements that also apply to maintained schools of whatever character. In particular, the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Mr. Wills), said:

> It is important to stress that the academies will have admission policies consistent with the codes of practice on admissions.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee F*, 6 June 2000; c. 747.]

The prospectus is even clearer on that point; it says:

> admissions criteria must be clear, objective and fair . . . admissions arrangements should be circulated for comment to other admission authorities . . . City academies should participate in the local admissions forum and establish independent appeals panels.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that part of the admissions code includes dealing with exclusions, and that under the code the local education authority has a duty to find places for young people who have been excluded from other schools? However, the city academies may not be required to play a part in accepting students who have been excluded elsewhere.

Mr. Benn: I hope that that is not the case, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will address that issue when he responds to the debate. If the

city academies are to abide by the full spirit of the code of practice on admissions, all the requirements and obligations that come with it should apply.

One of those obligations, which was not dealt with at length in Committee, is the role of the adjudicator. The purpose of amendment No. 75 is to extend that principle to the functions and duties of the adjudicator as they relate to admissions to city academies. It is not my purpose to discuss at length the role that the adjudicator plays, because—according to *Hansard*—that was debated at considerable length into the early hours of the morning when the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 was considered. The arguments in favour of the adjudicator system are just as strong today.

Parents, local authorities and other schools are entitled to be reassured that if a city academy is established in their area—Ministers have confirmed that it will operate according to the law on admissions and the code of practice—they will have the same rights to refer issues to the adjudicator, whose word will be final in the matters over which Parliament has given him control. In other words, city academies will be no different from other schools when it comes to admissions.

The adjudicator has a particular responsibility to deal with objections referred to him that relate to admission arrangements, including those relating to partial selection, or cases in which selection by aptitude—to which the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West referred—is in fact selection by ability. On that issue, right hon. and hon. Members will have been interested to note that of the 500 or so specialist schools that can select up to 10 per cent. of pupils by aptitude, only about 7 per cent. actually use that power. I have some sympathy with that, because I can see difficulties in interpreting aptitude. Assessing the interest of pupils in the subject might be a better method. I would be grateful if my right hon. Friend, in replying, could assure the House that no aspect of the establishment of city academies will require governing bodies to use the ability to select up to 10 per cent. by aptitude if they choose not to do so. They might choose to follow the pattern of specialist schools elsewhere.

The adjudicator post exists to provide reassurance that admissions arrangements are fair and within the law. The functions were introduced for good reason, and currently apply to maintained schools. I can see no reason why they should not apply to city academies, too.

Mr. Willis: It is sad that we spent 20 minutes on the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) which deal with the narrow issue of selection. This is a major Bill, and city academies are one of the most important initiatives of the Government's three years in office. The impact of the Bill on the state education system could be profound. I say that not as a criticism, but as a statement of fact.

There is an argument—as the hon. Members for Altrincham and Sale, West and for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) said—that if this form of educational organisation is good enough for children in inner-city schools, why is it not good enough for children elsewhere? The Secretary of State must answer that important question. We must not have another tier of organisation that applies to children in so-called failing schools.

The amendments on city academies were tabled at a late stage in Committee. There were full apologies from the Government for that, and we do not wish to reopen that issue. However, in Committee I asked for the Government's definition of a failing school, as that is important. We need to know whether it means a lack of students getting five grades A to C for three years—the Secretary of State's original definition—or truancy rates, or other criteria that often affect inner-city schools in particular. In order to have a policy that will apply to groups of failing schools, we must have a definition of a failing school. Perhaps the Secretary of State will give us that definition when he responds to the debate.

I refute the idea that is often peddled by the Tory party—and, sadly, by large numbers within the Labour party—that we have a failing state education system. I do not believe that that is the case. Yesterday, in Islington, Tim Brighouse made it clear that all politicians—particularly Members of this House—should be careful about damning our schools, teachers and children simply because they do not meet the norms in some criteria set by the Department for Education and Employment or anyone else. I am sure that the Secretary of State and the Minister for School Standards would support some, if not all, of those comments.

I hope that the Secretary of State will reject amendments Nos. 79, 84, 85 and 86, which are an attempt by the Opposition to bring in selection by the back door. Amendment No. 85 would allow schools to select on the basis of maths and English testing. That is what the 11-plus was about. The hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West is passionate about selection and I admire his tenacity. However, he ought to be honest enough to say that it is Tory party policy to seek to reintroduce the 11-plus at the age of 11—as that is what the amendments say—not for a few children but for all children, and that the Tories want to base their education policy on that.

Mr. Brady: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Willis: With respect, I will not, because the hon. Gentleman spent twenty minutes speaking to the amendments. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have constantly sought reassurance from the Secretary of State and the Government about selection. We were ready to believe that it would be a thing of the past. However, the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West is right to say that creeping selection has been coming in, first through the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, and now through the Bill.

Mr. Brady: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Willis: I do not want to be discourteous.

Mr. Brady: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who has returned to his characteristic good manners. Although I am a strong defender of a school system that works well in my area, the purpose of my amendments has nothing to do with the honesty or dishonesty of my party. I am seeking honesty and openness from the Government.

Mr. Willis: The Secretary of State is quite capable of answering for the Government's policy, but the amendments are a clear attempt by the Tory Opposition to introduce selection by the back door. I rest my case.

5 pm

The hon. Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn) spoke to amendment No. 75, and I was delighted when the Secretary of State nodded at my intervention concerning excluded pupils. It was a real anxiety in Standing Committee that a group of schools would be set up that would have the privilege of excluding students while not having to accept excluded students.

Anybody who has worked in the more challenging areas of education knows that dealing with challenging behaviour and difficult students lies at the heart of the solution to underachievement. Until we deal effectively with that problem, we will not reverse the underachievement of many of our young people. I hope that the Secretary of State, in his response to amendment No. 75, will clarify the Government's position.

I have two other matters to raise with the Government. The first has to do with finance. In Standing Committee, the Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Mr. Wills), was not clear about how much state money was to be put into this initiative. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the percentage split in terms of capital will be in the ratio 20:80, and that the private sector partners will have to find the 20 per cent? Will he also confirm that that will be roughly equivalent to £2 million? Does that not mean that each of the new city academies will get £123 per person, as well as the equivalent of £10 million in capital investment?

If that is the case, may I tell the Secretary of State that many schools in all constituencies—urban, inner-city or otherwise—could do with that money? Would it not be an insult to give so much money to a few schools that have been hand-picked by the Secretary of State, when there are huge areas of deprivation in rural areas?

Finally, new clause 20 deals with the question of assets. In Standing Committee, I asked a series of questions about what would happen when a school's freehold was transferred to the private sector company running that school. The Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks), made it clear that if the school folded for any reason, those freehold assets would simply transfer back to the local education authority.

I accept that, but a private company that takes over a school may decide to move site. It could then use the value of the real estate, and other resources, to invest in the new site. What would happen to that site in the event of failure? Would it revert in its totality to the local authority; or would the private sector company be able to take out the real value of its investment there? I hope that the Secretary of State will also respond to that important question.

Valerie Davey (Bristol, West): I rise to speak briefly to amendment No. 71, which would include local authorities in the consultation about city academies. I believe that that is crucial if city academies are to be of long-term value.

Hon. Members who represent city areas know that the challenge to provide all young people with the excellent secondary school education that they deserve has not yet been met. That is not because of any lack of dedication among teachers, or lack of commitment among local education authorities, but because of the huge demographic changes that have taken place. Another contributory factor is the lack of long-term investment in school buildings and their surrounding environments, which in some cases has isolated schools from the wider community.

The hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) acknowledged that the first response of the previous Tory Government was to subsidise the private sector to provide places for able children. However, I contend that only a few such places were ever provided. Their second response was the gesture of city technology colleges. The latter solution, in particular, never benefited the wider community of schools. In many cases the colleges were imposed, with largesse of public, rather than private, funding in areas where there were already surplus places. In some cases they were positively detrimental.

By comparison, this Government have promoted the excellence in cities initiative. In the pilot areas, the project is beginning to meet the aspirations of children and their parents. The collaboration and co-operation that is taking place, which includes local education authorities, schools and the wider community, is bringing new hope to areas where there have been great difficulties, if not a feeling of hopelessness.

Into that scenario of excellence in cities comes the new idea of city academies. In that context of collaboration, the academies must be seen as an extra, complementary facility; cities can integrate them if they wish, but that will not be done without their full collaboration and support.

Mr. Brady: Has the hon. Lady received some assurance from Ministers, which I do not think that the Committee received, that no city academy will be established in an area with surplus places in other schools?

Valerie Davey: I appreciate that intervention. I am sure that that will be a consideration when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State looks to future city academies.

In Committee, we reflected on the value of the American charter schools. Indeed, we received evidence that in certain cases they have helped to raise standards. When the Education and Employment Committee visited America, we also learned about pilot schools, which were completely within the local education authority system, although they provided initiatives and were getting sponsorship.

We are opening up exciting potential for LEAs, and for the community of schools in each city that is trying to make more excellent provision for its students. However, our approach must be for the whole city community, and it must be considered in the long term. Through its strategic planning, the LEA has a key role in ensuring that that is done, so we need the further consultation.

Mr. Ken Purchase (Wolverhampton, North-East): Education is about the nearest that I get to any religion or belief system—the Labour party is the second nearest. I am most concerned about this add-on to the Bill—a Bill that I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on introducing. It is overdue. For many years, we have endured training schemes and skills development that have been inadequate to meet the needs of Britain in a changing world and certainly to meet the challenge of the global economy.

The city academy add-on trivialises to some extent the great importance of the Bill, to which we need to give 100 per cent. attention. I hope that this evening's proceedings may improve even further the efficacy that the Bill will bring to the learning and skills base within our regions. That is an important part of the development of regional policy. Through the Bill, we have established the need to ensure that the learning and skills councils link properly, comprehensively and coherently with the regional development agencies and with local authorities.

Although the provisions could be strengthened to some extent, by introducing this important Bill real progress has been made. I am afraid that I regard city academies—like city technology colleges—as an education gimmick. If someone were to suggest introducing them to the private sector, no one would take the suggestion seriously. The only selection that has ever applied in the private sector has been by the question, "Do you have the money?" Labour Members should be ensuring that the currency of educational opportunity is rooted in social justice.

In a moment or two, I hope to make a defence of what I regard as the tremendously hard work that many teachers and parents have put into ensuring that our comprehensive system of education is successful. However, I will just say regarding selection that the choice of the figure of 10 per cent. admission by aptitude shows that this is just an add-on—a gimmick. Why 10 per cent? Why concede that there is an argument for setting a benchmark, such as 10 per cent., and saying, "This far and no further"—or, in my case, "Why this far at all?"?

There is no real intellectual clout behind an arbitrary decision of that type, yet the Labour party's view of education has been rooted historically in intellectualism. It has for years and years produced major thinkers on education who wrestled with the problem of the relationship between a professional teacher and the state and the local authority. It has tried to understand and exemplify and improve that relationship for the benefit of children, who are ultimately in the care of teachers.

There are many systems of education and I do not deny that the idea of specialisms, such as they are and such as they may be, has found root and progressed to achievement in other countries. One thinks immediately of America, the home of almost every gimmick thought of in the 20th century, such as bubblegum and wurlitzer organs, but also the origin of the "Fame" series. Was it not attractive? Did it not make our heart beat faster? I am sure that that works very well in America, which has a massively diverse population—200 million people living in cities, many of which are systems in their own right, city states in the true sense of the word, cut off by 1,000 miles from the next tranche of civilisation.

It is not surprising that such a country, diverse as it is, should produce so many diverse ideas, understandings and views about education, but some of them do not travel well. I do not believe that we need a performing arts school, or a technology college, for pupils from the age of 11.

Almost the whole of Labour party policy has been based on the view of various child psychologists and psychiatrists, not least Piaget, who understood and showed the rest of the world the meaning of differing maturation rates. The hon. Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs) asked whether it would be better if selection took place at 13 and 14. In truth, it would. If there is to be selection, the later the better; it certainly should not take place at 11.

I previously spoke of the child who at 11 believes that they will be the greatest hockey star, football star or singer that the world has known, but who is fed up with it by the age of 12 and a half. That is the nature of the differing rates at which children mature. Boys and girls mature at different rates. As they grow older, they change, and gain new insights—very often, believe it or not, from teachers in our comprehensive schools—about the value that they should be placing on the education that they receive.

Years ago, in the 1930s, we were worried in this country because our gross domestic product was not growing as fast as that of other nations. We were concerned that we did not seem to be keeping up, and a famous report produced by Professor Hadow suggested that what we really needed in this country was a three-legged approach. We should have grammar schools for our real high fliers and technical high schools for those who show an aptitude for science and technology. In Britain, we have always considered scientists and technologists second grade compared with academics in English, history and so on—and does that not show in our industrial output? Does it not show in the difference between the salaries paid to technical people and to those who—broadly speaking—come through the arts route? Does it not show in the respect that is not shown to science and technology in this country, compared with other countries?

5.15 pm

Mr. Brady *rose—*

Mr. Purchase: With respect, the hon. Gentleman had long enough to make his case. I would rather not give way.

The Germans took a technical approach and it worked; it fitted the culture and was helpful, but in Britain it failed. If we measure that approach simply by productive output, we see that it worked in Germany, but not in Britain. We have broadly abandoned the technical approach to education, realising that we also need a broader education.

Mr. Brady *rose—*

Mr. Purchase: The hon. Gentleman is persistent.

Mr. Brady: I am also grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I was about to call his attention to the German example. Was not the reason for the failure of the German model in this country the fact that we under-resourced the technical schools, rather than that the grammar schools did not deliver?

Mr. Purchase: My detailed knowledge of the allocation of resources during the period in question is not sufficient to give the hon. Gentleman a proper answer. I think it was much more to do with the fact that we failed to break the culture of elitism. We have not recognised the arts route for what it is—usually, to produce well-rounded people with excellent understanding. We put those who take that route on a platform; indeed, if hon. Members will forgive me for saying so, we put them in the Treasury

[Mr. Purchase]

and the Foreign Office rather than in the Department of Trade and Industry or the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

In Britain, we have always had that elitism and it has held us back. I do not agree with elitism in education—it is wrong. I cannot say that often enough or loud enough. It has not assisted us to make our way in the world as we should have done. That is my honest view, based on much evidence about the economic performance of various countries.

For more than 50 years, much has been written on the difficulties of selection at the age of 11.

Mr. Clappison: In the light of the hon. Gentleman's comments, what does he make of the Government's proposals, under the excellence in cities programme, for taking between 5 and 10 per cent. of children out of schools and giving them a different form of education?

Mr. Purchase: In case I have not already made it plain, I repeat that such matters are trivia added to an important Bill, although such proposals would be improved if the amendments tabled by my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol, West (Valerie Davey) and for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn) were accepted. I hope that the Secretary of State will accept them—especially the proposals on consultation with local authorities.

However, my view is that this is not the way to proceed. In Committee, we argued about the late tabling of amendments and we agreed to close the book on that matter. However, we are considering an extremely important and coherent Bill that fits comprehensively with Labour's policies on economic development and learning and skills in education, and this is the wrong place to introduce such proposals.

Although there is some evidence that specialism in schools from the age of 11 can be effective, there is not a significant body of evidence. If there were, we should have a serious discussion of the matter, because the situation has gone on for 50 years.

For 40 years of my life, I have done my best to promote comprehensive schools. I believe that entrance at 11 or 13 to an all-ability school, based on a sensible and geographically coherent catchment area, is the best way to attract resources to that school. All children would attend the school and all parents would be involved.

Parents are the most significant element in educational outcomes. When the late Sir Keith Joseph was Secretary of State for Education and Science, he employed Rodney Lord as a researcher and he carried out an excellent piece of multiple regression analysis work. He identified the individual elements that contribute to good outcomes in schools. Unsurprisingly—most academic exercises fail to surprise—the interest, concern and enthusiasm of parents bore the strongest correlation to pupils' results in school. Although the number of teachers was a factor, the second most important element in achieving successful outcomes in education was experienced teachers. Thirdly, and a long way down the list, came the quality of the buildings and the equipment used. It was clear then and it is clear to a blind man on a galloping horse—*[Interruption.]* That phrase may be appropriate, but I apologise if it has caused offence. I can sometimes be offensive without wanting to be so deliberately.

It is clear from the evidence that parents are the most important factor in achieving successful outcomes, and a huge body of evidence supports that view. Introducing specialisms at the age of 11 will barely touch the margins of the serious business of educating our young people.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): Given the hon. Gentleman's real reservations about the Bill, will he be clear on one matter? Does he intend to oppose the Bill on Third Reading?

Mr. Purchase: The hon. Gentleman should know better than to ask. I told him in Committee that I would not give Conservatives a cheap thrill by voting against a Labour Government. He must be mad; there is absolutely no possibility of my doing that.

I have described this issue as trivia, because it is at the margins. I want my hon. Friends to realise that the proposal is not helpful and that it is time consuming. It will not add sufficiently to the value of state education and the comprehensive system to justify the time that we have taken away from discussing the other provisions in this vital Bill. I want to spell it out that I believe that the wide view in the Labour party is that the Victorian and early 20th century approach, of selection at the age of 11, is not a sensible policy for us to dabble with. It is contrary to all the evidence. This time, I use the word "dabble" deliberately, and this time I intend to be offensive.

The proposal prompts an important question about education generally. In the 1970s, Bernstein wrote that education could not compensate for society; it can only play a part. Our teachers have our children for a few hours a day for 40 weeks a year and the part that we play as parents and grandparents, as I am now, is vital to ensuring that young people understand the importance of education in its broadest sense.

I have referred to the French approach to education and to the baccalaureat. That is too prescriptive for my liking, because we can give teachers more responsibility and freedom to teach than did the previous Government. I hope that this Government will ease up on the curriculum imperatives, because I trust teachers. I believe that they have been trained properly and that many of them have a strong vocation to teach. They should be respected and rewarded. However, I should perhaps declare an interest: one of my daughters is a teacher.

The issue goes much wider than specialist schools. Specialism is sometimes good on television, and "Fame" was great. I know that some young people will benefit from that sort of education, but as a nation we must opt for a broad education. I accept, however, that there are occasions when it is appropriate to develop the specialisms that many young people show, some at 11 and some at seven. Other people even do so at six or five—we read of children taking O-levels at six years of age. However, these are the exceptions to the mainstream for which we should first be catering. We should cater for those with lower abilities and for those with higher abilities, within a comprehensive system of state education that is administered honestly and with children's welfare and education in mind.

I respect and admire the many teachers who, if they hear about the debate, will say, "I wonder whether my school will eventually be replaced. I wonder whether we will not quite come up to spec." I urge my right hon.

Friend the Secretary of State and all who have responsibilities in these matters to stop damning schools. Would the managing director of a huge group of companies who condemned one line of his business—such as the managing director of Ratner—imagine that anyone would want to work for it? Of course not. We need to give more encouragement to education, not less.

There should be a long period of proper development of education policy. Gimmicks will not do. I welcome the Bill and believe that it is absolutely to be supported. I think that it would be wrong to divide on Third Reading, but no doubt Conservative Members will do so. Overall, the Bill sets out an excellent approach to skills and training. It will give a boost to regional policy and I welcome it in every respect—except for the issue of city academies.

Mr. Blunkett: I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, North-East (Mr. Purchase) that I never use the whip when I am on my galloping horse. I assure him also that much of the policy that he enunciated is held in common by Labour Members. However, we would distinguish between this debate and the issue of excellence in cities, to which I shall turn, in relation to which the "gifted and talented" programme is about children within a school and not outside it. I am sure that, as in so many other areas, Wolverhampton will want to take full advantage of excellence in cities. I hope to be able to expand that approach once the outcome of the spending review is known.

I shall first respond briefly to the general points that have been raised. I, too, have read parts of Piaget's work, parts of Haddow and a little of Bernstein. I have read also Howard Gardner's work on multiple intelligences. There is a real intellectual debate to be had about how we develop the specialist talents of children, and how, by using the confidence and self-esteem that comes from the development of a particular specialism or talent, we can cascade that into general achievement levels, so that horizons can be broadened and self-belief increased.

I believe that that is also true of schools. Building on the strength within a school—and the development within it of a particular strength—can be the making or breaking of a school whose reputation and general esteem in the community, along with its status and standing, have fallen to the point at which parents, who have a preference, can vote with their feet. In more than 60 per cent. of schools which have been in special measures or which have fallen into weakness since 1996, rolls have fallen dramatically. In schools that we define as having challenges, we find that numbers fall. Places are available, and as a result children move into these schools, in-year from other areas or because they have been excluded from other schools. Such schools' challenges become more difficult by the moment. The point is reached at which children do not move in from more affluent areas—parents do not exercise their preference in favour of those schools from outside the area. There is neither struggle to gain entry nor over-demand for places—only a decline in the number enrolled, and real problems regarding the school's survival. That is the issue that city academies can address.

5.30 pm

City academies are not like the old city technology colleges—15 of them parachuted in like cuckoos in the nest, for good or ill. They were not welcomed as a solution to a problem, nor did they complement or replace struggling schools. They took children away from schools that were struggling to survive. Let me make it clear that our proposals are the reverse of city technology colleges. Like fresh start generally, city academies are about taking a school or schools in which the state of enrolment, the problems of education and the failure of parental preference have led to there being only two choices—to do something drastic, or to close the school or schools.

If schools close, children in the area and the community in general lose a facility and, gradually—as we have seen in cities across the country—the preference for secondary schools in the local neighbourhood is no longer available to those living in the inner city, because secondary school places have been pushed out toward the outer ring: indeed, in some cities, such as Bristol, they have been pushed beyond the city boundary altogether. As it has done in North America, preference moves outward to the point at which the community school no longer exists.

Hon. Members should look at reality—at the schools that are not in any meaningful sense comprehensive because their intake is not balanced. Many of the schools in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts) struggle not to cope with children referred from other areas of the city but to retain the confidence of parents and children in their own area. In affluent areas, there is over-demand for places, and parents struggle to get their child in. I want to reverse that. If 10 per cent. admission by aptitude will help to get children from the south-west of Sheffield into schools in the north-east of Sheffield, I will go for it, because in Sheffield, a city of half a million people whose south-west area is the size of a London borough, there is currently not a single child from the south-west going to school in the north-east—not one.

Let us get real. We are talking about a solution for schools that need a transformation. They need changes to their image, status and attractiveness. If aptitude for a particular specialism will help, I shall go for it—although I emphasise that it is entirely voluntary. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn) rightly said, most specialist schools that already have the option of 10 per cent. admission by aptitude have not chosen to take it, because they have decided that they can attract and retain children who have an aptitude without going through any sort of interview or making any assumptions about the child.

Mr. Willis: I hear what the Secretary of State is saying about city technology colleges. I ran a school in Leeds—John Smeaton community high school—which took children from some of the most deprived areas in the city: there was an intake of 301 every year and there was a waiting list. What is the right hon. Gentleman saying to that school's staff, parents and children, who, despite all their hard work, will get absolutely nothing out of his initiative? Communities throughout the country will be in exactly the same position—discarded because of their success.

Mr. Blunkett: The hon. Gentleman is entirely wrong. I am genuinely angry. We are not disavowing or disadvantaging other schools. I have made it clear that the admissions code will hold, and that schools cannot be parachuted in. They will be welcomed as replacements for

[Mr. Blunkett]

one or more existing schools. They will not be parachuted in, and will not be established where there are surplus places and where they would damage other schools' intake.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that the leadership, quality and drive of the school will not be affected. On the contrary, a number of local authorities, sponsors and local communities—including that of his hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes)—are clamouring for a city academy in their area, not to knock out success and aspiration but to replace failure and under-achievement.

That is the purpose of the measure. It may be a flea on an elephant's behind, to paraphrase my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, North-East slightly. *[Interruption.]* Elephants carry fleas and a great deal more. Sometimes the elephant can afford to carry the flea. We have 7 million children and 24,000 schools, but in some schools and in some communities, children are not living up to the aspirations and standards that we seek.

With common admissions, with coherent co-operation, and with a desire to ensure that we put aside the garbage that we have heard this afternoon about selection on the basis of maths and English, we can do something for schools that would otherwise fail and thereby fail their children. We can do it for communities that welcome this initiative.

I shall deal with some of the remarks made by the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison), and in particular the prolonged oration of the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady).

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): An excellent oration.

Mr. Blunkett: It was an excellent oration was it? So specialisms should be on the basis of maths and English, should they? Only someone who accepts that a minority of children can excel at maths and English could even begin to suggest that maths and English were specialisms. That is why there were grammar schools: 25 per cent. got in and were tested in maths and English, and 75 per cent. were presumed not to be able to make the standard in maths and English.

We are reversing that. We have set a target of more than 75 per cent. being able to make level 4 in maths and English, and we will attain it. If we had a specialism in maths and English, we would be well away, would we not? We would be able to say which 25 per cent. of children would not be able to get into the schools specialising in maths and English.

The hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West did not suggest that as a serious proposition, but as what the shadow spokesman for health might describe as a Trojan horse. In other words, Opposition Members would like to be able to say that they want to bring back the 11-plus, but the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May), who purports to be the shadow Secretary of State has not yet worked up the courage to say it. Perhaps she is waiting for the Leader of the Opposition to say it, so that she can back in on him. I am waiting for his speech next month, to see whether that is the new—or rather, old—Tory policy.

Mr. Brady: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Blunkett: I am not giving way. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman was only joking, was he? I was paraphrasing George Bush. I do not know who he was paraphrasing, other than himself.

Let us deal with the idea that all specialisms could be the basis for 10 per cent. of admissions. If we had 15 specialisms, we would presumably get to 150 per cent. admissions. The proposition is so obviously mathematically silly as to be nonsense.

I want to touch on the issue of aptitude, as opposed to selection. The Education Act 1944 recognised aptitude. The previous Government were so keen to ensure that there was a distinction between aptitude and selection that they commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research to define it, and accepted the definition.

I do not know where Opposition Members get the notion that we have been converted to selection; that having converted to selection, we are on their path; and that having taken their path, we are now using aptitude as selection, whereas they themselves commissioned work to show the difference between aptitude and selection. I do not mind them poking fun. I do not mind them having an afternoon out. What I do mind is whether children receive a decent education. If special schools, with opportunity in relation to aptitude, and the city academies can lift their standing and transform the education, I am all for that.

Mr. Brady: The Secretary of State knows perfectly well that my amendments sought to draw out some sensible arguments from him. One of the most important, on which I should like to know his thinking, is why 10 per cent. is the correct figure. Why not 5 per cent? Why not 15 per cent? My amendments are very unlikely to become law when the Bill becomes an Act, but the right hon. Gentleman must answer some of those questions.

Mr. Blunkett: I do not have to answer any of them—not least because the answers were given by the previous Secretary of State. These debates were held when the previous Government sought to extend from 10 per cent to 50 per cent. the selection on top of aptitude. That selection is now being dealt with by the adjudicator system, which neatly brings me to the issue of the adjudicator and admissions.

I have made it absolutely clear that schools will adhere to the admissions code. The issue, then, is how to ensure that there is a right of appeal. I would put the following points to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central with regard to his amendment No. 75. It is clear—and I shall make it explicit in the funding agreement—that city academies will co-operate with the admissions forum and seek to work in partnership with other schools in the neighbourhood. This is a collaborative, not a competitive, approach.

In order to ensure that we can meet the intention of amendment No. 75, I will not only stipulate in the agreement that that is the case: I will ensure that, as with

aided schools, there can be a direct appeal to the Secretary of State in lieu of the adjudicator. We have that at the request of the religious foundations—the Churches—for aided schools. The same approach is right for city academies. I hope that, with that assurance, my hon. Friend will be prepared to withdraw his amendment, since that approach meets both his and the Government's objectives.

Mr. Willis: What about exclusions?

Mr. Blunkett: The hon. Gentleman rightly reminds me of that issue. The answer to the question that he raised in his speech is that city academies will be dealt with on the same basis. The hon. Member for Hertsmere asked about children attending a school that becomes a city academy. If a city academy replaces an existing school, they are obviously part of its core entry. That must be so, because the whole objective, unlike that of CTCs, is to transform the life chances and educational opportunities of the very children who have been losing out. That is why the city academy approach is being tried, to ensure that we get it right.

To those who ask "Why not simply extend it to everybody?" I reply "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Mr. Bercow: Ah.

Mr. Blunkett: I don't know about "Ah". I recall the argument that the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) raised a few moments ago, which made me angry. If a school is doing well, reinforce it, support it, encourage it, celebrate the work of the head and the teachers. If it needs a fresh start, let it have one, rather than allowing it to close.

5.45 pm

Mr. Clappison: On the point about what happens to existing pupils, does the Secretary of State agree that the prospectus is hardly crystal clear? It states:

> Where an Academy replaces an existing school, suitable arrangements will have been made to provide for the education of all pupils from the school being replaced.

Does the Secretary of State guarantee today that all pupils from the existing school will be able to attend the city academy?

Mr. Blunkett: We are considering parental preference. When a school is failing, some parents may well wish to send their children to other schools, and I would not preclude them from doing that.

Let me consider briefly the other topics that have been mentioned. First, I am not sure why the Opposition tabled amendments on special educational needs. Either they, like us, want special needs children to be admitted or they do not. It is an outrage if they do not; if they do, I am not sure why they have tabled the amendments. If they decide to press them, we shall know the answer. I have stated our position on ensuring the admittance of special needs children, and I hope that the Opposition will not press their amendments.

Mr. Clappison: If the Secretary of State has got the idea that the Opposition do not want children with special educational needs to attend city academies, there is no basis for it. We pressed the point with the Minister in Committee. As I hope I made it clear in my opening speech, we tabled the amendment to press the Government on their plans for consultation.

Mr. Blunkett: Good. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has been able to press the Government.

Site value has been mentioned. I want to put it on the record that if the land initially acquired for the city academy was sold as part of a programme of renewal and replacement, the original site value, adjusted for inflation, would be returned to the donor, whether a local authority or a sponsor.

I want to deal with the points that my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol, West (Valerie Davey) and for Leeds, Central made. I am pleased to accept amendments Nos. 71 and 72. The purpose of our endeavour is to gain co-operation in raising standards. If, through consultation and inclusion, we can ensure that people are engaged with and support the process, that must be the right way forward. In conjunction with that, we must ensure that people are part of and positively engaged with excellence in cities, when an academy exists in an excellence in cities area now or in future. I shall make that explicit in the funding agreement.

We can therefore put to rest once and for all the idea that we are dealing with a Trojan horse. We are dealing with an endeavour to co-operate with a policy that will transform the standing of a school, the standard of education for the pupils, and the commitment of sponsors and partners to making it work. It will, through a specialism, bring lifeblood into a school that would otherwise be in danger of closing as parents opted to take their children elsewhere.

We are pleased to take the line that we reinforce aspects that are working well. Intervention must be in inverse proportion to success. However, when schools are failing, we have an obligation to the children to substitute the reality of action for past dogma, to ensure that those children get the education that they deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

Clause 124

CITY COLLEGES AND ACADEMIES

Amendment made: No. 71, in page 59, line 32, at end insert—

'( ) After subsection (3A) insert—

"(3B) Before entering into an agreement under this section in relation to a school to be known as a city academy, the Secretary of State must consult the local education authorities referred to in subsection (3C) about the establishment of the school.

(3C) The authorities are—

(a) the local education authority in whose area the school is to be situated, and

(b) if the Secretary of State thinks a significant proportion of the pupils at the school is likely to be resident within the area of another local education authority, that authority.".'.—*[Mr. Blunkett.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: It would be helpful if hon. Members were a little more audible when the Question was put. That would assist the occupant of the Chair.

Schedule 8

CITY ACADEMIES: LAND

Amendments made: No. 107, in page 94, line 31, at end insert—

'or the Secretary of State thinks it is about to be no longer so used.'.

No. 72, in page 94, line 31, at end insert—

'(d) before making the scheme the Secretary of State consulted the authority.'.

No. 108, in page 94, line 47, at end insert—

'(4A) A scheme must be so expressed that it does not come into force while the land concerned is used as mentioned in sub-paragraph (1)(b).'.

No. 109, in page 95, line 1, after first "force" insert "(a)".

No. 110, in page 95, line 1, at end insert—

', or

(b) on the day it otherwise identifies as the day for it to come into force.'.

No. 111, in page 95, line 14, leave out from first "to" to end of line 15 and insert—

'make a disposal in respect of the interest, or to enter into a contract to make a disposal in respect of it, or to grant an option to make an acquisition in respect to it.'.

No. 112, in page 95, line 21, leave out "to" and insert "in favour of".

No. 113, in page 95, line 24, leave out "acquire" and insert "make an acquisition".

No. 114, in page 95, line 35, leave out "dispose" and insert—

'make a disposal in respect'.

No. 115, in page 95, line 37, after "interest" insert "concerned".

No. 116, in page 95, line 41, after "disposal" insert "in respect".

No. 117, in page 95, line 43, after "interest" insert "concerned".

No. 118, in page 96, line 10, at end insert—

'3A.—(1) For the purposes of paragraphs 2 and 3—

(a) references to a disposal in respect of an interest are to a disposal of the whole interest or of a lesser interest;

(b) references to an acquisition in respect of an interest are to an acquisition of the whole interest or of a lesser interest.

(2) If the disposal referred to in paragraph 3(3) or (5) is a disposal of a lesser interest, the reference there to the interest concerned is to the lesser interest.'.

No. 119, in page 96, line 10, at end insert—

'Restriction on appropriation

3B.—(1) Sub-paragraph (2) applies if—

(a) a freehold or leasehold interest in land is held by a local education authority,

(b) at any time in the period of 5 years ending with the day on which this Act is passed the land was used wholly or mainly for the purposes of a county school or community school, and

(c) the authority proposes to make an appropriation of the land under section 122 of the Local Government Act 1972.

(2) Unless the Secretary of State consents, the authority must not make the appropriation.

3C.—(1) This paragraph applies if an authority makes an appropriation in contravention of paragraph 3B(2).

(2) The Secretary of State may purchase the interest concerned compulsorily.

(3) Paragraph 3(6) to (9) apply to a compulsory purchase of an interest under sub-paragraph (2) above as they apply to a compulsory purchase of an interest under paragraph 3(5).'.

No. 120, in page 96, line 26, at end insert—

'and

(c) the first or the second condition set out below is satisfied.

(1A) The first condition is that-'.

No. 121, in page 96, line 29, at end insert—

'(1B) The second condition is that, although the school concerned continues to be a city academy, the interest ceases to be held for the purposes of the city academy.'.

No. 122, in page 96, line 32, leave out "(b)" and insert—

'(2A) Sub-paragraph (1A) applies'.

No. 123, in page 96, line 36, leave out "mentioned in sub-paragraph (1)(d)" and insert "holding it".—*[Mr. Blunkett.]*

New Clause 9

SELECTIVE EDUCATION POLICY: LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITIES

'.(1) The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 shall be amended as follows.

(2) After section 104(3) there is inserted—

"(3A) Where the Secretary of State is satisfied that within a prescribed local education authority more than four per cent. of pupils admitted to secondary schools in the year 1999–2000 were admitted to grammar schools, that local education authority shall be designated as having a selective education policy."

(3) In section 106(3)(a), after "above" there is inserted "(save that where a local education authority operates a selective education policy as designated under section 104(3A), and no ballot under section 105(2)(a) has previously been conducted within that local education authority area, the request for a ballot must be made by a number of eligible parents equal to at least one per cent. of all parents falling within (1)(a) or (b) above)."'.—*[Dr. Ladyman.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss new clause 11—*Grammar schools: retention of selective admission arrangements*—

( ) In the School Standards and Framework Act 1998

(a) in section 104 (designation of grammar schools), omit subsection (4)

(b) omit sections 105 to 108 (procedure for ballots to determine retention or discontinuance of selective admission arrangements) and

(c) in section 109 (proposals by governing body to end selective admission arrangements) omit subsections (3)(b) and (4).'.

Dr. Ladyman: It is probably appropriate for me to begin by declaring an interest. I live in my constituency, I am a dad and I raise my family in my constituency. What I believe is best for my children I also want to see delivered to all my constituents' children. At the moment, my constituents do not have the best form of secondary

education system and I very much want to see it improved for them. They should be able to engage in debate about our secondary education system and to have a vote on whether it should continue in its current form.

The purpose of the new clause is simply this. In local education authorities in which there is nothing apart from a selective system of secondary education and when there has not previously been a ballot on the selective education policy of the local education authority, it should be necessary only to get 1 per cent. of eligible parents to sign a petition in order to have a ballot. That would make it practicable to move towards a ballot on a selective education system in areas such as Kent.

I shall provide some background to the debate for hon. Members who are not familiar with Kent. There are no comprehensive schools in Kent. We have only grammar schools and high schools. Selection for grammar schools is on the basis of the 11-plus which, in Kent, is called the Kent test. Twenty-four per cent. of children go to grammar schools, and the remaining children go to what are euphemistically called high schools. One or two schools aspire to offer a comprehensive system of education. A laudable effort, for example, is made by the Catholic Church, which tries to encourage Catholic pupils of all abilities to go to the few dedicated Catholic secondary schools. In an area in which 24 per cent. of pupils are selected at age 11 to go to grammar schools, I would argue that, in effect, it is impossible, for any school to offer a truly comprehensive system of education. The size and scale of the selection distorts the process so completely that, practically and economically, it is impossible for a school that does not have access to the 24 per cent. of brightest pupils to provide services to bright pupils.

In my constituency, and throughout my county, parents who do not believe in the 11-plus may choose for their children not to sit the test. If they make that choice, their children will not go to a comprehensive school, as there are none, but to a secondary modern school. Whatever one calls such schools they are not, as Kent county council tries to describe them, wide ability schools. They are only wide ability in so far as they serve the 76 per cent. of children who do not go to grammar school. They are secondary modern schools. Throughout Kent, it is as if the education system has been preserved in aspic since the early 1960s—as if no one has ever even thought of introducing comprehensive education.

There is no parental choice—none whatsoever. I shall go further on that subject, as part of painting the background to my amendment. Selection is not just about the 11-plus. As a result of the distorted selective education system in Kent. children are selected, first of all, according to wealth. If one is rich enough, one's children go to one of the public schools that serve the county. Children are then selected according to academic ability at 11. If they fail to get into a grammar school on that test, they are selected by postcode and, if they are lucky enough to live in a middle-class area, they go to a middle-class secondary modern provided in the area.

Some council estates in my constituency rank among the poorest in the United Kingdom, and have male unemployment approaching 60 per cent. If children happen to live in one of those poorer parts of the community, they go to a secondary modern which, effectively, is a sink school. The day that a child arrives at that school he or she will find that at least 70 per cent. of their peers arriving with them have special needs. Is it any surprise that that school then delivers poor statistics in the GCSE league tables? Sometimes, those schools are close to the bottom—indeed, sometimes even at the bottom—of the league tables, which reinforces the impression of their failure. Even though teachers in those schools are highly motivated, may add huge value to those children and be doing their very best for those kids, parents get the impression that those schools are at the bottom of the ladder, so they try to avoid them.

One of the biggest piles of constituency casework that I get is from all the parents who find that their child has been allocated one of those sink schools, even though they did not include it on their list of preferences as a school that they wished their child to attend. Someone, however, has to go to that school, and parents' first recourse on receiving the letter informing them of that is to contact their Member of Parliament to see whether there is any way of getting out of it. I am afraid that there is not, and I have to sit and explain to parents the realities of living with a system in which selective education distorts the life and educational prospects of all our children.

Mr. Brady: I am following the hon. Gentleman's speech with interest. Is it not the case that, if those schools were neighbourhood comprehensives, the same selection by postcode would happen? A neighbourhood comprehensive serving a more affluent area will tend to draw its pupils from that area, whereas one serving one of the least prosperous areas will tend to draw its pupils from that area.

Dr. Ladyman: Of course there are distortions in any education system. There are more distortions in the system than that of intellectual ability. However, if those schools were true comprehensives, had a full range of ability and a full wide syllabus for all their children, at least they would have the opportunity to raise their standards and their pupils would have aspirations higher than getting through their few years of secondary education. They would have the aspiration of trying to go on to further and higher education which, in many cases, they do not have in the distorted system that we must work with today.

One head teacher told me that the system is evil. He did not say that it is slightly less good than the other system or marginally inefficient, or that it is worth having a debate about changing it. He called the selective education system in Kent evil. He is not an apologist for the Labour Government. Indeed, this particular head teacher is one of the biggest pains in my backside. He frequently objects to funding policies, to the Secretary of State's comments and to Government policies on a range of issues. He was a pioneer of the grant-maintained system and took his school to that status when it was an option. He is not an apologist for the Labour Government, but he calls the system evil. I agree with him. I have not spoken to any head teacher of any high school in my constituency who believes that Kent's selective education system is appropriate. One or two are worried about the disruption that would follow a change in the system, but none agree fundamentally with the system.

I can tell the House that, although they will not say it in public, support for the selective system is not unanimous even among the head teachers of the grammar schools, of which there are four in my constituency. The Kent Association of All-Ability Secondary Heads

[Dr. Ladyman]

includes 60 secondary school head teachers who are prepared to say publicly that the system in Kent needs to be changed.

6 pm

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): The hon. Gentleman says that a head teacher in Kent has described the education system as evil. If parents support that view, why was the local authority elected on a policy of not changing the system?

Dr. Ladyman: Frankly, it was not. We have not engaged in that debate in any depth or with any feeling. I believe that if we were to have that debate and provide the people of Kent with the facts and the figures, the local authority would be instructed to change the education system.

I am prepared to put that to the test because my new clause does not ask the Government to take away parents' right to choose. I fought the general election on a policy of leaving the choice to parents. My new clause seeks only to make it a practical possibility for parents in my constituency to make that choice. I have said publicly that when we have that debate, I will not play a politician's role in it; I will leave it to parents. I will of course have a voice as a parent, but I will stay out of the debate if other politicians do the same and leave it to parents to make their choice on objective grounds.

Mr. Bercow: In developing his argument, will the hon. Gentleman concede that he is motivated, at least in part, by the risible failure of Mr. Martin Frey and his colleagues in Kent, who in this academic year have secured only 7,000 of the 45,000 signatures that they require to trigger a ballot, which has caused them to postpone the petition, although sadly not to cancel it?

Dr. Ladyman: The hon. Gentleman is nearly correct. I shall come on to the reason why Mr. Martin Frey and his colleagues have managed to get only 7,000 signatures. Acquiring that number of signatures took a huge effort and was almost a miracle. Reaching their target of 45,000 signatures is a practical impossibility, given the rules under which they have to work. I shall come on to those rules later in my oration.

I say to the hon. Gentleman that those people have not abandoned their petition; they have simply postponed it, and they will carry it into next year. The problem that I fear as much as any other is that we will have this discussion year after year, that they will always fail to get the required number of signatures because of the practical impossibility of doing so, and that we shall never have certainty in our local system. I want rules that allow the schools to have the ballot and to get the debate out in the open so that a decision can be made, and then we will all be able to live with what follows.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): In view of the comment made by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), my hon. Friend might be interested to know that a paper from Buckinghamshire county council shows that when the council had a consultation on grammar schools, it got a total of 3,644 responses. Perhaps my hon. Friend would like to reflect on the hon. Gentleman's use of the word "risible" for a total that was twice as high and was reached by a private individual, not a public body.

Dr. Ladyman: My hon. Friend makes her point extremely effectively.

I turn now to the background of the new clause. If any hon. Members think that the 11-plus, which Kent calls the Kent test, is an objective test suitable for judging people's ability at 11 and determining the rest of their life, I point out that the test was changed a few years ago because not enough boys were passing and local grammar schools could not fill their boys' places. The head teacher of one of those schools came to me to lobby for the Kent test to be made easier for boys. The test had to be changed—a non-verbal reasoning test was included—and more boys are passing now. However, if the test is now fair, it must have been unfair beforehand, and generations of boys were tossed on to the educational scrap heap. If that was not the case, the test must be unfair now.

Mr. Purchase: Kent's experience of the difficulty of deciding boys' and girls' whole future at age 11 is greatly reflected in inner-city areas, such as mine, with multicultural communities. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is almost impossible to devise an objective, rational test on a one-size-fits-all basis?

Dr. Ladyman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. May I say how much I agreed with his comments in the previous debate. I had fellow feeling for him on many of the issues that he dealt with.

I shall expand a little on what my hon. Friend has just said. Not only was the Kent test changed a few years ago to make it easier for boys, but Dover was not getting enough children through the test to fill all its grammar schools, so it introduced the Dover test. I do not know why, but fortunately for Dover, enough of its children are passing the Kent test this year to fill the town's grammar schools. However, the children who passed the Dover test are also entitled to grammar school places, and they are taking them, so people who would previously have gone to grammar schools in Dover are now being displaced to grammar schools in my constituency.

Who suffers in the end? It is the people whom the Conservative party is always championing—those who live in rural villages and towns and are furthest away from the grammar schools and therefore last on the list of the schools' admission criteria when they are ticking off which pupils they will take. This week, my desk is covered with letters from people who live in small, rural towns and villages in my constituency, such as Wingham and Minster, and who are being told that their child does not have a grammar school place because of the nonsense of the selective system which is being foisted on the whole area.

Mr. Brady: Given that the hon. Gentleman has painted a picture of chaos in school applications in his constituency, why does he believe that no one can find 20 per cent. of parents who are prepared to trigger a ballot?

Dr. Ladyman: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I will deal with precisely that point in a moment because it is the thrust of the argument for considering change.

I turn now to an objective view of which system we should be following. We now have two sets of objective data about the relative merits of the comprehensive education system and the selective education system. York university identified intellectually equal cohorts of children based on their performance at age 14 in standard attainment tests and measured their progress as they went through grammar schools and comprehensive schools.

The researchers found that for the top 4 per cent. of children, there was no difference between grammar schools and comprehensives, but the remainder did better in comprehensive schools than in grammar schools. That would apply to over 80 per cent. of the children who attend grammar schools in my constituency at this moment. I can put my hand on my heart and say that none of those children would be worse off in a good comprehensive school, and 80 per cent. would get better results in a comprehensive.

If that was not enough, I have the evidence provided by the Secretary of State and by the Minister for Education and Employment in the other House, who in Lords *Hansard* on 15 March at column 1546 compared GCSE results for the top 24 per cent. of children in comprehensive schools with the top 24 per cent. in grammar schools, and found that the comprehensive pupils did significantly better. Objective data such as that need to be presented to parents so that they can compare selective education with the comprehensive system. We need to start that debate.

The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) asked why we did not succeed in getting the 45,000 signatures needed to initiate such a debate in Kent. In saying that, I have almost answered his question. Kent is taken as a huge conglomerate, and we must find 45,000 signatures—20 per cent. of all the eligible parents. It might be easier if just a petition of 45,000 parents was involved and we were given a fair crack at being able to get the data, but we must approach each school separately for the list of parents so that we can contact them. We are not allowed to collect petitions on schools premises, so we have to visit parents' homes one by one. We have to provide multiple pieces of information for every name on the petition.

Those who are experienced at collecting the signatures tell me that it takes 10 minutes for someone to fill in the form correctly even when that person has already been convinced, is being co-operative and is willing to sign. Before getting that far, people have to go to parents' houses and sit with them for 10 minutes, and probably have a cup of tea and a chat. They then have to visit the next house. All that has to be done in an academic year, and enough time has to be left to hold the debate and ballot. That is simply a practical impossibility.

With the greatest of respect to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, I have to concede that there has been an error of judgment. I share the blame for that error because I voted for it when the original legislation was framed. I put my hand up and say that I made the mistake as well; I did not spot how difficult the petitions would be. However, the petitions are intended for areas in which there is one grammar school in an otherwise comprehensive education system. They were designed for much smaller scale activities than those in Kent, where they are simply a practical impossibility.

I shall put some suggestions to my right hon. Friend, who shares many of my concerns about the problems that we face in Kent. We could make the rules for collecting the names on petitions much simpler, which would not require primary legislation, and would allow us to move forward. We could create a mechanism to ensure that the campaigning organisation was provided with the names of all the parents from the various schools so that its representatives did not have to visit every school separately to get all those names. We could make the logistics of collecting the petition more simple, by allowing many more names to be provided on one petition form.

We could consider how Kent is divided to find out whether it would be possible to hold the ballot at certain locations in Kent rather than across the whole county. That is not beyond the wit of man because Kent avoided going comprehensive in the first place by saying that it was a group of diverse communities that had to be treated separately, that the legislation could not be applied en masse and that schools had to be broken down and dealt with on their individual merits. Kent could say that for a couple of decades to avoid the current legislation. Why cannot we divide Kent into its communities? Some may doubt whether that can be done, but it has been done in Dover, where the Dover test serves local grammar schools.

6.15 pm

We could make the ballot a practical possibility by reducing the threshold for the petition to 1 per cent. That is the only part of my proposals that would require primary legislation, which is why new clause 9 deals with that aspect only. I strongly urge my right hon. Friend seriously to consider accepting new clause 9, which would allow us to try to achieve that much more realistic threshold. That would at least make it a practical possibility for us to campaign, and to hold the debate and the ballot. I am not talking about a political dogfight or suggesting that we should all get into our bunkers and start to close our eyes to the merits of good schools, the difficulties faced by bad schools and all other the problems that Opposition Members will certainly mention.

The subject must be debated properly, after which the decision could be taken and we could then begin to live with it in Kent. I would at least know that there was a fighting chance that I could offer my daughter the sort of education that I believe that she and all my other constituents deserve. I want the educational apartheid that exists in Kent to end and a decent, progressive comprehensive education system to be put in place so that we can start delivering results and dealing with the iniquities that face my county.

Mr. Bercow: I support new clause 11, tabled by my hon. Friends the Members for Maidenhead (Mrs. May), for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) and for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) and myself. When the time comes, my hon. Friends and I will certainly press it to a Division.

It may be helpful to explain at the outset that new clause 11 is the sequel to two important developments of the past few months, the first of which occurred on 14 March in the other place, when my noble Friend Baroness Blatch successfully pressed for the inclusion of

[Mr. Bercow]

amendment No. 138A, which, if I remember rightly, subsequently became new clause 98. The second of the developments to which today's proceedings are a sequel occurred on 23 May in Committee, when new clause 98 was effectively struck down and deleted from the Bill at the request of those on the Treasury Bench.

New clause 11 represents the latest instalment in a long-running saga. My starting point is that grammar schools and the selective system, where it exists, are successful. The hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) advocated his case eloquently and with sincerity. I respect him for that, but I disagree with him, and he will not be surprised to learn that a copy of the *Official Report* containing his speech will shortly be winging its way to my long-standing friend, the admirable prospective Conservative parliamentary candidate for South Thanet. I refer of course to Mr. Mark MacGregor, whom I confidently predict will replace the hon. Gentleman in due course.

Grammar schools are a success. My right hon. and hon. Friends and I regard them as beacons of excellence in our education system. They are renowned for their academic results, their sporting prowess, their cultural achievements, and, indeed, for the equipment for citizenship with which they have successfully provided their pupils for generations. However, the House need not take that from me; it can usefully take the same point from the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field). Sadly, he is not in his place today, but he has contributed intelligently to the public debate on the subject.

On 12 September 1999, the right hon. Gentleman wisely declared that grammar schools were the outstanding success of public education in this country. Moreover, he was joined by the hon. Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman), who was emboldened during an Adjournment debated initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady).

For the benefit of the House, I quote what the hon. Gentleman said:

> If our grammar schools are doing a good job, and in my patch they certainly are, let us leave well alone—"If they ain't broke, they don't need fixing."

I congratulated the hon. Gentleman at the time, and I reiterate those congratulations.

The Secretary of State seemed somewhat puzzled when, on an earlier set of amendments, we showed interest in the use of the expression, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." He was arguing that case in a different context, but he talked about the importance of reinforcing and supporting schools where they were doing well. Manifestly and pre-eminently, that same argument, and perhaps even the rhetoric that he deployed, are applicable to grammar schools.

It is worth noting that in that debate, the hon. Member for Wirral, South went on significantly and helpfully to add:

> The perpetual threat of balloting is corrosive of the sense of security of the school, its staff and pupils.—[*Official Report*, 20 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 371.]

He was absolutely right and deserves the warm admiration of all fair-minded Members.

The evidence is clear.

Mr. Hilary Benn: If the hon. Gentleman is so confident of the virtues of selection at 11, why is he afraid to let parents decide whether they want that selection through the ballot mechanism?

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman is an admirable Member of the House, but impatience is getting the better of him on this occasion. I hope that he will not hold it against me if I say that to that important point I shall in due course and with relish come, but that before I do, I want to say something about the success of grammar schools, from which I know he would not seek to divert me.

In 1999, 36 per cent. of the top 100 performing schools were grammar schools, even though they account for only 5 per cent. of the total number of secondary schools. In 1998, at GCSE level, eight of the top 10 performing local education authorities were selective education authorities. At A-level, in the same year—

Mr. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman must contain himself and demonstrate what patience he can muster in the circumstances.

In 1998, the five top performing education authorities were all selective authorities. I refer to Bournemouth, to Buckinghamshire, to Southend, to Sutton and, perhaps above all, to Trafford, which is in the area of my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West—Trafford education authority came top. That happened despite the fact that selective LEAs account for only one fifth of all LEAs. We also know, as Northern Ireland Members can readily testify, of the tremendous academic achievements of the selective system in the Province; it is consistently between 30 and 50 per cent. better than the system in other parts of the UK.

Mr. Hopkins: Is it not obvious that those education authorities are high performing because of their social composition? It is nothing to do with the education systems that they have. Would they not do even better if they had a non-selective system, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) has pointed out?

Mr. Bercow: The answer is no. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely wrong. If he studies the evidence and the social composition and make-up of those areas, he can readily be reassured that the facts disprove his prejudice.

Dr. Starkey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: I will give way to the hon. Lady in due course if she is patient.

In debating the issue, we need to take account of one other important factor: the third report of the 1998-99 parliamentary Session by the Select Committee on Education and Employment, which was about highly able children. That report concluded that there was a significant weakness in the provision for highly able

children in one third of maintained primary schools and in 30 per cent. of maintained secondary schools. It went on to emphasise the need for different types of schools for different categories of highly able pupils. We should therefore be aware that, when we contemplate the possibility of abolishing grammar schools and the selective system, we do so in the face of a Select Committee report that contends that we are already doing too little for the most able children.

Dr. Starkey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: I will in due course.

Before the general election, what did the Labour party say on the subject of grammar schools? The House should be reminded of the words of the Secretary of State in his capacity as shadow Secretary of State on 7 February 1997. He declared that as far as grammar schools were concerned, a Labour Government posed no threat—I quote him precisely—

to their continuance or to their ethos or to their quality . . .

The then Leader of the Opposition, now the Prime Minister, wrote in a letter to the electors of Wirral during the Wirral, South by-election campaign:

A Labour Government will not close your grammar schools. That is my personal guarantee.

He went on to say, of the grammar schools that exist, "let them remain". "Standards, not structures", he said, adding that Labour was ditching outdated ideology in favour of the principle that what counts is what works.

Manifestly, grammar schools work. Ministers cannot conceivably object to the standards attained by those schools. It must logically follow that the objection is to their structure.

Dr. Ladyman: If grammar schools work, how does the hon. Gentleman explain the university of York data, which used normalised, equal cohorts of intellectually similar students, the only difference between them being the secondary education system that they followed, and manifestly showed that comprehensives did better still?

Mr. Bercow: First, I simply do not accept the hon. Gentleman's verdict. Secondly, I believe that I am right in saying that the basis on which the research was conducted was not made public at the time of the presentation of the paper. It was therefore impossible to conduct a proper intellectual debate about it. The author of the research was requested to produce the assumptions on which he was working. He refused to do so, in defiance of the normal rules of academic debate. If the hon. Gentleman on a suitable occasion wants to furnish those details to the House, as he could credibly and in more detail have done this afternoon, we could have a proper discussion about it. The evidence to which I have pointed demonstrates the continuing success of selective education authorities, including in areas where there is a substantial socio-economic mix.

I remain convinced of the merits of the selective system where it exists, although it is important to emphasise, contrary to what the Secretary of State implied earlier, that we are not advocating a selective blueprint throughout the UK. It might suit his book to allege that, but that is not the position of my hon. Friends, or the position that I take.

Dr. Starkey: After the debate, will the hon. Gentleman look at the performance statistics for schools in Milton Keynes and the rest of Buckinghamshire when they were under Tory-controlled Buckinghamshire county council, which believed in selective education, and compare those with the results now, when Milton Keynes has an education authority that does not believe in selective education? He will find that Buckinghamshire county council allowed a huge disparity in standards to build up between Milton Keynes schools and schools elsewhere in Buckinghamshire, and that since the threat of selection has been removed from Milton Keynes and we have an education authority that believes in the education of all its children, standards in all schools in Milton Keynes have vastly improved. The improvement has been at a much higher level than any improvement in the rest of Buckinghamshire.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Lady is wrong. The record of Buckinghamshire as a local education authority is outstanding. It is comparable with anywhere in the UK. The results improve consistently across the board. I remind my right hon. and hon. Friends that what the hon. Lady says is entirely symptomatic of the Labour party's tendency to decry the achievement of secondary modern and high schools. I bitterly resent the way in which they seek to denigrate the achievements of those schools. I champion not only the grammar schools in the Buckinghamshire local education authority area, but the upper schools, which do an admirable job.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

6.30 pm

Mr. Bercow: I shall make a little progress with my argument and give way to the hon. Gentleman later, if time allows.

I mentioned Labour rhetoric before the election. What has happened since? Petition and ballot regulations have been put on the statute book and my right hon. and hon. Friends and I believe that there are several cogent objections to those regulations. First, they constitute a one-way ratchet. They allow for the destruction of grammar schools, but they do not permit their creation. Moreover, grammar schools are the only category of schools to which the petitioning and balloting procedure is intended to apply. We are not to have petitions and ballots in relation to technology colleges, comprehensive schools, voluntary-aided schools, single-sex schools or independent schools. Grammar schools have been singled out for this treatment.

It has been emphasised many times, and I do so again, that there is scope within the petition procedure for fraud. I have said on a number of occasions—and it has not been effectively contradicted—that there is potential for cheating in the collection of signatures for the petitions. My right hon. and hon. Friends and I were not remotely reassured to be told by Electoral Reform Ballot Services last year:

The checking procedures are in accordance with the ballot regulations and the terms of our contract with the Department for Education and Employment.

Is that reassuring? No, it is not, when we know that the opportunity for validation of signatures is not what it should be.

Mr. Blunkett: Will the hon. Gentleman clarify that? Is he or is he not making an allegation that the ballots are

[Mr. Blunkett]

unfair and that civil servants in my Department seek to undermine their validity? I want an answer to that question from the hon. Gentleman, who purports to want to be a Minister.

Mr. Bercow: I am happy to answer the Secretary of State. I did not say that the petitions or the ballots so far had been subject to fraud. I am happy to repeat, however, that the scope for fraud and impersonation does exist. The Secretary of State should not affect quite such shock or seem so affronted. The point has been raised with him several times, and we have had no satisfactory response from him or from the Minister for School Standards. I stand by what I have said. I have said it many times before and I shall continue saying it until the Secretary of State is prepared to reconsider the terms of the regulations and the contract with Electoral Reform Ballot Services.

The ballots ask a loaded question. It does not refer to grammar schools, but simply says, "Are you in favour of the school or schools listed introducing admission arrangements which admit children of all abilities?" That is manifestly a motherhood-and-apple-pie question which invites an affirmative answer. The electorate who are invited to answer the question are perversely chosen by the Government. My right hon. and hon. Friends will agree that it is frankly indefensible that the parents of grammar school pupils, who themselves have a direct vested and continuing interest in the outcome of such ballots, are disfranchised by the Government's regulations in many cases.

Considerable costs are involved in sweeping away the grammar schools and the selective system. In Kent, in bricks and mortar terms alone, the cost is estimated at £150 million. For the whole country, a figure of more than £500 million seems to err on the conservative side.

Mr. Blunkett: Is it not a paradox that the amount that Kent claims it would take to alter the system is £6 million higher than the sum that it would need, according to its asset management activity, to refurbish, renew and extend existing buildings to provide a satisfactory solution to its building and construction problems? It seems that Kent is prepared to spend £6 million more on reconfiguration than it would on reorganising its existing buildings to make them fit for current pupils.

Mr. Bercow: The Secretary of State really does have a brass neck to make such a bogus debating point—to which I shall with relish reply. This is not a question of what Kent county council is prepared to spend; it is a matter of what Kent county council would be obliged to spend in order to secure a reconfiguration of the pattern of local education in that county. The Secretary of State himself has made it clear, albeit only sotto voce, that if parents choose to vote for the abolition of the existing system there will be a price tag, and the bill will have to be met at local level because the Secretary of State has no intention whatever of footing it. So it will mean crippling council tax rises for local residents—a fact that the right hon. Gentleman has been reluctant to emphasise, but which I want to underline tonight.

Why does the Secretary of State not listen to the authoritative view of the director of education in my own county of Buckinghamshire, Mr. David McGahey, who has repeatedly told him that the size and configuration of local grammar schools in Buckinghamshire mean that they would not readily lend themselves to conversion to comprehensive status? The schools are full almost to bursting, the scope for development on the green belt is minimal and the capital costs of reconstruction are prohibitive. It is no good the right hon. Gentleman consistently refusing to allow the facts to intrude upon his declared prejudices in any way, at any time and to any degree. The reality is that it would be costly—and in many cases impracticable—to secure the sort of conversion that many of his hon. Friends envisage.

Dr. Ladyman: I know that the hon. Gentleman does not deliberately try to mislead the House, so he must allow me to correct him on two points. First, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is absolutely correct to say that Kent county council has said that it needs to spend £146 million on the existing system of education—only barely less than it would cost to implement a new system. Secondly, the hon. Gentleman implied that parents of pupils at grammar schools in Kent would not get a vote. That is absolutely untrue. All parents with children at feeder schools and secondary schools would get a vote.

Mr. Bercow: Let me make two points in response to the hon. Gentleman. First, I am grateful to him for confirming that reconstruction would entail substantial additional costs. He has not denied that. Rather, he has acknowledged the truth of the charge that my hon. Friends and I have been making. Secondly, of course I am happy to confirm that in Kent, as he rightly pointed out, grammar school parents do have a vote. The burden of my criticism was directed at the procedure that applies to areas where there are stand-alone grammar schools or groups of grammar schools, where it is an undemocratic outrage that parents of children at grammar schools are not allowed to vote.

Mr. Willis: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: I shall give way just once more and then I must make some progress.

Mr. Willis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who has been most generous in giving way throughout the debate. Does he agree that it is equally an outrage that in the recent Ripon grammar school ballot, 25 per cent. of parents who were eligible to vote had children at private schools?

Mr. Bercow: I do not think that there is anything remotely outrageous about that. The hon. Gentleman is tempting me to address the subject of Ripon. He can rest assured that I shall not resist that temptation for long, but first I shall focus briefly on the arguments about educational opportunity and the threat of discrimination against people from ethnic minorities, as that is a point of great importance to the Opposition.

Thirty per cent. of pupils at Henrietta Barnet grammar school in the London Borough of Barnet are from ethnic minorities. As the former head teacher, Jane de Swiet, pointed out many months ago, if that school were to become a comprehensive, its catchment area would be

based around Hampstead Garden Suburb, which has some of the most expensive housing anywhere in the United Kingdom. Such an arrangement would prevent substantial numbers of bright children from ethnic minorities and from financially modest backgrounds from benefiting from the education that is presently available to them.

Mr. Hopkins *rose—*

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam) *rose—*

Mr. Bercow: I have given way a great deal. The hon. Gentleman would be the first to complain about the length of speeches. He cannot have it both ways, and I am being as fair as I can.

My second example is the Queen Elizabeth school for boys in the same borough, where 32 per cent. of the pupils speak English as a second language. Let us make no mistake about it; if those schools became comprehensives, their catchment areas would effectively deprive large numbers of bright children without financial means from benefiting from the sort of education that they currently receive.

A further objection—as if the objections were not manifold already—is that if grammar schools are scrapped on a significant scale, the effect will simply be to increase the size of the private sector. In common with my right hon. and hon. Friends, I strongly support the right of parents to spend their post-tax income as they wish, and that has always been the Conservative position. However, would not it be the cruellest irony if, in the year 2000 under a Labour Government who spout the mantra of support for the many and not the few, the private sector were to expand, not on account of its intrinsic merits but because of the destruction of the grammar schools? That would be wrong, it could not be defended, and we should not allow it to happen.

Under present legislation, the sword of Damocles hangs over the remaining 164 grammar schools year after year. There is provision for a moratorium on further ballots in the event of an unsuccessful ballot, such as that in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), but nothing prevents those who pursue a failed petition one year from embarking on another the next. That is wrong. It produces the lack of security that was rightly, eloquently and bravely bemoaned by the hon. Member for Wirral, South in last year's debate, and the Conservatives deplore that state of affairs.

Interestingly, we have heard little in this debate about what grammar schools themselves think—but we have bothered to discover that by conducting a survey of the 164 grammar school head teachers, two thirds of whom responded. Some 91.8 per cent. said that an end to selection would cause extreme disruption to local education, and 86.8 per cent. said that it would have serious implications for bright kids. Some 81.8 per cent. said that despite the controversy over the continuation of grammar schools and the insecurity that many of them feel, demand for places at those institutions has continued to rise, and 74.5 per cent. said that their schools enjoy good relations with neighbouring secondary schools.

Mr. Beggs: Did any of the school principals who responded describe the system of selection as evil?

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that observation, upon which I shall reflect. I respect the experience that he brings to these debates.

We wondered whether, following the Ripon ballot which was a triumph for the patient and persistent diplomacy of my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon, the Government might have changed their stance. The signals have been confusing. First, in the immediate aftermath of that triumph of my right hon. Friend and his colleagues, the Secretary of State said:

> Arguments about selection are a past agenda. I am not hunting grammar schools.

However, we should beware of reading too much into such statements. At almost the same time, we discovered that the Secretary of State was cited in support of a press release issued by the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes), who is doing her best to whip up support for a petition and hostility to grammar schools in the borough of Trafford. As if that were not bad enough, we had the decision of the Standing Committee on 23 May—

Mr. Brady: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, because I would not wish him to miss an important detail. In the letter issued to all members of the Labour party in Trafford, not only is the Secretary of State claimed to oppose grammar schools and to seek their abolition, but so is the Prime Minister, which is entirely contrary to the promises that he made in Wirral, South shortly before the general election.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend is simply pointing out that the Prime Minister is a chameleon. His convictions on a Monday differ from those he holds on a Wednesday, which differ from those he holds on a Friday. He is all over the place and subscribes to no fixed principles or philosophy.

We know that several Labour Members—the hon. Members for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor), for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn), for Vale of Clwyd (Mr. Ruane), for Wolverhampton, North-East (Mr. Purchase) and, apparently, for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman)—want to up the ante and increase the pressure for the destruction of grammar schools. This year alone has seen eight petitions circulating in various parts of the country.

Mr. Chaytor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: No. I am coming to a conclusion and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will have an opportunity to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Earlier in this on-going debate—at the start of the last century—that great socialist philosopher Tawney said that it was important to have the maximum possible diversity of type among secondary schools. Tony Crosland, in language that I could not repeat on the Floor of the House without severe rebuke, declared that if it was the last thing he did, he would destroy every

[Mr. Bercow]

grammar school in England and Wales. Those positions have honesty in common. They are straightforward and defensible positions. The Government's position—seeking the abolition of grammar schools through the back door—is duplicitous and mean-minded, and I strongly deplore it.

6.45 pm

The regulations are spiteful and vindictive. They set parent against parent, governor against governor, teacher against teacher and even, potentially, pupil against pupil. Thousands of hours have been wasted on the petitions and the ballot campaigns, and no doubt the Government would like to see even more time wasted. The Conservatives will fight, fight and fight again to champion those great institutions and to vanquish those who would destroy them.

Dr. Starkey: I do not support new clause 11, and I shall cite the example of Milton Keynes and Buckinghamshire. In that regard, I am grateful to someone who passed on to me the useful agenda and report of the meeting of Buckinghamshire county council on 17 February 1995, headed "A grammar school for Milton Keynes? Outcome of public consultations".

The new clause shows the limits of the Conservatives' commitment to parental choice and democracy. They are keen on local communities expressing their view only when it coincides with the Conservatives' view, and I shall give the example of what happened when the Conservatives were in power in Buckinghamshire. Hon. Members will be aware that Milton Keynes is a special place. It is a growing community and still in the process of an extensive school building programme. During the 1990s, when the area was under Buckinghamshire county council control, it was proposed that the next new secondary school should be a grammar school, not a comprehensive. Not unnaturally, that proposal involved heated public debate over some considerable time. The proposed grammar school would have been highly selective and likely to have taken only one in 20 local children. It would also have taken substantial funding away from all the existing secondary schools in Milton Keynes.

The county council was involved in public consultations and, in January 1995, the results of one of them was revealed to the council. The parental consultation demonstrated that 59 per cent. were against the grammar school proposal and 39 per cent. were in favour. The proposal that the new school should be a grammar school was opposed by all the other existing secondary schools and primary schools which responded. The proposal was also opposed by the then Milton Keynes borough council and by three out of the four parish councils that responded, not to mention the Roman Catholic diocese, which had invested in a secondary school in Milton Keynes on the understanding that it would be part of a comprehensive system.

Despite those overwhelming indications of public feeling, Buckinghamshire county council decided to ignore that response and to make the new school a grammar school. The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow)—who was not active in Buckinghamshire at the time—made a point about the danger of repeated ballots, but Buckinghamshire county council held three ballots on the proposals because it did not like the answers it got the first and second time. Unfortunately for the council, the third ballot got the same answer—a majority of parents were not in favour of a grammar school. The Conservatives on Buckinghamshire county council were not against repeated ballots. They simply hoped that, by going on and on, they might change the public's view. They did not. When they failed to change the view of the public, they simply ignored it.

Mr. Brady: Is not the process that the hon. Lady is describing somewhat analogous to what the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) is seeking to do with his amendments? Recognising that he cannot get the 20 per cent. threshold, he wants to cut it to 1 per cent.

Dr. Starkey: My hon. Friend is asking about the threshold of a ballot, and I agree that it has been set impossibly high so that it is not possible to get a public consultation. Buckinghamshire county council held a consultation, ignored the results and then had repeated consultation. During this time, the secondary school—which should have gone ahead—was kept on ice.

My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) and I have been well aware of the consequences of that decision for the whole school system in Milton Keynes, where a much needed secondary school was held up for a considerable time because of the determination of Buckinghamshire county council to foist a selective system on the people of Milton Keynes, despite their repeatedly expressed view that they did not want it.

Fortunately, the attempt by Buckinghamshire county council to force the system on people was frustrated by the determined efforts of the Milton Keynes council, which is now the education authority with responsibility for schools. Thanks to the council and the Government, we now have a new comprehensive school that is meeting the needs of pupils in the part of Milton Keynes that is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North-East.

In my intervention on the hon. Member for Buckingham, I said that the consequence for the parents and children of Milton Keynes of the removal, once and for all, of the sterile debate about selection is that we now have an education authority that has concentrated on the needs of all the children and schools of Milton Keynes. In the short time it has been in control, the authority has overseen a substantial improvement in standards across the whole ability range: markedly so for boys. There has been a substantial improvement in the level of achievement in comprehensive schools. I am confident that that improvement in standards will continue.

That vindicates the expressed view of the people of Milton Keynes that what they wanted were excellent schools for all their children and not the distorted debate that Buckinghamshire county council was attempting to push on them. The council's action exemplifies the view—one that is held, certainly, by the hon. Member for Buckingham—that the way to improve education is to push resources into a small number of schools for which we select the best pupils. Not unnaturally, those schools will turn out good results. It is as if we were to select on the basis of the height of the children and then be surprised that, in selective schools, the average height of pupils was higher than elsewhere.

The amendment to which the hon. Member for Buckingham spoke is a blatant attempt to ensure that parental choice cannot be operated to express a view that selective education is divisive and does not provide a good education for all children. I do not believe that it even provides good education for those children who are often put into narrowly academic schools where they are unable to fulfil their full potential across a range of activities and where they are channelled into a narrow sort of education.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): This has been a wide-ranging debate which, in many respects, has concerned the very principles of selective as against comprehensive education. I am unique in the House, in that there has been a ballot in my constituency. I wish to speak from experience, rather than from a theoretical position.

I say to the Secretary of State that Ripon college—the city school, as it was; formerly a secondary modern—will, in the next academic year, benefit from its technology status. I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that award, which was well merited. He will be interested and pleased to know that, recently, the school received two awards for excellence in teaching, demonstrating the commitment of the school to continue to improve standards. He will be pleased to know also that the co-operation with the grammar school—promised at the time of the ballot—is being pursued. We intend that that partnership—formed in the heat of battle, if I can put it in those slightly melodramatic terms—will continue now that, for the moment, the battle is over. I intend to make sure that those important promises are kept.

I wish to refer to the circumstances in which the ballot took place and how it took place, as they illustrate the difficulties of a Bill that the Government are defending but which has been so roundly attacked by Labour Members today. In my constituency, the electorate was incomplete and, frankly, arbitrary. First, the electorate was confined to feeder schools which had sent five children to the grammar school over the previous three years. However, if the junior school in question had a separate infants department, children at the infants school did not count towards the ballot. If the school was integrated, the children did count. Parents would find themselves in identical situations in different junior schools in Ripon, but some were disfranchised.

Secondly, the parents of both secondary schools were denied the franchise. I would never suggest that only the parents of those children at the grammar school should have the vote. It is legitimate that the parents of the children at all the secondary schools should have the vote. However, they did not. We had the arbitrary situation that a parent in Ripon with a child in the last year at one of the feeder primary schools had a vote. However, a parent with a child in the first year of either the college or the grammar school—where there is an expectation that that child will spend between five and seven years at the school, right through to university entrance—was denied the vote. I regard that as an arbitrary definition of the electorate.

The problem with the Bill is that the question is incomplete. The question does not ask the electorate, however it is defined, to vote on a particular scheme of reorganisation. The electorate and parents are canny, and want to know what they are voting for. They want to know where the beef is. They do not want just a theoretical debate about education.

When North Yorkshire education authority—which behaved entirely properly throughout this matter—pointed out to parents that a vote for change did not necessarily mean that a single comprehensive school would be created in Ripon, the parents said that that meant that they were voting for the unknown. They were not voting for a particular proposal whose meaning they understood. It was not clear what the organisation would entail.

Technically, the ballot was about admissions to the grammar school, and the only question on the ballot paper was a technical one. The question that that opened up—what sort of education we would get if there were a vote for change—was not answered. That was left to the local authority. When the authority put forward its answer in the event of a yes result, the electorate was not consulted on its practical shape.

I reiterate the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow): the solution in Ripon is only temporary. In five years, those concerned can come back to the matter. It is difficult to manage and run a school knowing that that possibility is constantly looming.

If they want a definitive solution, the Government could adopt reasonable procedures that would satisfy their own Back Benchers. First, they should require every local authority with selective schools to set out a scheme of reorganisation—except where ballots have taken place already, as the principle of double jeopardy should be maintained. Those local authorities should set out not the principles of reorganisation but how they would reorganise their schools on a comprehensive basis. That would mean that parents knew what they were voting for.

7 pm

The Government should then issue an undertaking that, if the scheme necessitated further capital expenditure, they would provide it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham said, it is clear that funding would not be available for capital expenditure consequent on reorganisation. If the Government want to give parents a real choice, on the famous level playing field, they must demonstrate that parents will not, by their vote, penalise themselves or their children in terms of funding.

Finally, there would be a ballot of eligible parents. For stand-alone schools, parents of all pupils at both secondary and primary schools would participate. Where the present whole-LEA system of education obtains, the ballot would be much wider and would therefore be held broadly in accordance with the principles that have been set out. However, when that decision has been taken, that would be the end of the process. There would be none of the constant returning to the old argument that has been described already in this debate.

In this Chamber, hon. Members have made it clear that they are fed up with the argument about structure and are more interested in performance, and I agree with much of what the Secretary of State has to say in that regard. He has stated that what matters in schools is individual performance, and he has stressed the importance of head teachers. I echo what the right hon. Gentleman has said, with authority, about the sheer difficulty of running some inner-city schools, where teachers have to combine

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teaching with being police officers and social workers. Their role in loco parentis is the greater because, to be blunt, children often come from deeply inadequate backgrounds.

The House should focus on those difficulties, so it is important that a term be set to the current debate. In that way, we could take the matter forward: parents would be able to make a definitive choice, and schools would finally know where they stood.

I believe that the Government need to be got off the hook over this problem. They have proposed a scheme with the wonderful advantage that both sides of the argument believe that the ballot is rigged. That is quite an achievement, and it happened with the ballot in my constituency.

I must pay tribute to the Secretary of State again, as he gave a judicious and balanced response when he was called upon to adjudicate the complaints. No reasonable person could have objected to his decision. However, the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) showed that he thinks that the scheme does not work effectively. He excoriated the scheme, before announcing—somewhat curiously—that he intended to take no part in any ballot in his constituency that might result.

Dr. Ladyman: May I clarify that I did not say that I would not vote in the ballot? I simply said that I would not use my position as a politician to make the ballot a political one. In fact, I rather admired the slightly detached approach to the ballot process displayed by the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Curry: If the hon. Gentleman is saying that he would not want to make the ballot party political, I would certainly agree, as I sought to exclude that possibility from the ballot in my constituency. However, politics goes far beyond parties, and this ballot process is intensely political. It is one of those few experiments in which ballot papers were delivered to doorsteps. Even then, the turnout of only 70 per cent. could have tempted me to an entirely unauthorised digression on local government election turnouts, on which I do not intend to embark in this debate.

As I said, the Government need to be let off the hook with regard to the scheme. In the next academic year, as we approach a general election, I look forward to watching Ministers and Labour activists campaigning through *Daily Mail* territory and encouraging parents to hold ballots on the future of their grammar schools. I have a feeling that the word may go out, quietly, that the Government are not too anxious to incite enemy troops at this particular time.

I understand that the Government wanted to find a solution to this problem, but their solution involves a formula that is so provisional and so unsatisfactory that virtually no one thinks it sustainable. I suspect that the Secretary of State will argue otherwise, and I said earlier that I am in a relatively comfortable position, as the ballot in my constituency has already been held. However, there is a case for a close examination of the system that has been set up, so that parents can have a genuine choice.

The Government must ensure that the extent of the franchise should not be open to dispute and that the question is honestly and fully put. A definitive result would mean that everyone would know where they stood, and we would all be able to move on and deal with a much more pressing agenda.

Mr. Chaytor: I rise to oppose new clause 11, moved by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), and to support new clause 9, moved by my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman).

Interestingly, the hon. Member for Buckingham spoke for precisely 30 minutes about the selective system, but he focused entirely on grammar schools. Why did he ignore the 75 per cent. of children who fail the test at 11 and are deselected? The hon. Gentleman should answer that question when he speaks on the matter again, as should all Conservative Members. They try to define selection entirely in terms of grammar schools, even though most children in the selective system are not in grammar schools. The Conservative party must address that issue.

The hon. Member for Buckingham must answer another question. If he were to have children—God forbid, some might say—would he exercise his freedom of choice and send them to a secondary modern school? I look forward to his answer.

Mr. Bercow: The happy event to which the hon. Gentleman alludes has not yet occurred, and I accept that it might well not do so. I shall have to wait for events to take their natural course. However, I can tell the hon. Gentleman that I should be very happy for children of mine to go to a secondary high school in a number of the selective areas to which I have referred.

The hon. Gentleman is wrong: I celebrated the achievements of the grammar but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) will know, I pointed also to the success of the high schools.

There it is: a straight question from one politician gets a straight answer in the affirmative from another.

Mr. Chaytor: I look forward to the proof of that. If the hon. Gentleman were to act as he says he would, it would be a record. I think that he would be the only Opposition Member who had ever chosen to send a child to a secondary modern school. It would be a remarkable event, and I will hold him to his promise.

The hon. Member for Buckingham based his argument on the assumption that the evidence is that grammar schools perform better than other schools. He dismissed the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet regarding the recent research by York university, and the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) about what happened in Milton Keynes. He insisted that grammar schools perform better.

Unfortunately, even if that was true at some point in the past, it is true no longer. I refer the hon. Member for Buckingham to the written answer that I received on 25 May from my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards. It showed that the top 25 per cent. of children in grammar schools and secondary modern schools differed in level of achievement by only about 5 percentage points.

The figures show that 100 per cent. of that top 25 per cent. in comprehensive schools obtained five GCSE passes at A to C grades. That may not be the ideal

benchmark, but it is the one normally used. By contrast, 96.4 per cent. of children in that ability range in selective schools achieved that success.

Our comprehensive system has developed and improved over the years. The figures show that children in the top 25 per cent. in the ability range perform better in comprehensive schools than in selective schools.

Mr. Brady: Will the hon. Gentleman say where those top performing comprehensive schools are—in the most affluent areas, or the poorest ones?

Mr. Chaytor: The figures that I gave apply to comprehensive schools across the country that happen to have children from the top 25 per cent. of the ability range. Their geographical location is irrelevant. Conservative Members, newspaper editors and television pundits talk about the failure of comprehensive schools in inner cities, but it must be remembered that there is not a single comprehensive school in any inner city in the United Kingdom. Every school in the inner city has been selected once, twice, or even three or four times. There is no such thing as a genuinely comprehensive school in our inner cities because, in the vast majority of cases, those schools have been so heavily creamed that even though their curriculum may be available to children of all ability, their intake does not reflect the full span of the ability range.

Mr. Hopkins: On the previous point, does my hon. Friend agree that one problem with the selective system is that children who do not pass the 11-plus examination, or whatever one might call it, become alienated from education; therefore, across the system as a whole, such children perform less well on average? When children are in comprehensive schools, they are encouraged rather than discouraged.

Mr. Chaytor: That is absolutely right. If we contrast areas that have successively reorganised along comprehensive lines with those that have retained selection, comparing areas like for like in terms of their socio-economic status, that will prove to be the case.

I see the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) shaking his head and I am glad that he is doing so, as it conveniently brings me to my next argument. He made the sweeping statement that he represents the best performing local authority in the north-west—Trafford, which is an authority that I know reasonably well. I am not familiar with the performance of all the local authorities in that area, but I am familiar with that of authorities in Greater Manchester, where our constituencies are located.

If we compare selective Trafford with comprehensive Bury, on whatever indicator that the hon. Gentleman chooses to provide, we will find that there is, at worst, no difference and, in most cases, a significant improvement in the schools in Bury. Let us consider, for example, the performance at key stage 2 in primary schools: Bury's comprehensive primary schools outperform the primary schools in Trafford. If we take performance at key stage 4, or the number of children who obtain five A to Cs at GCSE, the most recent results show a negligible difference: 55 per cent. in Bury and 55 point something per cent. in Trafford. Consider the number of children who get a single GCSE. This is the most interesting result, as it is where the bulk of the population is at, and the proportion of children who get A to Gs in comprehensive Bury vastly exceeds those achieving that score in selective Trafford.

The most significant figure is that for the participation rate beyond 16—it is what this Bill is about—where selective Trafford performs not only far worse than comprehensive Bury, but far worse than many other districts in Greater Manchester and throughout the north-west—districts that do not have the enormous social advantages of Trafford.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet has performed a service to the House in his careful dissection of the weaknesses of the selective system in Kent and the impact that that has on the development of the potential of children, of the divisive nature of the system as it impacts on communities, and of its sheer inefficiency. He also performed a service by drawing attention to some aspects of the existing regulations for the ballots in selective areas that must be reconsidered. He advanced a significant argument in favour of one sort of change to the existing ballot. Other changes need to be reconsidered. The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) also argued constructively about the way in which the system operates, in particular in the area that he represents.

I hope that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will take the time—I know that he will keep the matter under consideration—to reconsider the way in which the ballot for selective systems operates. It is not a question of opposing selection out of dogma or ideology. My objection to selection by ability at 11—there are other forms, which I do not oppose—is entirely based on the evidence and the results. The fact is that across the board, like for like, the performance of children in comprehensive schools and systems is far better than that of children in selective schools and systems.

7.15 pm

Mr. Brady: I shall be brief, but some of the arguments that have been advanced in the debate, in particular those in the previous contribution from the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor), need to be challenged. It would be deeply boring for the House if the debate degenerated into a ding-dong between Bury and Trafford and who has the best results, so I will not go too far down that road—but the hon. Gentleman should look at the performance in Trafford between key stages 2 and 3.

An article in *The Times Educational Supplement* last year demonstrated that the authority had one of the best improvements between those stages in the country. That is because something happens between primary school level—

Mr. Chaytor: I will tell the hon. Gentleman exactly what happens between key stages 2 and 3: a large number of children leave Trafford at 11 to avoid the secondary modern schools and an equally large number come in at 11 from surrounding affluent districts to take advantage of what they perceive to be the value of Trafford's grammar schools.

Mr. Brady: The hon. Gentleman can pursue his fictions if he wishes. There is a traffic in and out of

[Mr. Brady]

Trafford, not least across the boundary from the Manchester local authority area, which is, of course, Labour controlled, and is less affluent than the areas in my constituency to which children come. They come across the boundary not because of the affluence of their parental background, but because they are seeking a better standard of education, and they are fortunate to be able to obtain it.

The improvement between key stages 2 and 3, which is one of the best in the country, is because of the quality of the schools—not merely the grammar schools, but the high schools too. I have talked often in the House about the quality of the secondary modern high schools in my constituency and the Secretary of State has acknowledged it. Ashton-on-Mersey is a beacon school. Children in my constituency are not consigned to failure if they do not go to a grammar school; they go to a beacon school. Now, they may also go to a technology college, as we have one coming on stream. It is a question of the quality of the system as a whole, and it delivers.

The hon. Member for Bury, North can say what he likes about performance in Bury. I very much hope that the schools there are excellent and I congratulate him on the results that they achieve. However, he cannot say that the borough of Trafford is universally affluent. Let us compare like for like. Trafford has 18.9 per cent. free school meals. A comparable authority, such as Kirklees, which has about 18.5 per cent., comes 78th in the league table of local education authority performance, whereas Trafford always comes towards the top.

We can dispute these matters day in and day out and we have had numerous opportunities in this Parliament to do so. The crucial question is not whether hon. Members believe one set of statistics or another for the performance of selective schools; it is whether parents believe in the performance of the selective system. That is why I was dumbfounded and disappointed to hear the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) propose his amendment, the basis of which was that the Government had introduced a rigged balloting system in which, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), the question is inappropriate in many areas where there are stand-alone grammar schools as the electorate is manifestly unfair. I do not object if Labour Members have a passionate, ideological objection to grammar school and selective education: in that case, they are right to state that view. However, if after a debate that has lasted 20 years in Kent, as it has in Trafford, they still cannot persuade the 20 per cent. of parents necessary to sign their petition to trigger a ballot, it is not acceptable for them to come back to the House and say that they cannot do it under the rules introduced two years ago so please may they change the rules because they have failed.

I will not compare the hon. Member for South Thanet, who seems to be a perfectly charming man in most respects, with President Mugabe in any other respect, but the hon. Gentleman's disregard for the democratic process in this matter is worthy of the situation with President Mugabe. People are saying, "We did not win. If we do not win under the current electoral process, we will change it and do it differently. May we please have new rules?" Surely not.

I happen to believe that even if the hon. Gentleman were to have his way and the Secretary of State were to buckle to pressure from the Benches behind him and make it easier to secure ballots on the future of selective education where it exists, we would find in Trafford, in the Wirral, in Buckingham and in Kent—as we did in Ripon, where it has been tried—that the vast majority of parents have the good sense to recognise good schools and to want to defend them, and that they put in practice what the Secretary of State puts into words. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Mr. Blunkett: I shall be brief. I want to place on the record once and for all that Labour Members think that the 11-plus is an anachronism. It will be an even greater anachronism when we have raised standards in primary schools sufficiently to make a nonsense of selecting 25 per cent. of children on the basis of a test of their mathematics and English ability, with or without verbal or non-verbal reasoning tests.

The 11-plus will be an anachronism because actually it is possible to provide diversity in the secondary school system, both within and across schools, in a way that develops the talents of the gifted, provides support for those with special needs and allows those who are good at a particular subject to flourish but does not penalise those who, at a particular age and stage of education, have not managed to jump through a particular hoop.

If we can manage that, we shall have a world-class education system that prepares people for the future—one that demands not that we have an elite composed of a small number of people, educated to a high level in schools that are separated out, but that the majority of people are able to develop their talents to the full and contribute to a knowledge economy that can compete with the best in the world. Everywhere else, there is an end to dogma. Everywhere I go, whether in Europe or in China, which I visited two weeks ago, there is a desire—a commitment—to provide excellence for everyone, to develop children's talents and to enable children to flourish.

Had I had my time again over the last three years, I would have picked up what the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) alluded to tonight, so let me put that on the record. First, I believe that the coming together of the grammar school and the college, as it now is, is an extremely good development: the combining of the work of the governing bodies and the ability to interchange children across the schools is an excellent development. Where grammar schools and secondary modern schools are close enough together to make that a possibility I, in the time that is left to me as Secretary of State, will do everything I can to encourage them to combine, to show once and for all what a nonsense it was to separate out children at 11.

If we can achieve that in those areas, we can do a service to local people because the practice of separating out children at 11 and the argument that has taken place tonight illustrate the fact that, in this country, we cling to the past. We invent a structure and a system and cling to it as though that were the determinant of success; whereas the teaching in the school, the nurturing of the individual and the tailoring of education to meet that individual's needs are what is required. Therefore, I take the challenge by the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon head on. I do not agree with him about the detail of the ballot in

relation to giving a vote to the parents of those who have already entered secondary school, because in this case the matter to be decided is not the abolition of a school but a change in the admissions process.

There was a problem in the introduction of comprehensive education, in that we allowed schools that excelled—that had excellence—to deteriorate. I have one in my constituency. It was the only grammar school in the north of Sheffield, with a population of 250,000. It was for boys. It deteriorated; it fell apart. It was never and has not been since, until very recently, a comprehensive school. It is pulling itself up by its bootstraps. I use that illustration only to show that we can learn lessons from the past, but the issue for us all tonight is to move forward to the future.

I found many of the other lines of argument that the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon pursued very interesting. I say to him, and to my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman), that we should seriously consider whether there are anomalies that should be examined. I shall return to that subject. The interesting argument about Buckinghamshire was important, and my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) put it very well. I thought that the intellectual argument that the predecessor of the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) used to make was very entertaining. The trouble is that intellectual entertainment is irrelevant to the needs of individual children.

The excellent speech by my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet was from the heart. It was about the dilemma of parents and the consequences for children. We should take very seriously the heartfelt cry that he made, as a parent as well as a politician representing the area. He spoke of the silly nonsense of a Dover test versus a Kent test—but with the channel tunnel, I was wondering whether there might be a Calais test, which would override both.

My hon. Friend made interesting arguments about the possibility of dissecting the county, as a previous Conservative-controlled Kent county council did when it suited it. I believe that it will be difficult to respond positively on that theme. The idea is intellectually possible, but looks very difficult in practice, despite the anomaly of the Dover test and the nonsense that results from it, which my hon. Friend rightly outlined. It is even more impossible to change the 20 per cent. threshold.

It is equally impossible to conceive of starting a process of allowing parents to ballot, holding one ballot in one area and then deciding to abandon ballots altogether, which is what the Conservatives are proposing. As Baroness Blackstone rightly put it, that would be rather like holding a by-election to determine a general election. I am sure that, after the Romsey by-election, the Liberal Democrats would consider that to be a wonderful idea. Perhaps the Opposition would not find it quite as attractive, although the idea has points in its favour.

Mr. Purchase: Tottenham.

Mr. Blunkett: On the strength of the arguments that are being made, now that we have had the Tottenham by-election we need not bother with a general election. We obviously do, and I will stand by that. It is nonsense to suggest that, having embarked on a system, we abandon it—not least because it removes all parental choice. Neither parents nor anyone else could ever again change the system of selection and the admissions process in those schools that are currently designated grammar schools. That would be an intellectual and practical nonsense.

However, there are clearly technical difficulties in areas where a ballot is held throughout an authority. Such problems were experienced in Kent, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet outlined. I think that I am right in saying that 45,959 votes were required—an enormous challenge, by anyone's calculations.

In areas such as Kent and Trafford, where a ballot process is still in existence with the current threshold, anomalies have been highlighted. The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon mentioned some of them. I am prepared to take a look at those detailed technical requirements as they relate to the development of the ballot process. However, what I cannot do is change the threshold for the ballot. I am not prepared to prevent parents having the opportunity to ballot.

7.30 pm

We embarked on the process five years ago—it is five years to the week since we published the document outlining it, and indicated that we would give parents the right to choose. Five years later, we are still debating those issues, but the ballots will go ahead. The debate is important; it matters deeply to children. It matters to my colleagues in the House and to many people outside. We should always treat the debate with care and try to respond where we can.

However, we must be honest with one another; none of us can allow the issue of selection and grammar schools to divert us and to dislocate the process in which we are engaged—raising standards for all children and ensuring that we give to the many what was, in the past, available only to the few. We are not returning to the debates of the past; we shall not allow the media or anyone else to divert us from the course we have set. We shall give children in our schools the decent education they deserve. That is why we should reject the new clause.

Dr. Ladyman: By leave of the House, I will answer my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. As my right hon. and hon. Friends are flooding into the Chamber, it is clear to me that, if I were to push new clause 9 to a vote, it would be carried. However, I must accept that the Conservatives and their sympathisers in the House of Lords would certainly throw out the new clause—and the Bill with it. The Bill deals with important issues.

Given that I want no more and no less than for parents in my constituency to be able to hold a ballot in which the facts can be considered objectively, free from party politicking, and to make their decision about the future of selective education, my best chance of achieving that is to take the Secretary of State's kind offer to the bank. I therefore beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 11

GRAMMAR SCHOOLS: RETENTION OF SELECTIVE ADMISSION ARRANGEMENTS

( ) In the School Standards and Framework Act 1998

(a) in section 104 (designation of grammar schools), omit subsection (4)

(b) omit sections 105 to 108 (procedure for ballots to determine retention or discontinuance of selective admission arrangements) and

(c) in section 109 (proposals by governing body to end selective admission arrangements) omit subsections (3)(b) and (4).'.—*[Mr. Bercow.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Motion made, and Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 132, Noes 330.

Division No. 239] **[7.32 pm**

AYES

Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maginnis, Ken
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John Randall and Mrs. Eleanor Laing.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brake, Tom
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt.Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil

Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. David Clelland.

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 135

SEX EDUCATION

Mr. Boswell: I beg to move amendment No. 83, in page 67, leave out lines 2 to 29 and insert—

(2) In section 403 (sex education: manner of provision) in subsection (1) for the words "and the value of family life" substitute " the value of family life and sexual health".

(3) After section 403 insert—

"403A (1) The Secretary of State must issue guidance designed to secure that the following general objectives are met when sex education is given to registered pupils at maintained schools.

(2) The general objectives are that the pupils—

(a) learn about the nature of marriage as the key building block of society and its importance for family life and for the bringing up of children;

(b) learn about the significance of stability in family relationships;

(c) learn to respect themselves and others;

(d) are protected from teaching and materials which a reasonable person would regard as inappropriate having regard to—

(i) whether information is accurate and objective;

(ii) the language and images used;

(iii) the age of the pupils and

(iv) the provisions of section 403, this section and section 403B.

(3) When sex education is given to pupils who are in the third or fourth key stage or over compulsory school age, the general objectives referred to in subsection (1) are to include the following additional objectives.

(4) The additional objectives are that the pupils—

(a) learn to understand human sexuality;

(b) learn the reasons for delaying sexual activity and the benefits to be gained from such delay;

(c) learn about obtaining appropriate advice on sexual health.

(5) The Secretary of State's guidance must also be designed to secure that sex education given to registered pupils at maintained schools contribute to

(a) promoting the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of the pupils and of society;

(b) preparing the pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life.

(6) No guidance under subsection (1) shall be issued or substantially revised unless a draft of the guidance has been laid in draft before and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament.

(7) Local education authorities, governing bodies and head teachers must, in discharging their functions under section 403, have regard to the Secretary of State's guidance.

(8) In this section 'maintained school' includes a community or foundation special school established in a hospital.".

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 73, in page 67, line 11, after first "are", insert—

'(a) taught that marriage provides a strong foundation for stable relationships and the most reliable framework for raising children; and

(b)'.

Mr. Boswell: If I am brief in moving the amendment, that is not because this is not an important matter. It is important to those on both Front Benches and to the political parties and it attracts much interest among Back Benchers. I am conscious of the timetable for the whole architecture of the Bill and of the fact that, after four hours, we have not even begun to consider education for those aged between 16 and 19. There are also many others important issues to debate.

I bear in mind two factors. The first is that this issue has been fully—almost exhaustively—debated in another place. I suspect that it may well be debated again, because the clause has already been amended since it left the Lords. Secondly, there is a proper and honoured place for my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) to speak to his own amendment. We have considerable sympathy for his amendment, as is shown by the rather unusual fact that the whole Opposition Front-Bench team have attached their names to it.

In fact, I am surprised that my hon. Friend's amendment did not attract other signatories. As he will no doubt tell the House shortly, it is couched entirely in terms that are drawn from the Government's publication "Supporting Families: A consultation document". I do not understand why Ministers have not signed the amendment. The phrase

marriage provides a strong foundation for stable relationships and the most reliable framework for raising children

is a direct quotation from the Government's document. What are Ministers up to in not associating themselves with the words that they themselves have used?

In the interests of winning consensus wherever that is possible, I am minded to advise my hon. Friends to desist from pressing amendment No. 83—obviously, we shall reserve our position until we have heard the debate—but to persist with their support for my hon. Friend's amendment. We shall do that conscious of the fact that matters might ultimately be resolved either in another place or in discussions between the two Houses on what they are prepared to accept.

I touch on these issues not to steal my hon. Friend's thunder but to explain the architecture of what I hope will be a not unduly prolonged debate. I shall now address my remarks to amendment No. 83, which more assiduous Members who read the Bill at an earlier stage may recognise, because it is framed in exactly the terms of the clause bequeathed to us by another place on its consideration of the Bill after amendment. It was returned to us and was then filleted by Government amendments in Committee.

It may be convenient for the House if I explain three things that the amendment is not. First, it is not to be construed as any signal, encouragement or advertisement to any person in a school, whether a pupil or his or her teacher, to have any part whatever in any discrimination or bullying in respect of the individual child. We believe strongly—we respect the views of those who take a different view—that it is possible to assert values, including those in connection with marriage, without stigmatising persons who are not married, persons whose parents are not married or persons who are in some other sort of relationship.

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South): I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman is dealing with the amendment in the same thoughtful and considered way in which he dealt with such matters in Committee. In view of the argument that he is advancing and his comments about not stigmatising—and drawing attention to concerns about bullying—why have the Opposition not seen fit to include in the amendment any reference to those issues?

Mr. Boswell: I was anticipating that question. In terms of the amendment that we inherited from another place, and in stating the general objectives of instruction in sex education, paragraph (c) refers to the need for pupils to learn to respect themselves and others. That is a sufficient peg on which to hang the concerns that the hon. Gentleman and I share.

We believe that it is possible to assert values. Some of us have Christian values and others may have other values, other faiths or no faith. To say that is not to suggest that those who do not share our views and values are not worthy of our respect. A school needs to wrestle with these issues at all times, and its teachers must have regard to them. The purpose behind the amendment is to provide for guidelines that are set in statute, rather than merely evanescent guidance from the Secretary of State for the time about these sensitive issues.

Secondly, the amendments have nothing to do with issues that arise from the criminal law or from the specific issue of the homosexual age of consent, on which Conservative Members, along with Labour Members, were free to take different views, and did so.

The amendment bears no relation to any gender preference. However, it is a matter of fact, which I observed in Committee, that, when considering issues of

marriage, some gay people take the view that they would wish to associate themselves with the institution of marriage by extending the provision of civil marriage to cover unions between gay people. I say that not in a light or debating sense but to record that the amendment has nothing to do specifically with gay issues—and nor has it to do with the criminal law.

My third point in what I might call path clearing is that the amendment has nothing directly to do with the operation of section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988. That will be discussed in a different context. If the Government are intending—*[Interruption.]* I am not quite sure why the Under-Secretary is chuckling. We have an understanding that the Government intend to legislate on section 28.

In a sense, as my noble Friend Baroness Young adverted in another place, it is difficult to disentangle the two issues. However, there is no direct link. Perhaps the link has become a little clearer in relation to the recent decision of the Scottish Parliament to delete the section 28 provisions, but that was accompanied by its parallel decision to include a statement on the importance of marriage. It is reasonable to argue that the case for statements of the sort that we have set out in the amendment will be intensified if and when the Government decide to come clean and persist in their apparent intention to delete section 28.

If they choose to make that deletion, they do so in the face of public opinion of the kind enshrined in the recent non-governmental Scottish referendum, the overwhelming view of the Christian Churches and the view of leaders of other faiths.

Mr. Allan: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that there is no connection between section 28 and what he is proposing, because the section has not been relevant in terms of school sex education policies, which are set by parents, teachers and governors, and have been for some time? What the hon. Gentleman is proposing is a departure in terms of guidance for schools. That is not affected by whether section 28 is or is not on the statute book.

Mr. Boswell: Although I have been at some pains not to debate section 28, its application goes wider. One of the difficulties in the clause as we received it from the Committee is that it excludes—Christian interests would welcome this—the confusing reference to duties on a local education authority. This is about—we think that this is proper, and evidently the Government do too—whether the sex education policy of schools should be determined by schools, subject to guidelines which may or may not be statutory. The amendment relates to the nature of statutory guidelines.

The amendment has an interesting and perhaps somewhat erratic genesis. First, there are resonances with the Government's general objectives, which were enshrined in an amendment for debate on Third Reading in another place. For example, it referred to the importance of learning about the nature of marriage and its importance for family life and the rearing of children. It referred also to learning about the significance of marriage and stable relationships. Those were regarded as key building blocks of community and society.

Many Members will be aware of the history of the debate at that stage in another place. The amendment of my noble Friend Baroness Young was preferred by their lordships, who delivered the Bill to us accordingly. Hon. Members will perhaps have studied those debates.

It is interesting that the Government, not having got their own way on their own draft, indicated in a reversing statement by Baroness Blackstone that they would consider the Government's future position. In both respects, although this is not always the case, the Government have honoured their undertaking. They have taken away all positive references in the statutory guidelines to the nature of marriage. They have produced an alternative, which appears in the Bill as clause 135, which we seek to amend.

There is an interesting feature to the Government's second thoughts. It is an open secret that they started with a heavy influence from the Christian Church, and the Church of England's board of education in particular, to produce some value-laden statements to put in statute and to inform the guidelines. However, the Government have moved away from that. They have only produced—although it is not unworthy and I am not suggesting that we should quarrel with it—a minimal filter for the activities that schools may sanction in terms of sex education.

8 pm

In one sense, it might be appropriate—in another, it might be inappropriate, given the history of the century—to describe the Government's attitude to legislation as smacking of the 18th century: they appear to be saying, rather wearily, that all they, as a Government, can do is to prevent pupils from being done harm through access to inappropriate materials. In no sense am I suggesting that it is not important to prevent access to such materials or to ensure that materials are appropriate to the age and culture of the individuals involved, but, in a slightly uneasy progress, the Government have removed any positive duties—any meat—from the guidelines, other than that which appears in non-statutory guidance.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): Does my hon. Friend consider that the position is now worse than it was before? Had the Government not been through the debate in another place, where the issues were thoroughly fought out, what they have done might be thought the result of an oversight, or of a different approach. In fact, the Government, in a direct way, have decided that they are not prepared to support a provision that Christian Churches of all sorts and many informed people want to be introduced. Because of that, the Government need to explain their position far more clearly than they have hitherto.

Mr. Boswell: My right hon. Friend makes a most valuable point. It would have been one thing had the Government not started down the route of introducing an extraneous matter into the Bill, which makes provision for post-16 education, but it is quite another for the Government, having started on the basis that it was a good idea to tell people what they ought to teach, now to say that, because they did not get their way in another place, they have decided not to say anything at all about it. That casts doubt on the strength of their feeling on the matter.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): Will the hon. Gentleman explain the thinking behind his

[Dr. Evan Harris]

amendment? As I understand it, it differs significantly from the amendment tabled by Baroness Young. Have Conservative Front Benchers been convinced by the arguments against some aspects of the noble Lady's amendment?

Mr. Boswell: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, I perceive a close equivalence between the two amendments. I might have overlooked something, but I think that, in amendment No. 83, we have tabled the same amendment as Baroness Young tabled. Furthermore, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot has masterfully summarised our case in his much shorter amendment No. 73.

We have proposed some positive general objectives and attempted to address some of the issues. We welcome the Government's desire to protect pupils from harm or access to inappropriate materials, but it is mealy-mouthed of them to say that they believe in values—or did at one stage—but to remove them once challenged. It reminds me of the politician who said, "Here are the principles: if you don't like them, we'll take them away and find another set."

Some of us have occasionally been critical of our Church. The Church of England Board of Education has been straightforward in its approach. A letter was sent to my noble Friend Baroness Blatch by a member of that body, Mr. Locke, who states:

> the importance of marriage and the non-equivalence of other relationships are at the heart of where the Board of Education stands.

That is a traditional view, which many Conservative Members respect. I think that it is where we should stand.

It is easy for the issue to be over-emphasised and for it to give rise to ill-considered talk. We are considering an important subject: the guidance that should be given to schools in framing their sex education policy. Within that, there is a separate issue of whether the guidance should appear and be altered from time to time in non-statutory form, or whether it should be enshrined in legislation. Not for the first time—sometimes to the embarrassment of previous Conservative Governments—their lordships are right. They have talked of principles and the importance of marriage and stability in relationships, and have done so in a way that reflects more closely than the Government's proposals the views of the general public, of the Christian Churches and of responsible people who engage in these sensitive matters.

I think that the Lords got it right. The Government have backed away from the challenge at the first sign of difficulty, or out of petulance resulting from their experiences in another place. They have come up with a small and inadequate alternative; our version is better. Either in the formulation proposed in amendment No. 83, or in the shorter and more succinct formulation offered by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot, the House deserves to pass back to their lordships a firm endorsement of marriage and traditional values.

Mr. Gummer: On listening to the debate, the question that most people will ask is why on earth the Government are resisting the amendments, given that they represent the views of most of those who have considered the issues over a long period. The Government said that they would listen carefully to those outside this place who want to raise the standards of the nation and, in particular, encourage future generations to have the stability that marriage alone brings. The Government claimed in the other place that they have no quarrel with the desire to put marriage at the centre of sex education—indeed, the Government's own amendment was designed to achieve precisely that end. Therefore, Ministers face today the difficult task of explaining their actions to the public, who must be mystified as to why the Government want us not to put marriage at the centre of sex education. Had we not broached the subject, it would not be so serious a situation; but we have, so for the Government not to accept either of the amendments we offer or not to make the amendment that they proposed in another place says to the people of this country that the Government do not believe that marriage is at the heart of sensible sex education.

I am one who has been fortunate to have had a long and happy marriage. Therefore, I am among the first to insist that we should in no way be willing to stigmatise those who, for all sorts of reasons, have not had that kind fortune, and certainly not their children. However, I am also aware of the enormous advantage given to a new generation of growing up knowing, as they go to sleep at night, that the next morning their parents will be there and that their parents have committed themselves, outside the having of children, to live with each other until death do them part. That is a crucial element of stability—the one thing that any couple ought to try to give to the next generation, for without it they bring into the world a life for which their commitment is not properly sufficient. We are the only animal that has the choice of producing children knowingly. The one thing that we can properly give to the next generation is the knowledge that we intend for their sake, if for no other, to live together and provide the stability that young people growing up so desperately need.

All we ask in the amendment is that that perfectly proper view, which has been the view in this country for hundreds of years, which on any test is the view of the majority of people in this country, and which we understand to be the view of the Government, should be enshrined in legislation.

If the Government refuse to accept such a reasonable amendment, they will stand accused not just by their political opponents, but by the Church of England, the Catholic Church and the Protestant denominations of not believing that marriage should be at the heart of sex education. I can think of few things more damaging than sex education without marriage at its heart, for it would then be merely the mechanistic explanation of that which many already know.

If we are to challenge the Government, which I do in the most polite way that I can, I must ask the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), to answer a simple question when she replies. If she is not willing to accept the amendment, will she tell the House that she does not believe that marriage should be at the heart of sex education in schools? Unless she is willing to say that, she must accept the amendment.

If the hon. Lady does not accept the amendment, she must have the courage of her convictions and say, "Whatever the Church of England says, whatever the Catholic Church says, whatever most people in this

country say, I do not believe that marriage is at the heart of sensible sex education." Let her have that courage. I shall not agree with her. I shall find that view offensive, in the deepest sense, for it offends the next generation and it removes from them the thing that all of us have a duty to give.

I have no time for those who are not prepared to commit themselves to each other, but are prepared to produce children outside that commitment. I believe that to be a very wrong way of approaching their responsibility, but if the Minister takes that view, let her say so, and we will know. However, if she refuses to say so, the Government will be not only wrong, but extremely cowardly.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I am delighted to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) who, as ever on such issues, has given the House a lucid, eloquent, courteous and incisive view on an extremely important matter facing the nation.

I am somewhat surprised to find my amendment being endorsed by those on my Front Bench and to find myself, so to speak, in pole position on the grid, although I am delighted that that is the case and that my hon. Friends have seen fit to promote the amendment that I tabled. As my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) made clear, the wording that I used was taken straight from the Government's own document entitled "Supporting Families—a consultation document" which was published a couple of years ago.

Paragraph 4.3 of that document states:

> The Government believes that marriage provides a strong foundation for stable relationships. This does not mean trying to make people marry, or criticising or penalising people who choose not to. We do not believe that Government should interfere in people's lives in that way. But we do share the belief of the majority of people that marriage provides the most reliable framework for raising children.

The elision of the two points made in that paragraph forms the basis of my amendment.

Mr. Boswell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and, again, for his amendment. Will he draw the attention of the House specifically to the remark in the paragraph that he quoted, which may not have received sufficient attention so far? The Government conceded there that that view is shared by the majority of people in this country, yet they now oppose our amendment and say that they are prepared to go against the majority view, for reasons that they have not yet adequately stated.

8.15 pm

Mr. Howarth: My hon. Friend is right. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal made it plain that that was the view of the majority of the people of the country, and that it is bizarre that the Government are bent on resisting such a modest amendment, which is entirely in accordance with the Government's philosophy, as stated by no less a person than the Home Secretary.

The debate is part of a two-sided coin. The Government announced their plans to abolish section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988—the provision that prevented local authorities from promoting homosexuality as "a pretended family relationship." They know that that is deeply unpopular.

In Scotland, week after week, the *Daily Record*—not a Tory newspaper—has been hammering the Government and supporting Cardinal Winning and Brian Souter in the courageous stand that they have taken, so demonstrating that they were in touch with the people of Scotland and the Government were wholly out of touch. That was shown by the opinion poll commissioned by Brian Souter. I pay tribute to the courage of those people, one a cleric and the other a business man, for the stand that they have taken. They have set a great example to the rest of the nation.

In the face of that hostility in Scotland and elsewhere, the Government introduced an amendment on Third Reading of the Bill, late in the proceedings in another place. The amendment, in the name of Baroness Blackstone, required the Secretary of State to issue guidance. The guidance was published on 16 March, a week before the debate in another place. The guidance was extensive, running to 28 pages.

The Government tried to get the bishops on side, but failed to reckon with the outstanding and formidable eloquence and determination of my right hon. and noble Friend Baroness Young, together with the right reverend Bishop of Winchester, who supported my right hon. and noble Friend and who, I know, feels passionately about the issue. They persuaded the other place of the merits of their argument and won the day with an amendment to the Government's proposal, writing into the Bill that marriage is

> the key building block of society.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 23 March 2000; Vol. 611, c. 436.]

In Committee in this place, the Government removed Baroness Blackstone's new clause as amended by my right hon. and noble Friend in the other place, and substituted the present wording of clause 135. All the general objectives set out in the Bill as it left the other place are gone, save for the ambiguous requirement for pupils to be protected from

> teaching and materials which are inappropriate—

however that is to be defined. Instead, governing bodies and heads are to rely on the Secretary of State's guidance.

It is significant that those in another place were prepared to insert an amendment that was specific, even if it was not quite in the terms that many of us wanted, yet in this place all those provisions have been removed, save for the reference to inappropriate material.

Nothing better illustrates the confusion and prevarication at the heart of the present Government than their policy on sexual matters. On the one hand, the Home Secretary sets out graphically the Government's support for the institution of marriage. Then there is the prevarication in the guidelines issued by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, and we have the Government promoting the Bill to reduce the age of consent for buggery from 18 to 16. Where is the joined-up government in all of that? It is a very confused message that the Government are sending.

I remind the House that at the Ayr by-election the Prime Minister, having been shown some posters produced by campaigning groups whipping up homosexual propaganda, said:

> I've just seen the posters here in Scotland. I don't think I've ever seen a more astonishing campaign in all my born days. People are being told their children will have to play—what was it?—

homosexual role playing in schools. No wonder parents are concerned. It's nonsense. No child is going to be given gay sex lessons in school. Not under this Government now. Not ever.

Those were the Prime Minister's words, yet we have today a publication by Health Promotion Service Avon—the House has already heard me refer to some—

Dr. Harris: A teachers' pack.

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It is what is being given out to teachers. In lesson five, part II, "Challenging homophobia", a method to be promoted is described as follows:

This session can be performed as a role play, written up and fed back to large groups, or responded to like an 'Agony Aunt'.

The Prime Minister said that this would not happen under this Government. Here we have it, down in Avon, at the taxpayer's expense.

Mr. Shaun Woodward (Witney): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Howarth: I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman.

At the taxpayer's expense, that kind of literature is being produced—literature that the Prime Minister himself said this Government would not be party to. Case study D says:

Michael is 15 and his boyfriend wants him to have sex. He really wants to but he is nervous. Michael knows he should use a condom but doesn't know where to go for help. What should he do?

For goodness' sake! This child is under 16, even before the law is changed from 18 to 16. What on earth are the Government doing allowing that kind of publication to go out with taxpayers' money?

Mr. Allan: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with my understanding of the position, which is that no material is ever used in schools unless it is agreed to by the teachers, the governors and the head teacher? The governors include parents. It is a very specific responsibility. So it does not matter what anyone produces as printed material for the hon. Gentleman to read out, for his enjoyment, if not for everyone else's. What matters is what schools decide on the ground. The Government do not decide sex education policy in schools; it is decided by governors, parents and teachers.

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I understand that it is material produced for schools and available to them. The Government may well believe that it is inappropriate material. My point is that the Prime Minister himself suggested that such material was not being produced under his Government. It is being produced, and that is the material that is available to schools should they wish to use it.

In a letter to my noble Friend, Lord Ashbourne, my predecessor as chairman of the Lords and Commons family and child protection group, the Home Secretary wrote on 26 July last year:

The evidence is that marriage better provides a strong foundation for stable relationships and this framework is the most reliable for raising children.

The House may agree that that is pretty well a reflection of the language in the document "Supporting Families". But the guidance issued by the Secretary of State on 16 March refers repeatedly to marriage and stable relationships in the same context. Not only does that repeated juxtaposition of marriage and stable relationships imply that they are equally valid, which they are not, but, as my noble Friend Baroness Young pointed out in another place, there is nothing that prevents homosexual unions from being defined as stable relationships.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has returned to the substance of his amendment. In view of his remarks, does he believe that all relationships that are not of the marriage kind are unreliable frameworks for raising children?

Mr. Howarth: I would agree with the Home Secretary—

Mr. Marsden: That is not the question.

Mr. Howarth: The Home Secretary says that the best relationship is that of marriage. The hon. Gentleman will have heard my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal say that that is not to stigmatise those who are in different relationships. We are being asked to give some leadership. It is my view that the Bill does not give the necessary leadership, because the fact is that the family in Britain is in crisis. We have all seen it at our surgeries and advice centres. I doubt that there is an hon. Member present who in the last month at his or her surgery or advice centre has not had evidence of that. I shall not quote from a constituency case that came up last Saturday, partly because it is simply too distressing.

I should like to quote what the noble Lord Stoddart of Swindon, a Labour peer, said in another place on 23 March:

compulsory sex education has not done much to stabilise, let alone promote, marriages . . .

There is more promiscuity, less sexual morality, less marriage, more divorce, more single mothers, more under-16 pregnancies and more child pregnancies . . . all those matters were supposed to have been dealt with by the various Acts that have been passed. Clearly, they are not delivering the goods.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 23 March 2000; Vol. 611, c.463.]

I entirely concur with what the noble Lord said.

I and my hon. Friends are not proposing the amendments simply out of a belief in the moral case for marriage, although I subscribe to it. I entirely agree with what my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal said, and I hasten to acknowledge the work that CARE, Christian Action Research and Education, and the Christian Institute have done to fight this battle.

I agree with the Home Secretary: the evidence to which he referred indeed shows that marriage confers benefits all round. Studies have consistently shown that marriage generally, not always, leads to a healthier and happier life and that children benefit from that. Like my right hon. Friend, having passed the 25-year mark, I can bear testimony to the long-suffering wife I have and to some splendid and dutiful children. I am under no illusion that all marriages work out. I believe, nevertheless, that marriage is, as the Home Secretary says, the better framework for bringing up children.

Furthermore, the evidence shows that stable relationships, which I suppose one could describe in other terms as cohabiting, are no substitute for marriage. I am

sorry to say that there is plenty of evidence that that is so. For example, the British household panel survey a few years ago found that cohabitant couples are almost six times as likely to split up as those who are married. The Economic and Social Research Council found that even where there are children, half of cohabiting couples part within 10 years, compared with just one in eight of married parents. One cannot ignore those facts.

As recently as just a couple of months ago, the Office for National Statistics published a document, "Mental health of children and adolescents in Great Britain", which contained some startling information. I do not want to detain the House for too long, so I shall simply give the flavour of it. It shows the prevalence of mental disorders by family type, age and sex. Let us take conduct disorders in boys aged 11 to 15. For those in married households, the percentage with a disorder was 5.7. In cohabiting households, the figure was 17 per cent., three times as great. For those in households where there was just a single parent, the figure was 17.6 per cent. Against that factual background, we have a duty to the children of this country to ensure that the laws and regulations regarding sex education take into account the facts of what is happening.

The Government should stop trying to appeal to every interest group for fear of offending one or other of them. It was indefensible to give the advice that appeared in the guidelines that were published in March. They stated:

there should be no direct promotion of sexual orientation.

That means that the Government are neutral on the matter. They cannot and should not be neutral. Instead, they should recognise the serious crisis that faces family life in Britain today, and give proper, unambiguous, Christian, moral guidance to our young people to enable them to live more fulfilled lives than perhaps many of their parents have been able to live in recent years.

8.30 pm

If the Government accept the amendment, they will at least no longer be perceived to be speaking with forked tongue. As my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry has already said, the amendment has, for the Minister's comfort, been lifted straight from the Government's document. They could therefore happily seize ownership of it. I am not proud. They can own it, and show that they are being entirely consistent. However, if the Government fail to support the amendment, they will show that neither is there joined-up government, nor are the Government honest in their language in the "Supporting Families" document.

I end with the question that my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal posed to the Minister. Does she believe that marriage should be at the heart of sex education? If not, she must tell the House. The parents and children of this country should know.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): It gives me great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) and their cogent and compelling arguments.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot, I shall focus on rearing children and the message that we should propagate in schools. I should like to add one more study to the compelling list that he cited. Twelve years ago, a study was undertaken in America, not by some right-wing think tank or a religious organisation, but by the United States Department of Health. I am grateful to the Institute of Economic Affairs for publishing it. It examined juvenile delinquency among young people in all major family types. Married couples who had remained together constituted one category; three other categories included single parents and cohabiting couples.

The study examined five different income categories. In debating the best way in which to bring up children, the crucial argument that tends to be used by those promoting the other side is the importance of poverty. They claim that we leave out that factor, and that because poverty is more frequently associated with alternative life styles, one would expect to find more juvenile delinquency and more of a whole range of other problems, such as those to which my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot referred, among those who lived such life styles.

The study was astonishing because it showed that the poorest category of children, from families who earned less than $10,000 a year in 1988—a level of subsistence that would be regarded as intolerable by many in this country—had a significantly lower level of juvenile delinquency than the average in the three other categories. I looked a little further down the table and discovered that in the poorest category, the married couples who had stayed together and reared their children had fewer children guilty of juvenile delinquency than the wealthiest group—those who earned more than $50,000 a year.

My hon. Friend mentioned the contrast between married couples and cohabiting couples, as revealed in a British study. The most recent study that I have seen was undertaken three years ago. The critical difference between it and those that my hon. Friend cited was that it pulled out cohabiting couples who subsequently got married. If, for 1997, we compare those who were married in 1987 with those who were cohabiting in 1987 and did not subsequently get married, the success rate of the relationship was 81 per cent. in the former category and 15 per cent. in the latter.

The case is overwhelming.

Mr. Gummer: Does my hon. Friend agree that if such overwhelming evidence were offered to the Government in any other circumstances, they would be bound to accept it? Yet when we offer the evidence that my hon. Friend described, it is not acceptable because the Government are not prepared to stand out against those for whom such evidence is embarrassing.

Mr. Brazier: I hope that my right hon. Friend is wrong, but I fear that he is right.

The case is overwhelming. I was once privileged to take part in a debate against the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) at the Oxford Union. Participants in the debate included a rising generation of young people, some of whom have now found their way into the House. I was encouraged by the fact that the motion defending the traditional family was passed heavily. The point that needs making, tonight as then, is that our arguments are not about stigmatisation but about aspiration.

One of my closest and dearest friends was brought up by an extremely violent alcoholic father. Sadly, most classrooms today include a child whose father is a violent

[Mr. Brazier]

alcoholic. Does that mean that we should not teach children that it is wrong to beat children? Many children are brought up with a parent who is hooked on a drug; does that mean that we should not teach children that they should not take drugs? Of course not. Almost every family in the land is affected by, for example, divorce or illegitimacy. However, that means neither that we should have a conspiracy of silence nor that we should stigmatise anyone. We should aspire to the best. That is why the amendment is so important.

Dr. Harris: I want to ask the Minister three questions from the Back Benches. However, before I do that, I should like to ask the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) a rhetorical question. Does he believe that it is the job of a Minister, rather than parents and the Church, to tell the nation that sex outside marriage is sinful? He should learn from his party that when Ministers start moralising, they are in dangerous waters. Moralising is for people, such as the right hon. Gentleman, who have connections to the Church, and for parents. It is not the Government's job to tell adults what they should or should not do in their bedrooms.

Mr. Gummer: In answer to that rhetorical question, I simply said that I wanted the Minister to support the words of the Home Secretary. I merely said that, like him, I believed that marriage provided greater stability than any other form of rearing children. If the Minister is not prepared to say that, she must say that she does not believe that it is true. That is all I asked.

Dr. Harris: The tone of the right hon. Gentleman's remarks suggested that sex outside marriage was less than wholesome and that it was the Government's job to preach that idea to the nation. I question that.

I also question the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth). It is hard to know where to begin. I shall not make a strong attempt because there were so many logical flaws in some of his analyses. The idea that he could prove causal relationships through statistics is nonsense. The idea that the possession of a marriage certificate tucked away in a top drawer is some sort of insurance that will prevent a relationship from breaking up is nonsense. The idea that one can identify people who cohabit as equivalent in the sample to people who marry is ridiculous. Many people choose not to get married, and live together instead because they fear that their relationship may not last. It is therefore not a huge surprise if those relationships break up, regardless of whether children are involved.

The statistics that the hon. Gentleman cited did not relate wholly to children. He talked about mental illness affecting young people, as if we did not know that the biggest association is with deprivation and the stresses of family life. We know that the families of single parents, some of whom have tried marriage and are divorced, suffer far more stress and deprivation, and therefore have more associated poor health outcomes, than people who are not in that category. That is the obvious and correct interpretation of the data. The hon. Gentleman's misinterpretation does the debate no good at all.

The hon. Gentleman has the peculiar idea that one cannot ask young people to put themselves in the position of victims of intolerance because that is bizarre. I remember that when I was taught about the importance of not being racist, I was told to imagine being in the position of someone who was a victim of such persecution. That is a suitable mode of teaching, and certainly not inappropriate. The hon. Gentleman asked what advice people should give to a 15-year-old boy considering sexual behaviour. If the question concerned a 15-year-girl, would he say that that advice should not be available? He is right to lament the huge increase in, and the high incidence of, pregnancies among the under-16s. However, if he is not prepared for information to be given to young people in school to protect them, I despair of what sort of society his way would bring.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Harris: No, I want to finish.

I commend the Government's preference for the Bill's current wording over that originally proposed. We should compliment them for coming to that view; indeed, my hon. Friends the Members for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) and for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan) did so in Committee.

I have three brief questions for the Minister about the guidance referred to in the Bill. Will there be time for a parliamentary debate on the detail of the guidance, which is pretty fundamental? The Minister will be aware that many people are concerned not only about what we have already heard about, but about the fact that the Bill does not do enough to protect young people from the risks of early sex, and, indeed, other sexual activity. Given that primary schools have no statutory duty to offer sex education, is the Minister certain that the guidelines will implement her stated wish in the guidance that children should be taught about puberty before it happens, including the 10 per cent. of girls who do not know about menstruation before they have their first period—a dreadful situation, by all accounts.

The guidance talks about giving information along those lines in the transition year between primary and secondary school. I am sure that the Minister's colleagues in the Department of Health, Government health advisers, paediatricians and GPs will tell her that the phrase "shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted" would apply to a school that, despite her intentions, decided to delay giving that information until that late stage.

Finally, everyone in the House is concerned about the incidence of child sex abuse. Indeed, I sport a green full-stop badge every day to bear witness to that. I believe that the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children shares my view that children are not reporting abuse, and certainly not reporting it early enough, because they do not recognise what is going on, as they are not taught early enough in school which parts of their bodies are private and not to be interfered with by other people. That is a result of the failure of sex education to address the needs of very young children in age-appropriate language. I question whether the guidance, which contains a lot of good research by the social exclusion unit on teenage pregnancy, will achieve the aims that Health Ministers and many other Ministers desire.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Jacqui Smith): It is fair to say that the debate about sex and relationship education, which has been going on for some time, has generally been conducted with great passion and belief on both sides. It is also fair to say that there was a great deal of considered, sensitive and thoughtful debate, especially in Committee, when the issues were covered in some depth and when, as hon. Members have said, the Government reversed the amendments introduced in another place. However, I fear that the amendments tabled this evening and certain aspects of the tone of our debate will not build on the positive, sensible approach adopted in Committee. For that reason, I shall ask my hon. Friends to join me in opposing the amendments.

8.45 pm

I shall begin with amendment No. 83, which would reinstate much of the amendment that Baroness Young introduced in another place, the provisions of which were removed in Committee. It ignores the importance of balance, which must be at the centre of guidance on sex education. No one says that marriage is not an ideal, about which children should be taught in schools, but it would be wrong to stigmatise children whose parents are not married.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: Will the Minister give way?

Jacqui Smith: No I will not, because we are short of time, and I want to deal with the points raised by the hon. Gentleman.

In particular, because of its silence on the importance of understanding difference, amendment No. 83 would fail to tackle homophobic bullying in our schools. Moreover, it includes a vague notion of a reasonable person making judgments about what constitutes inappropriate teaching and learning, which the Government believe risks creating confusion and uncertainty for our schools.

We have always made it clear that we are committed to supporting marriage as the basis for family life. We believe that pupils should learn about the nature of marriage and its importance to family life and bringing up children. That is set out very clearly in our draft sex and relationship education guidance, which we issued for consultation in March. In fact, this Government put marriage into the curriculum for the first time, under the personal, social and health education framework issued last autumn. That framework underpins the guidance and work on sex and relationship education.

At key stage 2, the framework states that pupils should be taught to be aware of different types of relationship, including marriage, as well as those between friends and families. At key stage 3, pupils should be taught about the role and importance of marriage in family relationships. At key stage 4, they should be taught about the nature and importance of marriage for family life and bringing up children.

Our guidance will be supported by our national healthy school standard, which every school is expected to sign up to during the next few years, and which contains as a criterion of success the requirement for schools to teach in line with the Secretary of State's guidance. That constitutes much more positive and practical action than has ever been taken before.

Our aim is to improve the sex education that our children receive, which in the past has rightly been criticised for concentrating too much on the mechanics of sex and ignoring the importance of respect, stability in relationships and marriage. Why did the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), who was a member of the previous Government, not do more to improve the quality of sex and relationship education, as this Government are doing?

We recognise that many children are raised in loving and stable relationships outside marriage. We must not allow those children to be stigmatised in our schools; nor should we stigmatise children from single parent families. The hon. Members for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) and for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) made much of the Government consultation document, "Supporting Families", which they quoted correctly, but selectively. That document recognises that there are strong, mutually supportive relationships outside marriage. That is the balance that the Government have always made clear, but it is not made clear in the amendments that the Opposition have tabled.

The document is referred to specifically in our sex and relationship education guidance. Selective quoting does no justice to the debate, or to improving sex and relationship education for our children. Our guidance presents a careful and considered balance; amendment No. 83 would fail to provide that balance.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, South (Mr. Marsden) made the important point that that amendment would fail to ensure that children are taught about respecting difference and about preventing and removing prejudice. It is all very well for the hon. Member for Daventry to claim that that is Conservative Members' aim. If that is their aim, why did their colleagues not support the amendment that the Government tabled in the Lords in which it was made explicit? Without that safeguard, schools cannot tackle discrimination and teach tolerance. The amendment would specifically remove the chapter on recognising diversity and removing prejudice.

We believe that bullying on whatever grounds—be it based on race, appearance or sexual orientation—is wrong and should be checked. I am sure that many right hon. and hon. Members will know of young men and women whose lives have been made a misery by such bullying. We recognise that schools need to be able to deal with it, and the amendment will not provide the necessary safeguard.

The issue of protecting children from inappropriate teaching and materials has emerged as a key concern, although I do not believe that the sensationalism of some of the comments by the hon. Member for Aldershot did it due credit. The amendment made in Committee provides clarity and certainty. It gives the Secretary of State a duty to issue guidance, so that pupils are protected from teaching and materials that are inappropriate to their age and religious and cultural background. It gives statutory force to guidance that addresses this central issue and extends protection to materials issued by health authorities, which were not previously covered.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: Why is the Minister so afraid of putting the case for marriage in the Bill? She said that

[Mr. Gerald Howarth]

the Bill covered inappropriate materials, so why does it not put the case for marriage? After all, paragraph 4.8 of "Supporting Families" says:

> For all these reasons, it makes sense for the Government to do what it can to strengthen marriage.

Is the Minister saying that this is one area in which the Government are not prepared to help strengthen marriage?

Jacqui Smith: As I have already pointed out to the hon. Gentleman, not only have the Government already done a great deal to ensure that the importance of marriage and relationships is included within the personal, social and health education framework and within sex and relationship education, but we are also addressing issues involving inappropriate materials. However, we are not prepared to accept amendment No.73, as it would undermine the careful, considered balance and consensus that we have achieved, which Committee members supported. It would require children to be taught that marriage alone is the most reliable framework for raising children.

I do not need to repeat what I said earlier, but I would like to reinforce three key points. First, our draft guidance sets out that children should be taught about the nature of marriage and its importance for family life and bringing up children. Secondly, we cannot accept an amendment that does not recognise the realities of the society and the communities that we represent.

As I said earlier, many children today grow up in loving supportive families outside marriage. Those children should not be stigmatised in our schools. Hon. Members will be aware that our guidance and our work on sex and relationship education stems from a recommendation in the teenage pregnancy report, and the need to address the high rate of teenage pregnancy in this country. We take that responsibility seriously.

Thirdly, our guidance will be grounded in the broad consensus across society about how children can be given effective sex and relationship education in schools. The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) raised specific questions that I do not have time to answer this evening, but I can tell him that we consulted teachers, parents and other organisations. They all supported the guidance, particularly teachers. Indeed, 73 per cent. of teachers who responded to consultation believed that our guidance was right.

In conclusion, we need to focus on what is right to ensure that children receive an education relevant to their needs, that parents can have certainty that their children are receiving an appropriate and balanced education, and that schools, teachers and governors can be supported to have confidence in the education that they provide. The Government have built that balance and consensus, and it would be destroyed by the amendments, so I ask my hon. Friends to oppose them.

Amendment negatived.

Amendment proposed: No. 73, in page 67, line 11, after first "are", insert—

> '(a) taught that marriage provides a strong foundation for stable relationships and the most reliable framework for raising children; and
>
> (b)'.—*[Mr. Gerald Howarth.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 129, Noes 303.

Division No. 240] **[8.55 pm**

AYES

Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cran, James
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maginnis, Ken
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Öpik, Lembit
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*

Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Jamieson and
Mr. Don Touhig.

Question accordingly negatived.

New Clause 1

TEACHING OF ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE-RELATED SUBJECTS

'.—The Learning and Skills Council shall present a report annually on the trends in the teaching of engineering and science-related subjects throughout the previous year. This report shall include a section relating to the proportion of the cohort—

(a) commencing studies in those subjects; and

(b) completing studies in those subjects

with particular reference to the gender of students.'.—*[Mr. Willis.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Willis: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following: New clause 10—*London Learning and Skills Co-ordinating Committee—*

'.—(1) The Council will establish a London Learning and Skills Co-ordinating Committee ("the Committee") to co-ordinate the activities of the local learning and skills councils in London.

(2) The Committee shall be appointed by the Council and shall consist of not more than 15 members and shall have a majority of members with business experience.

(3) The functions of the Committee shall be:

(a) to undertake research for the learning and skills councils and provide information on employment, skills and the labour market in London;

(b) to provide a forum for common decision making on the planning and delivery of the functions and responsibilities of the learning and skills councils;

(c) to agree common operational frameworks and guidelines for the work of the learning and skills councils in London;

(d) to liaise with the Mayor, the Greater London Authority, London Development Agency and other relevant partners on skills and employment issues;

(e) to co-ordinate the activities of the learning and skills councils in relation to the London Small Business Service.'.

New clause 19—*Regional Learning and Skills Co-ordinating Committees—*

'.—(1) The Council must establish a Learning on Skills Co-ordinating Committee ("the Committee") to co-ordinate the activities of the Local Learning and Skills Councils ("the local council") in each of the English regions as described in section 1 of the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998 ("the Region").

(2) The Committee shall consist of not more than 15 members.

(3) Committee members shall be appointed by the Council from nominations by each of the local councils that comprise "the Region" and must include representatives from the Regional Development Agency, Small Business Service, local authorities and the wider business community.

(4) The Chairman shall be a member of and be appointed by the members of the Committee—

(5) The functions of the Committee shall be:

(a) to undertake research for the local councils and provide information on employment, skills and the labour market in each Region;

(b) to provide a forum for common decision making across the Region on the planning and delivery of the functions and responsibilities of the learning and skills councils;

(c) to agree common operational frameworks and guidelines for the work of the local councils in each Region;

(d) to liaise with the Regional Development Agency and other relevant partners as agreed by the Committee on skills and employment issues;

(e) to co-ordinate the activities of the local councils in relation to the Small Business Service;

(f) to co-ordinate the activities of the local councils in relation to the Careers Services.'.

Amendment No. 104, in clause 12, page 7, line 3, at end add—

'( ) The Council must establish systems for collecting information which is designed to secure that its decisions with regard to information, advice and guidance services are made on a sound basis.'.

Government amendments Nos. 31, 91, 32 and 42 to 44.

Amendment No. 74, in schedule 3, page 74, line 31, at end insert—

', or to the London Learning and Skills Co-ordinating Committee established under section (London Learning and Skills Co-ordinating Committee).'.

Mr. Willis: My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan) will speak to new clause 1, but I wish to speak to new clause 19, which deals with the organisation committees of the regional councils.

It has taken four hours, but at last we shall be discussing the essence of the Bill. For all that time, Conservative Members avoided talking about—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman should talk not about what has gone before, but about what is before us now—the new clause.

Mr. Willis: I am admonished, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

One of the real challenges in moving from the old organisation of post-16 education, training and lifelong learning is not simply to have a reorganisation but to do something much better. There is no point in getting rid of training and enterprise councils, the Further Education Funding Council or, indeed, the plethora of other organisations simply so as to swap the seats on the Titanic and replace them with different ones.

In Committee, in another place and in the House we have always argued that we wanted not a single Learning and Skills Council, but regional learning and skills councils coterminous with the regional development agencies—hopefully, the forerunners of the regional assemblies—so that the regions have not only an identity but, alongside the RDAs, the means to apply the skills and education agenda post-16. We lost that argument in Committee and we accept that. We do not wish to re-run it, as I am sure hon. Members will be delighted to hear.

In reality, many areas of Britain have ended up with a region, under the Regional Development Agencies Act 1988, and we now have sub-regional councils of the Learning and Skills Council. In Yorkshire and the Humber, for example, where my hon. Friend the Member for Hallam and I operate, we have three such

organisations. The point of the amendment is that we surely need an overarching organisation that will allow the three organisations to speak to each other.

Much of the organisational structure set up by the Bill will hopefully work for the benefit of education and training post-16, but unless we have that co-ordination, the sub-regional committees of the local councils will go off on their own and will not truly speak to each other. All we are asking for is a co-ordination committee. The right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) has tabled a similar amendment for London. That is the essence—

Mr. Gordon Marsden: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says and the Liberal Democrats have pulled back from their position in Committee, but in stressing the need for the changes he is surely showing a lack of confidence in the regional development agencies. He is suggesting that they are not capable of, or will not be able to make, the sort of contacts and communication that has been suggested.

Mr. Willis: The hon. Member for Blackpool, North—[HON. MEMBERS: "South".] It was pretty near. The hon. Gentleman is showing an uncharacteristic naivety. He has demonstrated his lack of knowledge of the Bill, which surprises me. Throughout, we have argued that the connection between the RDA and the Learning and Skills Council is tenuous. Indeed, those links were put in only at the last minute. I would be happy if there were a direct statutory link between the council and the RDA as that would solve our problem. That is not the case, which is why we are arguing for the new clause.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hallam will deal with our other amendments if he catches your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Like the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), I regret the hour at which we are coming to these matters. After your stricture upon him, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will not enlarge on what he said. I hope that you will excuse my saying, however, that I noticed that the Minister who dealt with the previous debate declined to take an intervention on the grounds that we were short of time. As the House rose at 6 pm yesterday, such excuses seem funny in the conduct of Government business.

New clause 10 and amendment No. 74, which is consequential on it, stand in my name and I speak to them. They are of a probing nature. Amendments to the same general effect were moved at columns 836 to 843 on 10 February in the Standing Committee in the House of Lords by Lord Tope and Lord Harris of Haringey, neither of whom are of my party, but both of whom have been long involved in London local government. Lord Tope was once briefly a London Member of Parliament.

9.15 pm

I should in all honesty acknowledge to the House that in the debate on 10 February, Baroness Blatch advised the other place against the propositions that I am putting forward. But that was 10 February, and we have not heard further from the Government since Lord Tope, in acceding to the Government's request to withdraw his amendment, said that he hoped that the Government would say more on the subject later. Since then, we have had silence.

I wish to probe the Government's position on a London co-ordinating body for the five learning and skills councils that are to be established in the capital. The subject was debated in another place—I have given the reference—but it has not previously been covered in this House. Lord Harris of Haringey explained the debate that had occurred in the London Development Partnership when it made its recommendation, by a narrow margin, that there should be five local learning and skills councils in London, but also recommended that there should be a co-ordinating body. The concept of the co-ordinating body was accepted by the Government, through Baroness Blackstone, in the other place when she responded to the debate.

I understand that the reason the Government have rejected the concept is that, although they have endorsed the concept of a co-ordinating body, they believe that it should not be on the face of the Bill. But although stakeholders in London understand the need to avoid another layer of bureaucracy, they are anxious to ensure a Londonwide approach to the many issues that cannot be decided solely by a single sub-region of London. The complex travel-to-work and travel-to-learning flows in the capital mean that unilateral action by one learning and skills council could adversely affect the actions of another. London's stakeholders are looking for a more powerful model than the one the Government appear to have in mind.

A stronger co-ordinating body is needed for the following purposes. It is needed to provide a focal point of contact for Londonwide employers and bodies, including the mayor and Assembly and the single Small Business Service. It is needed to provide labour market forecasting and analysis. There are significant economies of scale to be achieved by a joint approach, and the valuable work of the London skills forecasting unit needs to be sustained in the new learning and skills council arrangements. A co-ordinating body is needed to share and co-ordinate London plans and priorities—the fact that funding will follow learners and providers will require a Londonwide approach to planning and rationalising provision if real benefits are to be achieved. A co-ordinating body is also needed to agree operating frameworks and procedures so that learners and employers can be treated equally in London; and, finally, to provide a forum for agreeing collective action and overcoming disagreements.

We would not be building from a zero base in this respect. It is important that the good work that has been done by the London training and enterprise council and the skills forecasting unit on behalf of TECs, and the work by the London office of the Further Education Funding Council, should be incorporated in a new London co-ordinating body.

Since I tabled new clause 10 and amendment No. 74, the regional director of the London region of the Association of Colleges has written to me to say:

> A co-ordinating body would make a great improvement to the provision of post-compulsory education and training in the city under the LSC. As things stand at present London will be divided arbitrarily into five areas whose boundaries defy the fact that the capital is a single labour market and also one travel-to-work and travel-to-study area. Although they bear no relation to reality, the

boundaries—once established—will begin to acquire the status of fiefdoms. Local council members and executive directors will soon believe that they know what is best for the individuals and firms in their own geographical patches, and begin to act without reference to either their population's wider interests or the greater interests of London as a whole.

At the very time when we have gained a body, in the form of the GLA, to look after the strategic interests of London, the Government intends to remove both the overarching powers and duties of the FEFC's regional office and the co-ordinating influence of the London TEC Council. We will now have to rely on a head office in Coventry to determine a framework for collecting and analysing information, for agreeing priorities and for bringing together plans. It would be much better to fulfil these functions regionally.

I tabled the new clause and the amendment as one London local MP among 74. In 1987, it was remarked by economists that, until then, the London economy had been growing more slowly than that of the rest of the country, but that the dramatic effect of big bang had accelerated growth in London, causing the city not only to grow faster than the rest of the country but to lead the country's growth. In my constituency, 20 times as many people are employed as in the average constituency—both nationally and in London; 22 per cent. of the working population of greater London work in my constituency. If the remaining 78 per cent. is divided by the 73 other London seats, the resultant figure is somewhat lower than 1.1 per cent.—that is, 5 per cent. of my 22 per cent.

The hon. Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs) is in the Chamber. When I was Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the working population of my constituency alone exceeded the entire working population of Northern Ireland by 50 per cent. If there is such a great concentration in one constituency—which will of course fall under one particular learning and skills council—one fears that the benefits of that engine of economic activity in the heart of the capital will not be felt by the rest of London unless there is serious co-ordination. I have already referred to the London skills forecasting unit.

The Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks), is himself a London Member. Since I have been a Member of the House, we have seen increasing integration of the health service of London; policing has become borough based; and we are about to welcome the mayor and the Greater London Assembly.

I have one suspicion about the Government's action. As London will be the first of our cities with a mayor, that will give it pole position. That is why a co-ordinating committee has a relevance in London that it might not have in Birmingham or Manchester—as the Minister for Education and Employment made clear in the House of Lords. If London has such a committee, there is a risk that other people will want one too—as is revealed by the Liberal Democrat proposals. That would be easier to avoid if the issue were left out of the Bill.

Through the Government's initial response in the House of Lords and the impression they give us that they should be trusted—as there has been silence on the matter since then—they are saying, in effect, that they can be relied on to deliver a sensible arrangement, or that such an arrangement will emerge because they endorse the reason for it. However, there seems to be no reciprocity in other amendments tabled for debate; although the Government are asking London to trust them, they would not necessarily be trusted because of the statutory provisions that they want to implement—especially in relation to the cessation of TECs and their assets.

I do not want to leap forward to a discussion of those proposals; in tabling my provisions, I want only to be given a clearer idea of the results the Government envisage from a co-ordinating body whose importance—*[Interruption.]* I realise that the Minister is not trying to speak to me, but inevitably I can see his lips moving.

The Government should make clear what they think will occur in London—with much greater substance, structure and form than has been given so far.

Mr. Allan: I speak to new clause 1 and amendment No. 104, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) and me. They highlight two important matters to which the Learning and Skills Council should pay attention.

New clause 1 addresses the shortage subjects of science and engineering, where problems could arise owing to the number of recruits across the board, but especially in respect of the number of women entering those professions. The new clause would require the Learning and Skills Council to collect data on the number of people both entering and completing courses in those subjects and to break down the information by gender, so that we can consider the number of women as a separate category.

The background to the new clause is that there are too few women at all levels of science and engineering. That is a matter of concern for the Learning and Skills Council, because the problem is especially acute in post-16 education. Up to GCSE, all girls study science and mathematics, so 51 per cent. of those obtaining a maths GCSE and 38 per cent. of those obtaining a physics GCSE are female students. However, the percentage of female students completing A-level courses is down from 51 per cent. to 33 per cent. for maths and from 38 per cent. to only 20 per cent. for physics.

Clearly, there is a huge fall-off at the A-level end of the education spectrum and the number of female students is further depleted by the time they reach higher education, where women constituted only 14 per cent. of applicants to engineering degree courses in 1998. However, there are variations across the different disciplines in engineering. For example, 24 per cent. of the applicants to study chemical engineering are women, but in mechanical engineering the figure is only 9 per cent. I hope that the House will recognise from those figures that the number of women studying science and maths falls off dramatically from the age of 16 onwards.

The Learning and Skills Council will have a direct responsibility for female students over 16. Further education often offers engineering courses as an end in themselves, but they suffer from a fall-off in numbers even though they can provide a gateway into higher education. The council should therefore take action to deal with that problem.

Although groups such as Women into Science and Engineering have performed valuable work and raised the number of female engineering graduates from 7 per cent. in 1984 to 15 per cent. today, that work is not in itself sufficient. We hope that it will be boosted by further Government action, particularly through the new bodies, such as the Learning and Skills Council, that they are setting up.

There are a variety of reasons for the figures, and one explanation can be found at the careers guidance level. Amendment No. 104 deals with careers guidance more

generally, but women appear to be pointed in directions that are not entirely helpful in achieving a balance between the genders on engineering courses.

The Department for Education and Employment could do more to promote active role models for women going into science and engineering. Such role models are perceived not to exist and that creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. The fewer women who study such subjects, the fewer there are to encourage other women to copy and aspire to their example.

If we do not tackle the problem, we shall miss out on a huge pool of talent. Women make just as competent scientists and engineers as anyone else. However, only 14 per cent. of the graduates in these subjects are women and if we were to achieve a 50:50 gender balance, a huge gap would be filled. A significant number of women would make good professional scientists and engineers, but for one reason or another they are not entering those professions.

Britain needs top-class engineers. By increasing the number of women in science and engineering, we would not only enhance and the assist the abilities of women wishing to enter those professions, but we would enhance the reputation of the professions as a whole. Men who are thinking of entering science and engineering may similarly be put off if they perceive them to be not truly modern, representative professions, but ones that conform to old-fashioned stereotypes about what science and engineering are for.

If the Government are not able to accept the new clause, I hope that they will at least accept the principle behind it. Will they give us an idea of how their new structure of a Learning and Skills Council that is responsible for policy in this matter will improve on the status quo? I hope that they will accept that they need to improve the position and that they will tell us that a priority of the Learning and Skills Council will be to achieve a better representation of women in the shortage subjects that I have mentioned.

I do not need to remind the Minister that this issue also follows through into the teaching profession. If people are not given the opportunity to study science and engineering at A-level and at degree level, they will not be able to become teachers. We have shortages in those key subjects and the Government are trying to deal with that problem. However, the first way of increasing the intake into teaching is to increase the number of graduates. That means expanding the pool across the genders.

9.30 pm

Amendment No. 104 is a response to many concerns that have been raised by the careers service about the new focus that the Government will have on 14 to 19-year-olds. We debated the issues in Committee and I do not intend to rehearse all the arguments about Connexions. I merely propose that the Government could provide reassurance by indicating that the national Learning and Skills Council will at least collect data on guidance services. We are all receiving plenty of anecdotal evidence about how careers services are being withdrawn. I have been given examples of schools, for example, which say, "We have only a few disaffected youngsters as a proportion of the yearly cohorts, but many others will not have the quality time and attention which all youngsters require. The individual vocation and guidance interview is pivotal in all 11 to 16-year-old students' lives."

Many schools reflect this and ask, "How can we have equality of opportunity if we risk moving into a situation in which guidance services, while they are properly focused on disaffected youths in the key 14 to 19-year-old group, are not available to others?"

When the Government rejected an amendment proposed by my noble Friend Baroness Sharp of Guildford, they indicated that they do not wish to see statutory provision to the effect that we must maintain the level of services. In refusing to accept that amendment, they made a clear commitment to the careers and guidance services as a whole that the Government did not intend to see large-scale withdrawal of services from other groups of youngsters. We believe that they will not be able to justify their position unless they accept measures of the sort that we are proposing in amendment No. 104.

If the Government accepted that, we hope that they would seek to accept a base-line study to ascertain exactly what is happening. One of the problems is that we are not aware of the full picture within the careers and guidance services. Some of the provision takes place in schools, some by careers companies, some by other advice agencies, some by employers and some by training agencies.

It would be helpful if the Government were to require the national Learning and Skills Council to establish such a base-line study at this stage and then to report back regularly on it, so that we could see whether Connexions has led to withdrawal of service in other areas as advisers are diverted, or whether, as I think the Government have said they hope will happen, the broad range of provision available to all youngsters will be maintained at the same time as an enhanced service is offered to priority groups, preferably with additional funding made available under the comprehensive spending review. I understand that the Government intend that to happen.

I hope that the Minister will be able to respond positively to our suggestion that we undertake serious research into what is happening in careers guidance services. I hope also that he will make a commitment to report back in future so that we can establish whether the sort of fears that are being expressed to us from throughout the country are being realised, or whether the Government can pull out of the hat the magic rabbit that will deliver an enhanced service and a broad range of quality service to all youngsters, no matter whether they suffer social disadvantage or whether they are performing adequately at school, and thus risk being excluded from those on whom careers services will be focused.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I support amendment No. 104. I apologise to the Minister and hon. Members who served on the Committee if I go over some of the ground that was covered in Committee.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan) spoke of the real fears of many in the careers service and in the school sector about the provisions that are set out in the Bill. I can only echo those fears from the view of my constituency. That was what prompted me to intervene on Second Reading, having had a useful meeting with Peter Renshaw of Somerset careers. My feelings and sense of concern have been increased by

[Mr. David Heath]

letters that I have received from several secondary schools in my constituency, including Frome community college, Huish Episcopi school and Sexey's school, Bruton. They all make the self-same points, which I shall bring to the attention of the House.

Not one of the principals or head teachers who wrote to me expressed discontent with the Government's motivation and intention: they made it clear that prioritising social inclusion was an entirely meritorious aim which they supported and wanted to be reflected in their careers service. Their concern was that there should be no diversion of the resources necessary to provide an adequate service to all children, especially year 11 students who need their school careers service if they are to take full advantage of the opportunities available to them and enter either training or careers that are of value to them.

It strikes me that we are harking back to the debate of recent weeks about elitism in university admissions. The one way in which to break down such obstacles is to provide good guidance at the appropriate time to youngsters who are studying in comprehensive schools throughout our country—not only those who are falling behind, whether for social or educational reasons, but brighter kids who can profit from entering higher education and need to talk through the opportunities available to them if they are to take full advantage of them. There is a need to ensure that the new system continues to provide the same level of careers service in local education authority schools.

A cause of discontent expressed in a letter to me from Mr. Barry Bates, principal of Frome community college, is that the changes will adversely affect the integrity of the careers service as it stands. We are having difficulty finding permanent replacements for staff who are leaving the local careers service; it is a good careers service that achieves a great deal in our schools, but the uncertainty that surrounds the Government's proposals puts at risk the integrity of careers service teams.

The Minister can put our minds at rest by accepting our amendment. That would make it clear that there was an intention to revisit the matter and ensure that overall resources were not diminished by the changes. Not only could baseline data be collected but, even more importantly, baseline provision could be established, which would ensure that every child had access to a basic entitlement, irrespective of any additional support given to some. The Minister could also reassure us by making us confident that funding will be sufficient to meet all of the objectives that the Government have set out for the new service. We do not know how it could be provided—perhaps the comprehensive spending review will provide.

We in Somerset know that, on the whole, our county achieves good GCSE results and that we have relatively low levels of social deprivation, so we accept that we will not be winners. There is a separate argument to be had about schools funding, but we know that if resources are to be redirected to address social deprivation through careers services, the big increases will go to places other than Somerset. What we do not want is children in our schools to be losers. That is the reassurance that head teachers, parents and students in my constituency and my county of Somerset want to hear this evening.

Mr. Wicks: At this hour, several important and detailed points have been raised. I shall do my best to answer them, but if I do not do so in the detail required, I apologise and promise to write to right hon. and hon. Members later.

I understand the Liberal Democrats' position on new clause 19 and their allegiance to regionalism. We discussed in some detail the pros and cons of that in relation to learning and skills in the Standing Committee. The new clause is designed to establish a relationship between the learning and skills councils and the regional dimension embodied in the regional development agencies. I am sympathetic to that aim, but I think that the new clause presents the wrong course.

As we have said before, the regional dimension of an influential role for RDAs and their regional skills strategies is clearly provided for in the Bill. Furthermore, local learning and skills councils will draw in broad representation from outstanding local individuals and the wider business community, with relevant expertise to ensure that Government-supported learning and skills delivery meets the needs of individuals, businesses and their communities at national, regional, sectoral and local level.

We expect local LSCs to play an important role in partnerships established by regional development agencies and other bodies, such as local authorities and the Small Business Service. I hope that with those reassurances and the more detailed reassurances that I gave in Committee about the consultation process between the RDAs and the LSCs, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) will be reassured of our good intention to relate the local to the regional with regard to learning and skills.

On new clause 10 and the issue of London, I thank the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) for drawing this important matter to our attention. As a London Member myself, I take it extremely seriously. I remind the House that the London development partnership recommended that there should be five local LSCs in London and a co-ordinating mechanism to make sure that pan-London issues are dealt with effectively. The right hon. Gentleman, as a student of London governance over the years, understands the importance of London and the difficulties relating to boundaries within London.

At one stage there were some interesting arguments in favour of one learning and skills council for London, but because of the sheer size we thought that that would be a step too far for the interests of Londoners. We have repeatedly made it clear that we accept both conclusions presented to us—the need for five LSCs for London, and the need for a pan-London mechanism that would operate with a fairly light touch. There should be no question of our presenting the House with a recommendation for a new layer of bureaucracy.

As we prepare the ground for the new post-16 landscape, the Government office for London is engaged in discussions with key external partners, including representatives of the local authorities, training and enterprise councils, colleges, employers, trade unions and

the voluntary sector, about how the co-ordinating arrangement might operate and the issues that it would address. It would then be for the LSC chair and chief executive, in discussion with the five London local LSCs, to decide on the detailed arrangements. The work is under way already. We do not believe that we need statutory provision for those arrangements.

In describing what we need as a light touch, I do not mean one that is insubstantial. The issues in Greater London are considerable. Clearly, at a time when Parliament has re-established a Greater London Authority and the people of London have just elected their first Mayor, it is entirely appropriate that we examine Greater London issues. With those assurances, I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will withdraw his amendment. I thank him for raising an important issue.

In speaking to the Government amendments to schedules 1 and 2, I give due credit to the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell), whose eye for detail first enabled us in Committee to spot the possible need for an amendment to schedule 1. The point that he made was that the chair or chief executive of the national Learning and Skills Council, both of whom will be LSC board members, should be eligible for re-appointment to their additional roles as chair and chief executive, as well as for re-appointment as LSC board members.

The hon. Gentleman agreed at that time to withdraw his amendment to allow for an examination of that point in relation to other provisions in the Bill. The result is a set of technical amendments in respect of the national LSC, local LSCs, the Welsh council and its committees, as well as the adult learning inspectorate, which ensure that provisions in the relevant schedules are consistent in their effects on issues of membership, tenure and re-appointment. The hon. Gentleman will, I hope, gain some well-deserved satisfaction from seeing that Government amendment No. 42 is identical to that tabled by him in Committee. I thank him for his close scrutiny of our Bill.

9.45 pm

In respect of new clause 1, the Government entirely agree with the Liberal Democrats about the importance of improving the participation of women in science and engineering courses. The fact that I am replying briefly to the considered speech of the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) takes nothing away from that, or the importance of participation in the industries for which they prepare.

The number of girls and women studying science has gone up in recent years, and the DTI has been actively campaigning to improve the situation still further, especially in engineering. Of course, the LSC will collect comprehensive information on subjects being studied and on student achievements in all areas of post-16 learning, including science and engineering courses, and we expect it to make the figures publicly available. I think that that is the assurance that the hon. Gentleman wanted. The FEFC publishes statistics for each academic year on student numbers in the various subject areas, which includes a breakdown of students by gender, age and mode of study. We expect the LSC to continue this activity, and the provisions in the Bill allow for that without any further amendment. The hon. Gentleman may therefore consider withdrawing what I think was an important probing amendment on an important subject.

I understand and sympathise with the sentiments behind amendment No. 104, which calls for information. On the basis of that, we have had a brief discussion on the nature of Connexions as a universal service. I shall say no more about that now, because a later set of amendments will enable us to discuss it a little more fully. I say simply that we are committed to Connexions as a universal service for all of our 13-year-olds to 19-year-olds.

The Government are already developing systems to capture information relating to the local information, advice and guidance services, including their quality, efficiency and impact. The Secretary of State will set priorities for information, advice and guidance provision as part of the process of allocating funds to the LSC. Depending on the nature of these priorities, the Secretary of State will devolve responsibility for managing the appropriate information systems needed to support him.

Finally, I come to the remaining Government amendments to the LSC's functions. We have always made it crystal clear that the provisions in the Bill which set out the LSC's functions will encompass both work force development and economic regeneration activity. Indeed, these matters are at the heart of the Bill. Amendments Nos. 31 and 32 make that explicit.

In Committee, we reflected on the priority for work force development at the local level through an amendment to the provisions governing the local LSC's plans. Amendment No. 31 to clause 16 represents the second half of a commitment we made in Committee. It makes it explicit that at the national level the LSC's strategy must set out how it intends to develop the skills of people in the work force, while ensuring that that does not inadvertently affect the interpretation of the LSC's overall remit.

In Government amendment No. 32 we return to the territory of local LSC plans. It makes explicit our commitment to economic development and regeneration by providing that a local LSC's plans must include a statement of the likely affect of its activities on the wider economic development and regeneration of its area. No one should now be able to doubt what is already set out in the "Learning to Succeed" White Paper and the prospectus for the Learning and Skills Council: our commitment to give adults the opportunity to continue learning throughout their working life.

I hope that with those explanations and assurances—

Mr. Brooke: I do not wish to be derogatory about the hon. Gentleman's speech, whose spirit I very much appreciate, but he did not really add anything to what I said in speaking to my amendment. However, he said that he would write to me. It would be extremely helpful if he would write with rather more substantive comments on what the Government office for London is achieving in terms of negotiations with the principal stakeholders.

Mr. Wicks: What I sought to do, albeit with an eye slightly on the clock, given the hour and the business before us, was to say that we need a body representing the whole of the Greater London perspective. We are in consultation and we are developing our plans. The right hon. Gentleman, as a fellow Londoner, will be the first to know when we have developed our plans. I hope that the assurances that I have given mean that the hon. Member for Harrogate and

[Mr. Wicks]

Knaresborough will consider withdrawing the amendment and that hon. Members will support the Government amendments.

Mr. Willis: I thank the Minister for the courtesy of his replies and for accepting that the issues that we raised, even at this late hour, are serious. It is rather sad that we are rushing through the amendments, which have enormous substance. The right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) was right to make a crucial point about London. It is sad that we have not debated that properly. However, with the assurances that we have received, especially about collecting statistics on women in engineering and science and the effectiveness of the new careers service, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 5

PROVISION OF FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): I beg to move amendment No. 87, in page 4, line 24, at end add—

'(4) Any funding by the Council of provision of education and training under this Act (whether direct or indirect) shall be in accordance with the arrangements and formula contained in any order made under subsection (1) of section (*Free Schools*).'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: No. 76, in clause 7, page 5, line 21, at end insert—

'(aa) on condition that the quantum of grant per pupil in each school shall not be less than that applicable in the final school year for which the local education authority had responsibility for funding pupils above compulsory school age; and'.

New clause 13—*Free schools*—

'.—(1) The Secretary of State shall by order establish a mechanism for determining the funding of all maintained schools (the funding formula).

(2) The funding formula shall be on the same basis for every school but must have regard to:

(a) the numbers on roll at 1st October in each school year

(b) the age of pupils at any school including any below or above the age of compulsory schooling

(c) such other special factors affecting the needs of pupils or the cost of provision as the Secretary of State may determine:

(3) The governors and teachers at each school, as the case may be, shall use their allocation under the formula and such other revenues as are at their disposal to conduct education at that school; and in discharging their duties may draw on local education authorities or other bodies for free or paid-for advice and support and other educational services.

(4) On the coming into force of the funding formula introduced under subsection (1) sections 45 to 53 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 shall be repealed.

(5) Any order made by the Secretary of State under subsection (1) may contain such consequential, incidental, supplementary or transitional provisions or savings (including provisions amending, repealing or revoking enactments) as the Secretary of State considers appropriate.'.

Mrs. May: Amendment No. 87 is a paving amendment for new clause 13. I shall therefore consider them together. First, I should like to consider amendment No. 76, which relates to the all-important issue of funding for sixth forms in schools. It would introduce protection for sixth form funding, and would ensure that schools that currently have sixth forms knew that there was some certainty about their future funding, which they will receive under the new arrangements from the Learning and Skills Council via the local education authorities.

There is considerable anxiety in schools with sixth forms, especially those with small sixth forms, often because of their geographical circumstances. That applies especially to rural secondary schools, whose numbers will not be sufficient for a large sixth form. However, without that sixth form, the opportunities for young people who want to continue their education post-16 would be remarkably limited. It is important that sixth forms in schools can remain. However, there is real fear that sixth forms will be under threat in future. One of those fears is caused by the swingeing powers in the Bill to declare school sixth forms inadequate, or to declare weaknesses and therefore set their closure in train.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) will raise the subject of inadequate sixth forms later tonight.

Mr. Clappison: And tomorrow morning.

Mrs. May: Indeed. Some important amendments remain to be debated.

I want to deal with the second issue that worries schools with sixth forms: funding. The Minister may say that the Government have given schools some comfort in their guarantee on sixth form funding. However, as most heads will say when asked about the matter, they believe that the guarantee is not worth the paper it is written on. The guarantee states that the funding for school sixth forms will be maintained provided that the numbers are maintained. There has been much debate about what the Secretary of State meant by that phrase. It has been suggested to many schools that if their numbers fall, even by one or two students, the guarantee no longer holds, and that their sixth form funding will come under threat, with all the attendant consequences for the future of that sixth form.

To illustrate the anxiety in schools, we surveyed London heads of schools with sixth forms and asked for their views about the Bill's proposed changes to sixth form funding and the structure of post-16 education. The answers were illuminating. First, the House may care to know that 62 per cent. of those heads felt that the Government were pursuing a levelling agenda in education for 16 to 19-year-olds. It is interesting to note that 70 per cent. of the schools surveyed believed that funding for their school had fallen in the past three years under the Labour Government. In relation to the future of their sixth forms, 97 per cent. of heads believed that pupils should have a choice in provision—between a sixth form in a school and other providers. Sad to say, the Bill could reduce that choice, as school sixth forms might be closed on the back of the Government's proposals.

Sixty per cent. of the heads felt that the future of their sixth form was under threat as a result of the Government's actions. For heads, schools, parents and pupils, that threat has introduced uncertainty about the future of the provision in those schools and where pupils

can choose to go to undertake their post-16 education. We want to provide a measure of certainty for those schools and take away the uncertainty and the threat. That is why we tabled amendment No. 76, which would give schools a more genuine guarantee than the phoney guarantee provided by the Secretary of State and would ensure that they would not suffer a loss in funding for their sixth form as a result of the changed structure and the changed funding mechanism.

It is interesting to note that House of Commons Library figures show that schools with sixth forms get significantly better GCSE results. There is a knock-on effect down the school. It is not just about allowing pupils to have the opportunity to choose to go to a sixth form in a school environment rather than a sixth-form college or a further education college. The provision of a sixth form in a school has an effect on teaching and pupils' achievement in the rest of the school.

Mr. Willis: Will the hon. Lady clarify her final comments? Does she not agree with the latest research which shows that the smaller the sixth form, the less likely students are to do well? Sixth forms with fewer than 50 students perform extraordinarily badly compared with, for instance, sixth forms with more than 200 students or, indeed, sixth-form colleges and even FE colleges.

Mrs. May: It is important to examine the circumstances of any particular school. If, for example, the hon. Gentleman is saying that he would prefer to remove the sixth form of a small rural secondary school purely because of its size and take choice away from pupils, I do not accept that that is the way forward. Pupils should have the choice that is available. It is interesting that, in many other aspects of education, the hon. Gentleman would join the Government in talking about the importance of teaching in small groups. The problem that is often mentioned in relation to small sixth forms, and, indeed, the issue that has underlain part of the debate about the definition of weaknesses in schedule 7, is whether a small sixth form class should be declared as weak purely because of its numbers. One cannot say that, simply because a group is small, it will not achieve or that teaching quality will be lower.

Mr. Willis: First, I intervened to question the hon. Lady's assumption that all sixth forms appear to have better results than schools, sixth-form colleges or FE colleges. That is not the case. On the latter point, of course I would never argue that small groups are necessarily bad for teaching. However, I would argue that, even in a rural area, a school's ability to give students choice and diversity in a sixth form with numbers as low as 50 would be seriously hampered.

Mrs. May: I am happy to clarify what I said for the hon. Gentleman. The figures from the House of Commons Library show that schools with sixth forms get better GCSE results, so having a sixth-form has a knock-on effect down the school, as it provides role models and raises the quality of teaching throughout the school.

Mr. Willis *indicated dissent.*

Mrs. May: The hon. Gentleman shakes his head. I am happy to provide him with the independent House of Commons Library figures, which clearly show that schools with sixth forms get better GCSE results.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

It being Ten o'clock further consideration of the Bill stood adjourned.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, the Learning and Skills Bill *[Lords]* may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Question agreed to.

As amended in the Standing Committee, again considered.

Question again proposed, That the amendment be made.

Mrs. May: I have to say that I am sorry to hear the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) making those comments about small sixth forms in rural schools, because, from the sound of it, the Liberal Democrat policy is to abolish such sixth forms and put the pupils into other provision.

Mr. Willis: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. May: I shall give way once more, and then I wish to make progress.

Mr. Willis: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady, who is generous and courteous, as always. *Hansard* will show that I never mentioned rural schools; it was the hon. Lady who mentioned them. If she is extrapolating Liberal Democrat policy from what she believes I have said, she will clearly need to read the record.

Mrs. May: I will be happy to look at the record, and I am sure that it will show that the hon. Gentleman has not contradicted my interpretation of the Liberal Democrat view on small sixth forms in rural schools.

Mr. Chaytor: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. May: No, I want to make progress.

Amendment No. 76 clearly aims to provide certainty to schools that are worried about the future funding and very existence of their sixth forms and their ability to maintain them. They are worried about the impact of that on teaching and on pupils in earlier year groups. They are worried also about the impact on choice for students in future.

Many students choose to stay on in the school environment for their post-16 education, rather than moving to a sixth form college or further education college. Sadly, some choose to go to an FE college and then find that they have made the wrong choice and want to go back to their school. It is important that students have that choice and can actively decide to remain in the school environment and to benefit from the pastoral support and extra-curricular activities that are provided, rather than simply having the opportunity to go to a tertiary college.

Amendment No. 87 is a paving amendment for new clause 13, which would introduce a different method of funding pupils and give schools the power to choose how to spend all of their budget. This subject will not come as a surprise to the Minister. The Secretary of State referred

[Mrs. May]

to it in his speech to the National Association of Head Teachers on 1 June which led to *The Daily Telegraph* headline, "Blunkett frees state schools". The article said:

> All state schools will be set free of local education authority control and will effectively be given grant-maintained status, says David Blunkett, the Education Secretary.

We know full well from long experience of the Secretary of State's speeches that, to understand his intentions, one has to look behind the headlines and search for the substance. Sadly, as with so many of his headlines, when we delve into the detail—with this Government, the devil is always in the detail—we discover that, although he claims to be freeing state schools, the proposals do nothing of the sort. There is a certain sense of déjà vu about that.

About two years ago, the Government introduced "fair funding"—their new method of funding schools, which was lauded as a measure by which the freedoms of grant-maintained schools would effectively be provided again for schools; they would get 100 per cent. of their money and be able to decide how to spend it. Of course, that was another example of the triumph of spin over substance. In fact, far from schools being given 100 per cent. of their budgets, funds are being held back by local education authorities.

LEAs can hold back 89 different categories of expenditure under four different categories of responsibility. Once again, we are told that 100 per cent. of the funding will go to schools and that LEAs will be funded for four specific categories of responsibility, but the Secretary of State has in fact proposed not that schools will get 100 per cent. of their funding directly, but that a Green Paper will be issued for consultation.

We all became interested in the fact that the Department for Education and Employment might publish a Green Paper on school funding, but we now find that the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is to issue a document which, among other local authority funding matters, will refer to LEA funding. Far from "Blunkett frees state schools", it is a case of the Green Paper being issued by the Deputy Prime Minister and, like most things that the right hon. Gentleman issues, it is likely to sink without trace.

Conservative Members genuinely believe in free schools and in schools being self-governing. We believe that they should have their budgets and the freedom to exercise choice over how they spend them. After all, the Conservative Government created grant-maintained status, but the Labour Government have abolished it. Amendment No. 87 and new clause 13 would provide a new basis of funding that would enable schools to be entirely self-governing. One of the first issues raised with one when one visits a school is the degree of Government prescription, not only in relation to the amount of bureaucracy that the school faces but, and more particularly, in relation to its funding.

Schools do not have the freedom to decide how to spend money for themselves. They increasingly find that money is held back not only by LEAs, but, more particularly, by the Department for Education and Employment, to be spent purely on political priorities set by the Government, rather than on the practical priorities that the schools know are needed for their pupils.

I recently met head teachers in Kent who complained about funding and prescription. When I asked them whether they would prefer to have the money and the power to spend it themselves, their response was simple—to a man and woman, they just said yes. Amendment No. 87 and new clause 13 would enable the Government to put into practice the headline that David Blunkett got into *The Daily Telegraph*.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady knows the conventions of the House.

Mrs. May: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I refer of course to the headline that the Secretary of State achieved in *The Daily Telegraph*. Amendment No. 87 and new clause 13 give the Government an opportunity to put their legislation where the Secretary of State's mouth was. They give them the opportunity to say, "Yes, we actually want schools to be free; we want them to have their budgets; and we want them to be able to spend them in the way that they wish."

I fear that the Minister will oppose and reject amendment No. 87 and new clause 13 because, behind all the headlines, the Government have a centralising agenda. They have a bidding culture, in which spending priorities for schools are determined in Whitehall. They have a "one size fits all" approach and they think that the man in Whitehall always knows what is right for pupils throughout the country.

If we really want to raise standards, we should set the schools free. If we want to raise standards, we should enable schools to maintain their sixth forms. For the information of the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), the figures from the House of Commons Library show that 9 per cent. more pupils achieve five or more A to C grades at GCSE at schools with sixth forms than at schools without sixth forms. That is a clear message about the impact of school sixth forms.

Mr. Chaytor: Does the hon. Lady accept that of the schools with sixth forms, a significant proportion will be selective schools and therefore have a different intake? Of those without sixth forms, by definition, none is selective. It is inevitable that there is a higher percentage pass rate at GCSE because of the involvement of selection.

Mrs. May: As the hon. Gentleman told us earlier that grammar schools as well as other schools were not achieving in academic terms, that was a very silly argument for him to produce.

If we want to raise standards in schools, we should set the schools free. Grant-maintained schools have shown what can be achieved. They increased the number of teachers and the number of courses. They offered extra choice for pupils. They introduced new music departments. They added sixth forms to schools that wanted them. They raised standards because they had their budgets. They had the freedom. They were self-governing.

Amendment No. 87 and new clause 13 will enable schools not just to enjoy the benefits of that freedom again, but, most important, to raise standards for pupils, to benefit pupils throughout the country and to do what the Government claim they want to do, but what their policies are not doing: ensuring that every young person

develops their full potential and that we genuinely have an education system that provides high-quality education and high standards for all our children.

Mr. Willis: The reason why we have got to 10.10 pm and we are still not discussing the essence of the Bill is perhaps explained by the skills taskforce, which reported on Tuesday that 7 million adults have a lower level of literacy than an average 11-year-old and that a quarter of adults function at an innumerate level. The reason for that is the 18 years of Conservative education policy, which produced the most appalling levels of literacy and numeracy anywhere in Europe. The reason why Conservative Members do not want to speak about the Bill and to address it is because it is an indictment of what they left behind.

On amendment No. 76, the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) clearly has an obsession about sixth forms. I hope that we will discuss much of the sixth-form agenda, and small sixth forms in particular, during consideration of a later group of amendments, but I must respond at least briefly. I hoped that she would make the point—it is a real problem—about Government policy on the funding of sixth forms in the transitional stage. They guarantee that, if their numbers stay the same, they will get the same amount of money. If the numbers go down, they will not, yet if the numbers go up or double, there is no guarantee that funding will rise in proportion. When the Minister replies to amendment No. 76, she must address that specific issue. Sixth forms cannot plan for the future when they cannot have the guarantee of funding, which is clearly necessary.

The amendments were yet another diversionary tactic away from the essence of the Bill. We have had discussion of sex, selection and grammar schools, and we are now on to free schools—or free-for-all schools. I do not need to remind the House—I was one of the people who worked under the glorious education system that existed until 1997—that the Tories want to return yet again to division, and to the idea that standards can be raised only by competition and not by co-operation. It is a travesty for the hon. Lady to talk about the grant-maintained schools movement being the saviour of our education system. The divisions that were created by the ballots organised for GM status caused immeasurable harm in authorities up and down the country, and a return to that would be desperate.

10.15 pm

The Tory policy of free schools is based on a series of myths about local education authorities. Before the hon. Lady attempts to intervene, let me say that not all local authorities are perfect. Many of them leave a lot to be desired in terms of supporting their schools.

The first myth is that local education authorities waste too much money on administration. In fact, LEAs spend less than 2 per cent. of their income on administration and most of that goes on the administration of appeals, the special educational needs system, the payroll and other essential expenditure. That pales into insignificance compared with the administrative costs of most schools or those of the Department for Education and Employment, which are estimated at about 5 per cent.

The second Tory myth about local education authorities is that they retain vast resources. They do nothing of the sort. Indeed, 94 per cent. of LEAs delegate at least 75 per cent. of their budget and the average figure, according to the DFEE's latest statistics, is 82.4 per cent.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): The hon. Gentleman omits to say that that is a result of legislation passed under the Conservative Government, which obliged LEAs to do just that. Until LEAs were obliged by legislation to start delegating money in the way that he described and slimming down their administration, they were far more cumbersome and burdensome bodies than he now tries to pretend.

Mr. Willis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his characteristically frank intervention. I am not disputing the fact that the previous Government introduced the arrangements; I am complimenting them for doing so. That makes it even more ludicrous that those on the Tory Front Bench are now saying that the arrangements that they introduced are inadequate. If that is the case, who is to blame but the then Secretary of State?

An analysis of the money that local education authorities hold back for central expenditure shows that the vast bulk of it is to provide services for special educational needs and for people with disabilities. If the hon. Lady is saying that they should not hold back that money or that they do not do so with the consent of their schools and school governors, as applies in most cases, clearly the legislation that was introduced by the Government whom she supported is not working.

The third myth is that LEAs divert money that is planned for education into other sources and that, somehow, it gets taken out of the education budget and moved elsewhere. Figures from the House of Commons Library show that when the Tories left office, the contribution by local authorities to education budgets in 1996–97 was no less than £699.3 million and that, in 1999–2000, the contribution that local authorities made in excess of SSA to school budgets was £387.7 million. That is hardly a picture of local authorities taking money away from schools.

The whole essence of the free school movement, espoused by the hon. Member for Maidenhead in new clause 13 and amendment No. 87, is that we should have central funding. Heads and schools are attracted to central funding, and, as a former head, I would be the first to admit that. However, the new clause provides that, with a few exceptions, all children in all schools in England would get the same amount of money from central funds. The hon. Lady should be honest and admit that the cost of funding every school to the highest level of funding would be £4.4 billion. If, however, the hon. Lady does not intend to fund all schools equitably, she must say where the funds will be taken from to be spent elsewhere. If no increase in central spending is intended, current Tory policy means that some 40 per cent. of schools would see a reduction in their budgets in order to meet the free schools pledge.

The other point that the hon. Lady has to answer is that the £0.4 billion that local authorities spend on schools would have to be found either centrally or from somewhere else. I doubt whether any hon. Member would be prepared to urge local councillors to say, during a local

[Mr. Willis]

election campaign, that the Government were funding schools now, but that we needed to spend another £400 million to top up what the Government should be spending. That is nonsense, but it is the reality of what the free school movement would mean.

What evidence is there that our schools want to be free? What evidence is there that small rural primary schools want to be their own admission authority, to run all their services, to be responsible for their grounds and every other function or to organise contracts on a daily basis? They do not, and if the hon. Lady were honest about her discussions with schools in rural areas, she would agree that they want less responsibility. They want to be able to get on with teaching and leading their staff. Amendment No. 87 and new clause 13 would plunge our schools into chaos, and I hope that the House will reject them.

Jacqui Smith: I shall keep my response brief because—as has been mentioned—we have not yet got on to the key issues of the Bill. The Opposition have not concentrated on those either. This debate has more to do with the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) performing a warm-up act for the Leader of the Opposition's major speech on education next week than with a serious willingness to engage in the debate.

New clause 13 seeks to establish a national funding formula, applying on the same basis to all schools. As we have heard tonight, the previous Administration often said that they were in favour of greater delegation, but, in reality, they did little to achieve it. However, we have acted. Under fair funding, there is not only greater transparency, there is also greater delegation.

Later this week, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will publish once again tables showing expenditure by local education authorities, and their delegation rates. Those tables will show a substantial increase in delegation, brought about by the targets we have set and by the requirements to delegate repairs and maintenance fully, as well as personnel and finance administration.

Mrs. May: If the Minister is claiming that the Government are so much in favour of delegating money to schools, why did they abolish grant-maintained status?

Jacqui Smith: We have succeeded in delegating more money to all schools. Along with those matters that I mentioned, we have delegated personnel and finance administration, school meals in secondary schools—with the option for primary schools—insurance, if schools want it, and a number of smaller items. In all, an extra £1 billion is available for delegation.

Although we have achieved greater delegation and will go on increasing it, we have done so with a responsible attitude towards pupils. The Opposition talk of free schools, but they are less keen to acknowledge that there are significant issues that need to be addressed. As the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) said, pupils with special educational needs cannot be dealt with just through a formula; they are not numbers. LEAs are needed to take a wider view of their needs. What would the Opposition do about those children?

The Government have inherited lots of failing schools and are making strenuous efforts to turn them round—efforts which owe much to the involvement of LEAs and need flexible and appropriate funding. Presumably, the Opposition would set those schools free to flounder.

School transport is a delicate and difficult matter which needs co-ordination, especially if pupils' rights to transport to denominational schools—or even, dare I say it, grammar schools—are to be actually reflected in the available services. Again, how would the Opposition cope?

While the Opposition are thinking about what they would do, we have made clear what we will do. We are reforming the funding of education for those aged 16 to 19; part of that will be the funding of sixth forms via the Learning and Skills Council, but through LEAs so that local needs are properly addressed and schools continue to get funds from a single source. That illustrates how unnecessary amendment No. 87 is. We will be reforming the very heart of the education funding system in ways indicated by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State when he spoke earlier this month about the forthcoming Green Paper.

In that Green Paper, we shall set out options for arrangements that would be fair to different parts of the country, are more transparent and provide more predictability and stability than the standard spending assessment system with which we have to cope now.

We shall also explore the possibility of having separate budgets for schools and LEA central functions, so that we can be much clearer about the funding intended for schools. That would make clear the amount of funding that was being made available and end once and for all annual arguments about what schools should be getting. We will do that on the basis of discussion and consideration and not on the basis of a policy drawn up on the back of an envelope, such as the Opposition have provided this evening.

Quite aside from the fact—as was argued in Committee—that it is entirely unnecessary to put our sixth-form funding guarantee in terms in the Bill, there are other problems with amendment No. 76. On funding, spending in schools fell by £60 per pupil in the last three Budgets of the Conservative Government. Under this Government, spending will increase by £300 per pupil. Given those facts, I feel that our guarantee has rather more basis than any comments that the hon. Member for Maidenhead may have made this evening.

The hon. Member suggested that there was a fear for school sixth forms. If pupil numbers reduce, all that will happen is that the funds will reduce pro rata. That is exactly what has always happened under local management of schools and fair funding. The guarantee is maintained and it is a real-terms guarantee; that is unprecedented and is not reflected in the amendments.

There are several other technical problems with the amendment. It suggests that the baseline should be the academic year from September 2001, despite the fact that the transfer will happen only eight months into that year. The amendment seems also to suggest that funding for sixth forms should all of a sudden switch to the academic year from the financial year, which would surely cause chaos and increase administration and bureaucracy.

On consultation, I agree that we did not ask the London Conservative party to carry out our public consultation. However, there was widespread support for the case for change and on the question of what the baseline year for the funding guarantee should be.

10.30 pm

In the light of all those problems, I urge the hon. Member for Maidenhead not to press the amendments and the new clause. I hope that the Opposition will also end their campaign of frightening parents, schools and LEAs into believing that the Government have a hidden agenda for school sixth forms. Our only agenda is one that we are proud to publicise—that provision for 16 to 19-year-olds should be of high quality, and that it should offer a range of options. School sixth forms will continue to be an important and valued element of education provision.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): The Under-Secretary of State smiles at the end of a speech that would have been more enjoyable if, instead of sounding like a wind-up Minister, she had smiled while she made it. She has assured the House that if sixth form numbers fall, funding will not be cut more than pro rata, but she did not say what would happen if sixth form numbers grew. We have to assume that she could not give the assurance that, in that case, funds would grow pro rata. Perhaps she would like to give an assurance to that effect to schools that are successful in expanding their sixth forms.

It is clear that people in many education authorities are keen to have a mixture of provision. In the West Sussex area, for example, there are sixth form colleges and schools with sixth forms. The House should unite in saying that the Government should show more confidence in children and their teachers, and that the aim should be to help them achieve far more than has been the case over the past 20 years or so.

When I first came to the House, some large schools had more than 1,200 pupils, none of whom gained an A-level pass in maths, physics or chemistry. Those schools were not successful. Many people said that pupils in large schools, regardless of whether those were rural or inner-city schools, should be able to achieve the sort of success that would allow them to go on to university or medical school, or join a range of professions. There is now a bipartisan agreement that that can and should happen.

The disappointment in the debate was that the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) seemed to think that he was opposing the Conservatives in government, and gave his implicit support to almost everything that the Labour Government are doing. My hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) asked him what was the Liberal Democrats' policy on sixth forms in rural areas, but he did not answer. That will allow Liberal Democrats to be attacked by Labour and Conservative Members for letting down many teachers, pupils and parents in those areas.

Finally, it is true that children are not numbers. All children, parents and teachers want to achieve what in South Africa is called "upliftment". The connotations of that word are a greater sense of achievement, and a greater opportunity for it. Achieving that requires a little less of the partisan approach that we have heard from the Government over the past three years.

The Under-Secretary of State referred to a Green Paper. Will she assure the House that the consultation process will be more open than the health service consultation that was bounced out by the special political advisers to the Department of Health a month ago? An education Green Paper that was a genuine consultation exercise would be welcome. I suggest to the Labour party—

Mr. Blunkett: What has this got to do with the Bill?

Mr. Bottomley: I am following up a point made by the Under-Secretary of State in this debate. She referred to the Green Paper, and that involves consultation. If that is news to the Secretary of State, it is a jolly good thing that he is listening to the debate.

Mr. Blunkett: What a silly man. Is that a challenge?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I should be grateful if hon. Members, including the Secretary of State, would refrain from making sedentary interventions.

Mr. Bottomley: The Under-Secretary referred to the Green Paper in her response to the debate on the amendments, for which the Secretary of State was not present. I was saying that I hoped that the consultation would be genuine. If the Labour party wants to respond to the consultation, that would also be welcome. For us to have a bipartisan approach to improving education, each person should try to respond to the questions that others are asking.

My belief is that we are doing our job better if we allow schools and sixth form colleges to improve their output. That requires the confidence of the teachers, the interest of the parents and rather less of the minor party bickering that the Secretary of State introduced into the debate this evening.

Mrs. May: I am disappointed that the Government have not seen fit to take the opportunity to accept the amendment that would remove the uncertainty from the future of school sixth forms. I am also disappointed that they have not indicated in answers to the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) and to my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) what will happen to school sixth forms when numbers increase—because the schools are worried. However, the Government do not trust the schools, the heads or the teachers. It is clear that the Liberal Democrats do not trust the heads or the teachers either. We do trust the heads and the teachers to get on with the job of raising standards in our schools. That is why we want to give schools complete freedom and ensure that they get all their funding and the opportunity to decide for themselves how to spend it, rather than having to take instructions from the Minister on where to spend every £10, and have the Government decide their priorities for them.

Because the Government have not seen fit to put their legislation behind the Secretary of State's mouth, I shall press amendment No. 87 to a vote.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 122, Noes 323.

Division No. 241] **[10.36 pm**

AYES

Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John Randall and
Mr. Stephen Day.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Berrningham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hood, Jimmy
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy

Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Opik, Lembit
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 10

QUALIFYING ACCOUNTS AND GRANTS

Amendments made: No. 28, in page 6, line 11, after "promote" insert "—

(a)".

No. 29, in page 6, line 12, at end insert—

'(b) the making of arrangements which qualify under section 101.'.

No. 30, in page 6, line 13, at end insert—

'( ) may be specified as a body with which arrangements under section 101 may be made;

( ) may be designated by the Secretary of State under section 102(1) or (3) and may act in accordance with such a designation;'.—*[Mr. Wills.]*

Clause 13

PERSONS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

Amendments made: No. 57, in page 7, line 10, leave out "adequate".

No. 58, in page 7, line 10, after "training" insert—

'which are sufficient in quantity and adequate in quality'.—*[Mr. Wills.]*

Clause 16

STRATEGY

Amendment made: No. 31, in page 8, line 25, at end insert—

'(2A) The strategy must include proposals as to how the Council intends to develop the skills of persons in employment; but this does not affect the generality of subsection (1).'.—*[Mr. Wills.]*

Clause 18

SUPPLEMENTARY FUNCTIONS

Amendment made: No. 91, in page 9, line 6, leave out—

'hold shares in a company, or otherwise become a member'

and insert—

'subscribe for or otherwise acquire shares in or securities'.—*[Mr. Wills.]*

Clause 22

PLANS OF LOCAL COUNCILS

Amendment made: No. 32, in page 10, line 28, at end insert—

'(f) a statement of the likely effect of the local council's activities on the economic development and regeneration of its area.'.—*[Mr. Wills.]*

Schedule 1

LEARNING AND SKILLS COUNCIL FOR ENGLAND

Amendments made: No. 42, in page 70, line 23, after "member" insert—

'or chairman or chief executive'.

No. 43, in page 70, line 25, after "chairman" insert "or chief executive".—*[Mr. Wills.]*

Schedule 2

LOCAL COUNCILS

Amendment made: No. 44, in page 73, line 38, after "member" insert "or chairman".—*[Mr. Wills.]*

New Clause 6

PLANS: WALES

' .—(1) The Council must make a plan for each of its financial years.

(2) The Council must send its plan for its first financial year to the National Assembly as soon as is reasonably practicable after the year starts.

(3) The Council must send its plan for any subsequent financial year of the Council to the National Assembly before the year starts.

(4) A plan for a financial year must include—

(a) proposals as to how the Council intends to achieve in the financial year any objectives which should be achieved in the year in conformity with directions of the National Assembly or with conditions imposed under section 47;

(b) the Council's financial proposals for the year;

(c) such other matters as the National Assembly specifies.

(5) The National Assembly must approve the plan or require the Council to make specified alterations of it; and if alterations are required the Council must make them.

(6) The Council must publish the plan as approved by the National Assembly or as altered in accordance with the National Assembly's requirements; and publication must be made at such time and in such manner as the National Assembly specifies.

(7) The Council may make and publish such other plans as it thinks fit; but any such plan must not conflict with a plan for a financial year.'.—*[Mr. Hanson.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government new clause 7—*Strategy: Wales.*

New clause 2—*Delegation of training programmes: Wales*—

'. The National Council for Educational Training for Wales may, in discharging its duties under sections 30 to 34, delegate to the Employment Service in Wales the contracting and management of work-based training programmes of the kind hitherto within the responsibility of the training and enterprise councils.'.

New clause 3—*National training opportunities network: Wales*—

'. The National Council for Education and Training for Wales must, in fulfilling its duties under sections 31 and 32, establish a national training opportunities information and placement network for persons aged 16 or above.'.

Amendment No. 6, in clause 30, page 14, line 1, leave out from "appointing" to end of line 3 and insert—

'members to the Council the National Assembly must appoint at least one third from the private sector and at least one other member who is a training provider in Wales.'.

Government amendment No. 92.

Amendment No. 2, in clause 46, page 21, line 19, at beginning insert—

'. The National Assembly shall appoint regional committees in accordance with the provisions of'.

Amendment No. 3, in page 21, line 19, leave out from "5" to end.

Government amendments Nos. 45 and 46.

Amendment No. 4, in schedule 5, page 80, line 5, leave out "may" and insert "shall".

Amendment No. 5, in page 80, line 5, at end insert—

'and at least half the appointments to such committees must be from the private sector, with at least one other member appointed from training providers in Wales.'.

Government amendments Nos. 47 and 52.

Mr. Hanson: I will speak briefly to the Government amendments and new clauses, which I hope are largely self-explanatory. New clause 6 arises from a request from the National Assembly and from discussions with my hon. Friends for the Bill to include more explicit provisions on the planning functions for the council in Wales. It sets out the duty of the council to formulate a plan that must be approved by the National Assembly, which will have powers to require alterations to the plan. Any such alterations must be made by the council.

Amendment No. 52 arises from new clause 6, and I hope that it is acceptable to the House. New clause 7 places a duty on the council to prepare a strategy relating to its functions and to keep that strategy under review. The strategy must contain proposals as to how the council intends to achieve the objectives contained in any directions from the National Assembly. Again, I hope that those provisions are acceptable to the House.

The remaining Government amendments in the group have already been extensively debated; they relate to the Learning and Skills Council for England and give similar powers to the council in Wales. I hope they are acceptable to the Opposition, because several of them—amendments Nos. 45 to 47—relate to points made by the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) in Committee. I undertook to return to those matters on Report and have done so today. I commend the Government amendments and new clauses to the House.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) and my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands) tabled new clauses and amendments that are included in the group. I shall listen to the points they make and respond in due course.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): My right hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) and I tabled new clauses 2 and 3 and four amendments. Although I shall try to deal with each provision as briefly as possible, they relate to matters of considerable relevance to training needs in Wales, so it is essential that I make some vital points.

New clause 2 aims to make it possible for the Employment Service to be the contracting and management agency for some of the work-based training

programmes that are currently under the governance of the training and enterprise councils. We had in mind especially work-based training programmes for the creation of adult employability: the pre-vocational training, occupational skills and recruitment and training programmes for the over-25s that are currently contracted to and delivered through the TECs and training providers.

Such training programmes will better suit adults if they are linked closely to the new deal. Unlike Conservative Members, I believe that the new deal has been a great success story in our communities. It has broken with the fatalism and resignation that were left by the previous Administration and felt by many people—and not only by youngsters. They were left on the scrap-heap and were not offered meaningful training or employment opportunities.

I passionately believe that we should link training programmes for adult employability to the new deal. That is exactly what will happen in England. As I understand it, the new deal will be re-engineered in England for those aged over 25 to include what were the training and enterprise councils' training programmes. However, in Wales, the matter will remain with the National Assembly and be covered by its budget, so the programmes will not be a part of Employment Service provision. I hate to tell hon. Members and my colleagues in the National Assembly that I believe they have got it wrong in this respect—and only in this respect. England has got it right. A relationship should be created between the new deal and adult employment programmes as currently provided by the TECs, but that will disappear when the TECs disappear.

I have made this point before and the correspondence that I have received suggests there will be a new type of demarcation dispute. Because TEC budgets will go to the National Assembly and because employment services do not form an integral part of its role, the Assembly is jealously guarding its budget and the provisions for such programmes. I hope that such a petty demarcation dispute will not interfere with the best and most sensible way to deliver the programmes.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will accept new clause 2, but if he does not, will he assure us that there is nothing in the Bill to make it impossible for the Employment Service to deliver work-based training programmes in Wales? It is vital that we have that option. I fear that the National Assembly will not exercise it, which is why I seek a statutory basis for it in the Bill.

New clause 3 raises a separate and vital issue that I mentioned on Second Reading. Then, I explained that the catch-22 situation in our communities is that many employers do not offer training provision beyond NVQ 2. Many young people do not have the opportunity to train beyond that level, because work-based training programmes are not available. However, every survey that I have read suggests that we cannot have a new-tech or 21st century economy without such additional provision. How do we break through that catch-22? Because employers do not offer NVQ 3 training opportunities, how will young people in communities such as mine obtain such opportunities?

I draw an analogy with the position of a pupil in a sixth form studying A-levels and looking for a place a university. In such a case, a huge administration—the Universities Central Council on Admissions—ensures that a person with two Cs and a D can find a place at university anywhere in the country. A huge organisation is designed to find a place for a person who wishes to pursue the academic route. However, there is no equivalent for vocational training. As so often, it is a Cinderella subject.

New clause 3 suggests that the new National Council for Education and Training for Wales would have a duty to set up a network to provide a vocational equivalent of the UCCA system for people who want to pursue vocational training opportunities that are not available in their local community or that are not provided by companies in their immediate vicinity. However, those opportunities may be available elsewhere—and, in my area, along the M4 at Sony, in Bridgend. How does a youngster find out what opportunities might be available in places other than in his immediate vicinity?

11 pm

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Information is necessary, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that if young people have to travel considerable distances in the more rural areas, there will be a need for financial assistance to enable them to do so?

Mr. Rowlands: I agree that we should expand opportunity, and that will require additional financial provision. If anything should be the subject of an objective 1-type funding scheme, it should be the proposal that I am putting forward. We need to train the infrastructure of minds and skills as well as developing the physical infrastructure in our community. Objective 1 funding could assist, promote and deliver greater training opportunities. Financial provision for travel and access is extremely important.

Many of the young people in the community of the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) or in mine do not know where these opportunities lie. If they were taking A-levels and wanted a place in a university, a huge organisation would help them find that place. There is not an equivalent for those with training needs. I am trying to place a duty and responsibility on the new Welsh council, but it might be an English point, too. There is a case for establishing a training network.

Amendments Nos. 2 to 5 relate to the composition of the national council and the issue of regional committees and their composition. As for the Welsh provision, we have nothing more than a skeleton. We do not know what the structures will be below the national council. This is the new post-devolution flexi-legislation. The issue will be left to the National Assembly to determine. Hon. Members, certainly those of us who represent Welsh constituencies and know something about training, have a perfect right to prescribe ideas and views on the nature and character of the council and the structures below it.

Amendments Nos. 2 and 3 suggest that employers should constitute a third of the appointments and training providers. Those who provide training should serve on the national council. I do not know who will be the chairman. I understand, however, that the English council chairman has been announced. In Wales, there is a powerful need for a total commitment to the scheme by employers. The TECs have failed in many respects because there was not an employer commitment. By giving employers a significant role to play at national council level and in regional committees, we hope to bind Welsh employers

[Mr. Rowlands]

into the entire process. By giving them the privilege of belonging, serving and being an essential part of it, we hope that that will lead to commitment, involvement and obligation.

Mr. Alun Michael (Cardiff, South and Penarth): Does my hon. Friend accept that this matter has been debated a great length, and that there is a danger in making a test of a percentage the touchstone for the involvement of business? If the amendment were not carried, I would not want my hon. Friend to imply that the involvement of business would be any less important. Proportions can become a straitjacket. I think that everyone who has spoken on this topic over recent months has agreed with my hon. Friend's point that there is a need for business to be fully engaged and an important part of the council.

Mr. Rowlands: I accept my right hon. Friend's point. However, he probably understands and shares the view that we have a cultural tendency not to bind business into education structures. I am being rather modest in my observations in that respect, but let us consider the composition of the original education and training action group for Wales. It was dominated by the education and further education sectors, and its first report reflected that. My right hon. Friend will remember that it was as a result of the protest that followed that amendments were made to quotas to make the group more attuned to the needs of industry and employment. I believe, therefore, that that danger is present. I accept that there is a problem with prescribing, but I believe that we must send a message, loud and clear, that we want business, manufacturers and industry to be passionately and fully involved.

I come to the amendments dealing with regional structure. Once again, there is no structure below the NCETW set out in the Bill. We have no local skills councils, because we are awaiting the National Assembly's view on the role of the regions. No doubt, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Wales will tell me that we must not be prescriptive and that the right word to have is "may", as in "we may set up committees or regional offices". However, the first question asked in a glossy TEC paper that arrived in our post only this morning is:

> Will the new National Council have Regional Offices?

to which the answer is:

> It is intended that four regional offices will be established across Wales. These will work closely with the local CCETs—

that is, Community Consortia for Education and Training.

> These offices will have committees which will advice the National Council on regional policy issues related to skills, education and training.

A TEC document has been issued to all hon. Members stating that there will be regional committees and regional offices, yet my amendment stating that there "shall" be regional committees is apparently not appropriate. Why should we take that from some glossy document, when we are told by Ministers here that we cannot lay down that provision in legislation?

I hope that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will accept my amendments. I am the last person to suggest a new quango, but, a new maxi-quango having been created in the form of the NCETW, I assume that there will have to be mini-quangos below it to deliver its programmes. Maxi-quangos always give rise to mini-quangos, so, if we are to have mini-quangos, I suggest, first, that they encompass the people who have to deliver training—employers—and secondly, that they be regional bodies so that they can serve communities broader than local authority districts, which are often too small to deliver many of the programmes. I believe that there is a case for a regional structure, so why not put it in the Bill, especially as glossy TEC magazines tell us that the decisions have already been taken?

Training is vital to the future economic development of communities such as ours, but it has been the Cinderella of the system. We have to make it work and achieve our aims for the 21st century. I can think of no better way of spending objective 1 money than to make the Bill work and, by so doing, create more opportunities and a more diversely skilled community and society than we have now.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): As I am sure the House will be relieved to hear, I rise to speak only briefly. I wish to ask a couple of questions about new clauses 6 and 7, which will clearly be passed if the Government use their might.

What assessment has been made of the costs to the taxpayer of the plans, both in the Welsh Assembly and in the national council? Recently, hon. Members will have looked over their local council's best value plans. My local authorities appear to spend half their time creating plans, formulating them and ensuring that they are meeting statutory requirements. When the Government, at such a late stage, decide to insert additional plans in the system, they should tell the House what assessment they have made of costs.

I hope that the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands) has been told by Ministers that his valuable contribution will be followed up. He has identified a matter that has already been identified by my local colleges. The Government have decided on a unified strategy for skills training. I do not resile from that. In many ways, it could be a good idea, but the Government have decided, as the hon. Member recognised, that the long-term unemployed for whom the new deal provides and who probably have the fewest skills in the entire work force should not be included in the training for which the councils are planning. In deciding how courses should be set up for new deal people and for people who are not on new deal, colleges will have two paymasters and two groups for which to plan.

The point made about Wales is also valid for England, but I shall not stray into that. I support the hon. Gentleman's argument. He was so keen to tell the House that new deal has been successful. He is clearly a man who can pick up on figures, whereas those on the Government Front Bench, even if they do not listen to the speech, seem unable to pick up on their own statistics.

If the hon. Gentleman considers the group aged between 18 and 24 who are long-term unemployed, and who are currently being helped, in the Government's terms, by new deal, he will discover that the Government currently claim to be helping more than 135,000 people in that group. If the hon. Gentleman looks back two years and examines the corresponding statistics, which are provided by the Government and the Office for National

Statistics, he will find that, before the benefits of new deal were available, that group numbered 115,000. Surely even those on the Front Bench can understand that the present figure of 135,000 represents a rise.

The hon. Gentleman identified the need to use the new councils, which, after all, are being set up with taxpayers' money, to help people gain the skills that they require, so that they will no longer be long-term unemployed, and so that they will not be in a new deal scheme that creates more long-term unemployed, instead of getting them out of long-term unemployment. Surely that would be a good thing.

I hope that the Government will listen to their hon. Friend, whose valuable argument I support.

Mr. Hanson: I value our short debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands) made some valuable points and I hope to reassure him on some of them.

With regard to co-operation between the new council and the Employment Service, under clause 34 the council may, for the purposes of post-16 education and training, disburse funding itself or, by arrangement with others, or by joint arrangement with others, to achieve its objectives. The latter two categories could, where appropriate and desirable, include the Employment Service in Wales in the manner set out in the new clause.

The new deal programme in Wales, which was highly praised by my hon. Friend, has not been devolved to the National Assembly, but I feel confident that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, the Assembly and I have a shared expectation that the new council in Wales and the Employment Service in Wales will work together closely and productively to ensure that we get the utmost benefit from the work of the new council and from the new deal programme.

The hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) showed clearly that the Conservatives still oppose the new deal and still do not recognise that it benefits people in Wales. Whatever the figures he has brought together, there has been a 61 per cent. fall in youth unemployment in Wales because of the new deal. His criticisms are not strictly accurate.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hanson: I will not give way, as time is pressing and the hon. Gentleman has had his opportunity to speak. There has been a 61 per cent. fall in youth unemployment. The hon. Gentleman asked in passing about the figures and the cost of the plans. I cannot give him a specific figure for the plan, which deals with the way in which the council spends the resource, but our total budget in Wales will be in the region of £420 million next year. Obviously, the costs of preparing a plan will fall within that. Again, it is a matter for the National Assembly. The amendments are about the Assembly's powers to deliver those policy objectives in due course.

11.15 pm

I hope that my hon. Friend is reassured by the point on the new deal.

Mr. Rowlands *rose—*

Mr. Hanson: I did not give way to the hon. Member for South Dorset.

Hon. Members: Give way.

Mr. Hanson: I give way to my hon. Friend.

Mr. Rowlands: I believe that what my hon. Friend has said is what I want, which is that the TECs' budget money that will now go to the National Assembly after their abolition, and, with the resultant employment problems, will be given to the council, and the council could disburse that money to the Employment Service, although the Employment Service budget is not within the National Assembly. Is that right?

Mr. Hanson: As I have explained to my hon. Friend, the position is that the council in Wales is able, where appropriate and desirable, to include the Employment Service, if it wishes, in the disbursement and undertakings that it wants to make. Where appropriate and desirable, it has the option of working closely with the Employment Service. However, the Employment Service is not devolved. What I am really indicating is more co-operative work rather than disbursements.

My hon. Friend spoke about his new clause 3. The existing careers service in Wales, under contract with the Assembly, is already empowered under the Employment and Training Act 1973 to provide a placement service for young people seeking training opportunities. Under its supervision, the current service will be developed and enhanced as part of an all-age information, advice and guidance service, and there will be a wider Wales careers service launched by the National Assembly from April 2001. I hope that that answers some of the points that my hon. Friend raised.

With regard to membership, my hon. Friend will be aware that, under clause 30, the council is due to be constituted with between 10 and 12 members. I accept his point about the commitment of employers. I hope that employers, and, indeed, other sectors of the community, will get on board and provide strong support for the council in Wales. However, if we reserve places for the private sector and employers we shall be restricting the National Assembly's choice in the matter. I hope that my hon. Friend will accept my belief that there should be a commitment from employers, but that reserving places would be too prescriptive for the National Assembly, which wants to see candidates whose experience and qualities match the needs of the public bodies which they will serve. The scrutiny by the Assembly will be important.

My hon. Friend said that he wished to see regional committees. I draw his attention to the fact that regional committees exist in the National Assembly, looking at a range of issues across the Assembly at large. If my hon. Friend's amendment were passed, he would in a sense be creating two sets of regional committees, each having functions in respect of areas of responsibility within

[Mr. Hanson]

Wales. That would lead to confusion. I hope that he will accept that, within the regional committee structure in Wales, there is an opportunity for regional input into a whole range of policies across the National Assembly, including within the councils.

Mr. Rowlands: Will the National Assembly's regional committees be the watchdogs of the regional offices of the national council? I read out the answer to the question in the TEC brochure, which arrived in the post today, saying that the offices will have committees which advise the national council on regional policies. Are they the regional committees of the Assembly or will they be specially established committees to act as watchdogs over the regional offices of what were the TECs?

Mr. Hanson: The regional committees of the National Assembly can look at any aspect, and obviously can look at the whole range of matters on policy issues. I shall happily meet my hon. Friend, as I have done before, and discuss that point in detail. I hope that, on the basis of that further offer and the assurances I have given, he will be able not to press his amendments and support the Government amendments.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 7

STRATEGY: WALES

'.—(1) The Council must formulate a strategy in relation to its functions and keep it under review.

(2) The Council must incorporate in the strategy proposals as to—

(a) how it intends to achieve any objectives contained in directions of the National Assembly;

(b) how it intends to achieve such objectives within any time limits contained in such directions.

(3) The strategy must include proposals as to how the Council intends to develop the skills of persons in employment; but this does not affect the generality of subsection (1).

(4) The Council—

(a) may at any time send to the National Assembly a copy of the strategy as it subsists for the time being;

(b) must at such times as the National Assembly indicates send to the Assembly a copy of the strategy as it subsists for the time being.

(5) The National Assembly must approve the strategy sent to it or require the Council to make specified alterations of it; and if alterations are required the Council must make them.

(6) In exercising its functions the Council must have regard to the strategy as approved by the National Assembly or as altered in accordance with its requirements.'.—*[Mr. Hanson.]*

Brought up, read the First and Second Time, and added to the Bill.

Clause 38

QUALIFYING ACCOUNTS AND GRANTS

Amendments made: No. 33, in page 18, line 8, after "promote" insert "—

(a)".

No. 34, in page 18, line 9, at end insert—

'(b) the making of arrangements which qualify under section 101.'.

No. 35, in page 18, line 10, at end insert—

'( ) may be specified as a body with which arrangements under section 101 may be made;

( ) may be designated by the National Assembly under section 102(1) or (3) and may act in accordance with such a designation;'.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Clause 41

PERSONS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

Amendments made: No. 59, in page 19, line 7, leave out "adequate".

No. 60, in page 19, line 7, after "training" insert—

'which are sufficient in quantity and adequate in quality'.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Clause 44

SUPPLEMENTARY FUNCTIONS

Amendment made: No. 92, in page 20, line 22, leave out paragraphs (c) and (d) and insert—

'(c) to subscribe for or otherwise acquire shares in or securities of a company unless the National Assembly consents.'.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Schedule 4

NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN WALES

Amendments made: No. 45, in page 77, line 4, after "member" insert—

'or chairman or chief executive'.

No. 46, in page 77, line 6, after "chairman" insert "or chief executive".—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Schedule 5

COMMITTEES (WALES)

Amendment made: No. 47, in page 80, line 36, after "member" insert "or chairman".—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Clause 59

ADDITIONAL FUNCTIONS OF THE CHIEF INSPECTOR

Mr. Wicks: I beg to move amendment No. 17, in page 27, line 11, after "teachers" insert "or lecturers".

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government amendment No. 18.

Amendment No. 77, in clause 67, page 30, line 40, at end add—

'(6) The Inspectorate and the Chief Inspector, acting together, shall publish at least annually a report on the operation of the framework.'.

Government amendments Nos. 23 to 25.

Government new clause 5—*Annual Plan of the Chief Inspector for Wales.*

Government amendment No. 19.

Amendment No. 7, in clause 75, page 34, line 16, at end insert—

'(3A) In conducting inspections of any training providers the Chief Inspector must have regard to the terms of the providers' contract.'.

Government amendments Nos. 20 to 22, 26 and 27.

Mr. Wicks: In essence, the provisions for the annual plan of the chief inspector for Wales are the subject of the amendments. New clause 5 places a duty on the chief inspector for Wales to prepare an annual plan for the forthcoming financial year and submit it to the National Assembly. The plan must set out the chief inspector's proposals for the way in which she intends to use the funds made available to her to carry out her inspection and other functions. Amendment No. 26 would place the Assembly under a duty to approve the chief inspector's annual plan for the forthcoming financial year, which she will be required to submit under new clause 5.

The other Government amendments are minor corrections and technical adjustments, with which I shall not try the patience of the House.

Mr. Boswell: First, I shall deal briefly with Government amendment No. 17, to which the Minister referred somewhat perfunctorily as part of a clutch of Government amendments. I should be grateful for the Minister's reassurance; I therefore mention it before considering amendment No. 77.

Government amendment No. 17 would include in the chief inspector's remit the ability to consider

functions with respect to the training of or for teachers

"or lecturers". Has that remit previously extended to further education lecturers and their training? That is an important question. The Government are moving forward on the further education national training organisation, and we would support any improvement in professional standards. However, it is worth considering whether there is a substantive point to be examined or whether the amendment simply corrects an inadvertent omission.

I should also value the Minister's comments on instructors, who are important staff in further education colleges. They are not lecturers; they often instruct in specific technical skills. I am not clear whether the remit of Ofsted and the chief inspector would extend to them. If not, why not? How will the matter be resolved?

Amendment No. 77 reflects our continuing anxieties about the incoherence—to put it charitably—of the Government's provisions for inspection in England. I did not try to join in the Welsh debate, but, as some hon. Members know, my wife is from Wales and she is involved in education. Many members of her family before her have been involved in education in Wales. I take the Welsh analogy seriously. Even if the Welsh model of a single inspection is not the right template for England, it is perhaps more coherent than that for England.

Whatever would have been right for England, the Government have devised a messy structure, including a framework for the collaboration of the chief inspector of schools and the chief inspector of adult learning. We debated that extensively in Committee. I do not wish to reproduce those debates. We hope that the relationship will work well and harmoniously. That is more likely than not. I was reassured by a presentation that Her Majesty's chief inspector for 16 to 19 education gave in the House. That is an important relationship, and, in Committee, we rehearsed what would happen if it broke down or was not as harmonious as it should be. We also discussed, and the Government introduced, provision for revising the framework as time, circumstances and experience dictate.

I realise that, at this late stage, Ministers may not be inclined to rewrite the Bill, but they should have it in mind that one way to deal with potential tension would be to get the two chief inspectors to sit down at least once a year and write an account of how the framework was going. They could—one hopes that they would do it jointly—draw attention to any difficulties in the framework. For example, they might want to float proposals for changes to the framework. If nothing else, that would provide us with an opportunity, perhaps through an Adjournment debate in the House or in Westminster Hall, to raise concerns about the framework.

My points about Government amendment No. 17 are probing, and my remarks about amendment No. 77 relate to the need to run past the House, or the general public, how the framework is going. We hope that it will be harmonious and that the two chief inspectors will work together and not find themselves in constructive tension.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): The idea of an annual report is worthy of consideration because it will help to tell us whether the common inspection framework is working. Getting it to work may be harder than we think. I say that not because I do not support the joint inspection process—I do—but because I have evidence of a joint inspection in Lowestoft college in my constituency in March, which took place under the transitional arrangements.

That joint inspection, with a common framework, was described by the college as a shambolic process. There was supposed to be a single team from the Further Education Funding Council and the Training Standards Council, but my discussions with the college lead me to believe that there was not a single programme of meetings or lesson observations and that the common evidence base was not effectively used.

Inspectors from both organisations turned up to observe the same class. There was clear evidence that they were failing to share the base of information that had been provided by the college. The staff felt that two separate inspections were taking place. They were asked to participate in feedback sessions, and the two organisations held their sessions at the same time, so it was impossible for staff to attend both. It was felt that the designated lead inspector took no notice of what the inspectors from the other organisation said.

I give that example to make the point that we must ensure that the procedures witnessed at Lowestoft college are not repeated as the new inspection framework is developed and comes into being from 2001. The annual report may help in that process.

The process at Lowestoft failed to provide the opportunity for colleagues to seek redress in respect of ineffective planning procedures. It is worrying that we are, perhaps, trying to join two diverse groups who are reluctant to come together, and, if we shuffle the same individuals as a pack, the process may not work. A common set of principles must be established, as

[Mr. Bob Blizzard]

clause 67 requires. The irony is that, at the moment, both inspectorates demand separate evaluations, yet no single body appears to be evaluating the joint process.

I raised the matter with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on Second Reading, and he gave the commitment that it would be investigated. I am sure that it will be, but that has not happened yet. Will he assure me that the matter will be investigated, not only out of fairness to Lowestoft college, but—and this is my point about the amendment—to learn valuable lessons that will help with the establishment of the joint inspection process, which I want to happen?

11.30 pm

Mr. Rowlands: As I understand it, the inspectorate in Wales will cover not only schools and further education, but the whole gamut of training. Indeed, it is already inspecting training providers; some inspections have already taken place.

Following that experience, I should draw the attention of my hon. Friend the Minister to two points. One is to do with some of the comments on and criticisms of the training providers' work and programmes. The inspector has been saying, "You should do this, this and this" although those things are not part of the training providers' contract. I cannot see how such an inspection could take place. Surely, there can be inspection only of what the training provider is contracted to do.

The position should at least be clarified. It is perfectly right for the chief inspector to say to the body that has issued the contract—it has been the TEC—"You shall now do something else. Offer a wider contract to training providers," but it is not right to criticise training providers for not doing something that is not part of their contract. There have already been such criticisms during some of the inspections of training providers.

The second point is to do with the nature of the inspections themselves and the inspectors. I know of one case where the inspectors who turned up had experience as ex-principals, or experience in further or higher education, but had no experience of training, including industrial training, employment and the other world to which training is linked.

In Wales—it is the right and proper decision—we are to have one umbrella inspectorate. We will not have ALI: the adult learning inspectorate. We will have one inspectorate to cover the whole of Welsh provision, including training and training providers. We must ensure that the inspectorate is equipped and has people with experience and knowledge of the world of industrial and employment training. They should not come just from schools and further and higher education traditionally.

I hope that the Minister will assure us that, in Wales, we will bestow on the chief inspector those wide and broad powers; that inspectors will have regard to the contracts that training providers are given; and that the personnel who carry out the inspection will be much more broadly based. They should have a wider range of experience than was part and parcel of the old schools inspectorate, as we all called it.

Mr. Wicks: Amendment No. 17 concerns a matter of great interest to the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell). It is a very minor amendment. Clause 58(1)(d), which describes the extended remit of the chief inspector, contains the expression

training of or for teachers or lecturers.

The amendment therefore adds the words "or lecturers" to clause 59(3), which describes the additional functions of the chief inspector. The hon. Gentleman asked about instructors. We regard them as teachers for the purposes of the clause. I hope that that satisfies him.

My hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands) raised some important points. Although it is not the intention of the legislation to provide for the chief inspector of Wales to inspect the service specification of the new National Council for Education and Training in Wales, the provisions in clauses 76 and 84 enable the chief inspector to draw the attention of the Assembly to any shortcomings in the council's specification, as appropriate. That is a sensible longstop in addition to the Assembly's arrangements for the monitoring and oversight of the council's functions. I hope that that explanation reassures my hon. Friend, but we are happy to discuss the matter in greater detail with him.

In discussing amendment No. 77, the hon. Member for Daventry raised some interesting points about the nature of the new inspections. In order to satisfy public accountability on the operation of the framework, there is a clear opportunity in each inspector's annual report to describe the previous year's experiences. That will be an on-going process. If there is a case for a joint report—I think that that was the hon. Gentleman's point—we will want to explore it. Therefore, I cannot give an absolute guarantee, but I promise that we and the new inspectors will think again.

My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard) drew on the experience of one joint inspection. That proves the value of our reforms, as my hon. Friend was describing the status quo and not the new system. The problem was that the two inspectorates were working to separate frameworks. Under the common framework, a single team would work with more harmony. We are persuaded by the first area inspection that joint inspectorates can work very well. If my hon. Friend writes to me with details of that experience, I will make sure that we properly consider the matter. I hope that, with those reassurances, hon. Members will support the Government amendments and not press theirs.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 62

ACTION PLANS

Amendment made: No. 18, in page 28, line 19, leave out "66" and insert "66(2)".—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Schedule 6

THE ADULT LEARNING INSPECTORATE

Amendments made: No. 23, in page 81, line 20, at end insert—

"( ) If a person to be appointed under section 50(3) is not already a member of the Inspectorate, the Secretary of State must appoint him as a member for the same term as his appointment as chairman or chief officer.

( ) If a person to be appointed under section 50(3) is already a member of the Inspectorate but his term of appointment as such would end before his term of appointment as chairman or chief officer ends, the Secretary of State must extend his term of appointment as a member so that it ends when his appointment as chairman or chief officer ends.'.

No. 24, in page 81, line 21, after "member" insert—

', chairman or chief officer'.

No. 25, in page 81, line 23, after "chairman" insert "or chief officer".—*[Mr. Betts.]*

New Clause 5

ANNUAL PLAN OF THE CHIEF INSPECTOR FOR WALES

'.—(1) The Chief Inspector for Wales must, for the purposes of the consultation required under section 104(4) of the 1998 Act (funding of HM Chief Inspector of Education and Training for Wales), prepare a plan for each financial year.

(2) The plan must be submitted to the National Assembly by such time before the beginning of the financial year to which it relates as the National Assembly may direct.

(3) The plan must contain estimates of—

(a) the expenditure necessary, in the financial year to which the plan relates, in order to secure that the functions of the Chief Inspector for Wales are discharged effectively; and

(b) the income which the Chief Inspector for Wales will receive in that financial year and which may be applied towards meeting the expenses of the Chief Inspector for Wales.

(4) The plan must also contain proposals for the management of any funds which may be provided by the National Assembly for that financial year.

(5) The Chief Inspector for Wales may, after the plan has been approved under section 104(4A) of the 1998 Act, publish it in such manner and at such time as appear to the Chief Inspector for Wales to be appropriate.

(6) "The 1998 Act" means the Government of Wales Act 1998.'.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

Clause 73

THE EXTENDED REMIT OF THE CHIEF INSPECTOR FOR WALES

Amendment made: No. 19, in page 33, line 10, leave out from "1998" to end of line 12.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Clause 79

INSPECTION OF CAREERS SERVICES ETC. IN WALES

Amendments made: No. 20, in page 36, line 17, after "Assembly" insert "for Wales".

No. 21, in page 36, line 27, after "Assembly" insert "for Wales".

No. 22, in page 36, line 30, leave out—

'(5) to (8) of section 34'

and insert—

'(6) to (6C) of section 35'.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Clause 89

TRANSFERS: ENGLAND

Mr. Wicks: I beg to move amendment No. 36, in page 40, line 23, leave out subsection (11).

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government amendments Nos. 37, 38 and 124.

Government new clause 8—*Transfers: Wales.*

Government new clause 18—*Training programmes: cessation of funding.*

Government new clause 21—*Pensions.*

Government new clause 22—*Pensions: interpretation.*

Government new clause 23—*Pensions: delegation.*

Mr. Wicks: When we discussed the important matter of the transfer of assets in Committee, I promised to update the House on Report on the work that we are doing with TECs to agree the future use of assets. That work has led us to conclude that we need additional safeguards through the Bill to ensure that such assets continue to be used to meet national priorities and for the benefit of local communities.

TECs currently hold assets with a gross value of more than £600 million and a net value of nearly £280 million once current liabilities are taken into account.

It has become increasingly clear from our discussions with TECs that their future plans vary widely. Some are proposing to wind up the company and return all remaining funds to Government. Others have plans to keep the company going in one form or another. In a small number of cases—I emphasise that it is a small number—proposals are beginning to emerge which move away from one of the fundamental principles which has underpinned the work of TECs.

We believe that we must ensure that no TEC resources are used in support of any proposals that could be linked to individual shareholders or profits and take money away from public control. I emphasise that, in the vast majority of cases, we are having useful, civilised discussions with TECs on a TEC-by-TEC basis on the use of assets in a way that is consistent with national priorities and the needs of local communities. Only in a very few cases do we have concerns, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State feels strongly that we need the amendment in order to protect public money. Parliament would expect no less of us.

Ms Linda Perham (Ilford, North): I am most concerned by what my hon. Friend is saying. I have received representations from the East London TEC. I hope that my hon. Friend will reassure those involved that the East London TEC and a number of other TECs are not included in the small number at whom the amendment is directed. Some people involved in the TEC feel that the Government already have enough powers. I hope that my hon. Friend can offer some reassurance.

Mr. Wicks: If the Government already had enough powers we would not have tabled the amendment. We did so after much consideration, but there was a very real risk that we could not safeguard public money. We have to

[Mr. Wicks]

reassure the public and Parliament that we have taken the necessary powers. I emphasise that the provision will affect only one or two TECs and, even in those cases, we hope through negotiation not to have to use the powers. However, significant amounts of public money are at stake and it is important that we make the amendments.

Mr. Willis: Can the Minister explain why he has not tabled an amendment that would deal with the contingent liabilities of directors of TECs, during and after the transition period? Many directors fear that, although they will have acted in good faith and dealt properly with current assets, they could be held responsible for contingent liabilities.

Mr. Wicks: We are considering that matter. We realise that most TEC directors have done a good job for their local communities and we are aware of their anxieties as they wind up their business. If we can provide reassurances for them, we will. We are working hard in that regard.

Some concerns have been raised by TECs about the new powers. In taking the powers, it is not our intention to override the TECs' existing commitments which we have agreed in their business plans; nor do we intend to exert a perpetual power over future arrangements. Nor do we wish to interfere with those assets brought to the merger by chambers or legitimately accrued since merger in the membership fund. Such assets should and will be available to chamber members to establish a new chamber. We will do nothing to change that. I hope that those reassurances are helpful.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): My intervention follows those made earlier, because concern has arisen in Shropshire that the assets of the local TEC were provided for the specific use of the area. We should like some assurance that those assets will continue to be available for the successor bodies. What specific assurance can the Minister give us that Shropshire will not lose those assets?

Mr. Wicks: Some assets properly have to return to the Secretary of State, and that is widely understood. Some assets will be used to help to fund individual learning accounts, and that is understood. Where those requirements have been satisfied and local assets remain, we have given an absolute assurance that they will be used for local purposes. I hope that that reassures the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Rowlands: Do the powers apply to Welsh TECs? Do the worries and concerns that the Minister has mentioned apply to the situation of Welsh TECs?

Mr. Wicks: The same principle must apply—that we have to safeguard public money. In the case of England, we hope to do that by negotiation. I am sure that that will be achieved, but we felt that we should also take on additional powers.

Mr. Boswell: The Minister earlier gave a welcome assurance to the House on this important matter, to the effect that there was no intention on the part of Ministers to seek to alienate what might be termed privately generated assets. What assurance is there that the powers of direction for the future of assets that the Secretary of State will take could not be applied to private assets? No specific safeguard is apparent in the new clauses.

Mr. Wicks: TECs were set up by Parliament on behalf of the public and the assets exist because of that public nature. I have given an absolute assurance that when assets have been properly generated locally and belong to the local community, they will be preserved for the local community. I have also given assurances about the future of chambers. We are trying to advance on the basis of agreement and negotiation, and we are using accountants and auditors who satisfy both parties.

It is only in the rarest of circumstances that we may have to use the new powers. However, if we had not provided for these powers, we might have had to come to the House in a few months' time and admit that millions of pounds' worth of public money had been used for profit-making purposes by new companies with shareholders. In that situation, the House would have been appalled and we would have had to appear before every Select Committee under the sun. The Secretary of State is right to put the amendment before the House to safeguard public money.

11.45 pm

Mr. Boswell: I am somewhat shocked and disturbed by the Government's provisions. I have no wish to overreact, but, given the sensitivity of the situation in which TECs now find themselves, one would not expect them to express themselves with undue robustness.

Mr. Blunkett: We are talking about public money.

Mr. Boswell: I shall come to that point. The TEC National Council has stated that it is concerned to safeguard the reputation and integrity of TECs and chambers of commerce, training and enterprise, and feels that it would be unfortunate, at this late stage, if the proposals were to undermine the good will that has existed between TECs, CCTEs and the Government. I entirely share that sentiment and I hope that Minister does, too.

The new clause creates an entirely different dynamic to the negotiations. Some months ago, I jocularly characterised the Minister as the mad axeman. Now, I think that he has cast himself in a new role; that of playground bully. In effect, he is saying to TECs, "Please negotiate with me. If we do not get the outcome that I want, I will have your assets anyway and take them somewhere else." That is our concern.

Mr. Blunkett: There are assets.

Mr. Boswell: That is a very interesting point. I remind the Secretary of State of my question to his Department concerning any action taken to prevent forestalling action by the TECs, in effect, to sequester public assets. In doing that, I was criticised by the chief executive of one of the TECs for any implication that there was in some way an attempt to stash away assets into the private sector. We accept that publicly derived assets should be either returnable to the Secretary of State or applied by the Secretary of State to public purposes.

In many of the things that Ministers have said—including tonight's welcome reassurance that they seek agreement and earlier assurances that any locally derived assets would be applied locally—they have sought to be helpful. However, the problem arises where there is a genuine disagreement on either the origin or the nature of the particular assets in question. I have been at some pains to distance myself from the argument—which I did not think would be helpful to the general consideration—but I am aware of the circumstances involving the Northamptonshire chamber of commerce, training and enterprise, where there is a serious disagreement of principle as to the nature of the assets and their future control.

It is right that, in principle, publicly derived funds should be under the control of the Secretary of State. However, to take forestalling action, the Secretary of State's proposal is that, from the passing of the Act, he may, in effect, sequester any assets. The Minister was not able to assure me that those assets would be necessarily and absolutely certainly publicly derived assets. That is still a concern for the TEC National Council.

I am not suggesting for a moment that the Minister or the Secretary of State is setting out to steal private assets, or the assets of my local chamber of commerce. However, the Minister has not given the safeguards tonight that we might reasonably expect. That is a concern. In any case, where there is a dispute, one party should not be able to resolve the matter in its favour and a matter should not be resolved under the threat of one party resolving it in its favour. It should be resolved, if necessary, by some independent procedure.

In Committee, I offered in good faith the possibility of considering arbitration in suitable cases as a way of overcoming the problem. I do not question the good faith of Ministers in dealing with the matter, but several aspects worry me.

First, in proposing these nuclear deterrent powers to intervene in what the Minister called extreme cases, the Government run the risk that TECs might take anticipatory action while the Bill waits to be enacted. That action could not then be reversed, and setting out the powers at this stage might encourage people who want to take action before the Bill becomes an Act. I do not canvass that approach, nor would I welcome it, but it is something that needs to be considered.

Secondly, although I hope that the negotiations in which the TECs are involved will be satisfactorily concluded, the Minister should consider whether it is fair for them to face the potential threat that Ministers may direct the fate of their assets without having to specify whether those assets are publicly derived. The problem is that it is arguable that, in some cases, those assets could have been derived from the membership of the relevant chamber of commerce.

My third point is a matter of some concern. The proposed powers amount to powers to alienate property in the private sector that belongs to another, regardless of whether that property derived from public funds. Ministers are thereby putting themselves at risk of legal challenge. For example, the imminent legislation to implement the European convention on human rights would prevent the alienation of private assets.

I am worried that, in seeking to overcome a potential or theoretical problem, the Minister may have used a blunderbuss that could trigger legal challenges. The result may well be more difficult than would have been the case if the Government had proceeded by a more consensual route.

Of course I accept the case for a proper disposition of public funds. Equally, however, there is an argument that private funds, or funds whose ownership or derivation could be subject to argument, should be properly disposed—ideally by agreement or, if necessary, by independent resolution. With respect, it should not be done on the fiat of the Secretary of State.

I have gone on about this, despite the lateness of the hour, because I feel that it is of great importance. I do not want to press the matter to a Division in the House. However, when I have listened to the Minister's reply, I should be happy to defer to the greater legal wit and wisdom in another place, where the new clause will have to be considered and where the proposals may be viewed even less favourably.

I have not manufactured the concerns that I have described: they are seriously held by Conservative Members and members of the TEC movement.

Mr. Ian Bruce: It is rare for me to think that my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) is taking any matter to an extreme, but I think that the Minister is aware of a case in my constituency that is especially apposite to this debate about the proposed powers to transfer assets that have been given to a TEC for a particular purpose.

Weymouth college is based at two sites. One of them was passed to the college by a local estate, with the not unusual proviso that the asset should be used only for educational purposes. *[Interruption.]* Does the Secretary of State wish to intervene?

Mr. Blunkett: I think that the hon. Gentleman is out of order.

Mr. Bruce: It seems that the right hon. Gentleman wants to do your job, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The college wants to sell one site and to use the funds from the sale on rebuilding at the second site, but it has been told that those funds may revert to the state. I have had legal opinion from the Treasury Solicitor and the Attorney-General to the effect that this matter has to be tested in the courts. The college cannot simply sell one site and transfer the proceeds into educational spending.

That is exactly what is happening with TECs. They have been given assets for particular purposes; the money has been voted by Parliament. However, those assets will now be taken away from the TECs and used for other purposes. I hope that the Minister will address that point in relation to the Government's amendments.

Mr. Brooke: I rise in support of my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell). I apologise for the lateness of the hour, although that is not wholly of the Opposition's making. I commend the Government Back Benchers, who are being remarkably patient—rather more patient than Front Benchers.

The Government have a tough timetable in terms of implementing everything in the Bill for the deadline of 1 April next year. There must be a degree of anxiety about whether these matters will be concluded before the

[Mr. Brooke]

Bill becomes an Act and while it is still before Parliament. In view of the Minister's observations about contingent liabilities and the discussions about them, it would seem eminently desirable that those discussions should be concluded before the Bill is finally enacted.

I am conscious that the issue hangs on one or two cases, and that is why the Secretary of State is seeking these powers. The problem is that one or two cases could be a moving target unless there is some process of identifying them to the official Opposition. That has to be a concern, although naturally there is a sense of trust towards the Government. However, the Government have said that the problems arising in one or two cases have prompted this measure.

The greatest hazard in what has, in principle, been an orderly and amicable process up to now, is the law of human nature that makes people behave according to the way in which they are treated. If they are treated as though a blunderbuss will be held to their head in the final analysis, that alters the climate in which the negotiations take place.

I think that the Minister must give greater assurances on how the Government will bring this matter to a conclusion while the Bill is still in front of the two Houses of Parliament.

Mr. Wicks: I genuinely regret the stance of the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell). I pay tribute to the majority of TECs, and those associated with them, for their excellent work. We all know that there has been variation in quality, but I do not want to dwell on that. We want to build on good practice. We fully expect large numbers of excellent staff and many directors of TECs to be part of the new infrastructure of learning and skills councils.

It is important to emphasise again that, in the vast majority of cases, we are having sensible and calm discussions with TECs, helped by a firm of auditors and accountants, to look at complex issues about assets. They are complex because there is no such thing as a typical TEC. They vary a great deal—some, for example, are in partnership with chambers of commerce. We are looking at that in great detail. The process is being pursued in an orderly way. We may never need to make use of the amendment, but some cases concern us.

The hon. Gentleman adopted a rather belligerent tone, calling me the school bully. My job, and that of the Secretary of State, is to be vigilant on behalf of the public about the public's purse. I will give some instances, but I will not name names—unless I am tempted. In a number of instances, we have had to take firm action to prevent a TEC from taking steps that we do not consider to be in the public interest. These include a proposal to move a freehold property outside the control of the Department's debenture, the movement of a large sum of reserves into a trust and a proposal to establish a separate company with two TEC employees as the only shareholders. We have managed to head off those proposals, in part through existing powers in the contract and in part through stern discussions with some of those involved. However—and this is the rub—we are not confident that the contract can cover all the situations that may arise.

I emphasise that, faced with the situation in which some people are forming new companies and setting themselves up as the only shareholders, there is a real risk that they will take the public's money and run. We will not let them run away with the public's money. That is why—yes, with a heavy heart and much consideration—we have tabled the amendment.

12 midnight

The TECs have money that is generated from the public, but I have already made it clear that where, for example, chambers are involved and they wish to re-establish themselves as sole chambers, we will be helpful in terms of the assets that we require. Where there is local money, which does not properly need to be transferred to the Secretary of State, it will be used for proper local purposes. We have to be vigilant on behalf of the public. That is what this Parliament is about; it is what the Government are about; and it is what the amendment is about.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 90

STAMP DUTY

Amendment made: No. 37, in page 40, line 27, leave out 'or 89' and insert—

', 89 or *(Transfers: Wales)*'.—*[Mr. Blunkett.]*

Clause 91

CONTRACTS OF EMPLOYMENT

Amendment made: No. 38, in page 40, line 32, leave out 'or 89' and insert—

', 89 or *(Transfers: Wales)*'.—*[Mr. Blunkett.]*

Clause 99

AMENDMENTS RELATING TO EXTERNAL QUALIFICATIONS

Amendment made: No. 39, in page 45, line 2, at end insert—

'(2A) In subsection (3) of section 24 for "(g)" substitute "(gg)".'.—*[Mr. Wills.]*

Clause 100

QUALIFYING ACCOUNTS

Amendments made: No. 95, in page 45, line 39, leave out—

'in or as regards Scotland'

and insert—

'for the purposes of any provision of, or made under, an Act of the Scottish Parliament authorising grants to be paid to, or in respect of, individuals in connection with their education or training; and for this purpose references in this section to the Secretary of State are to be treated as references to the Scottish Ministers.'.

No. 96, in page 45, line 40, at end insert—

'(8) For the purposes of this section an enactment includes an Act of the Scottish Parliament.'.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Clause 101

QUALIFYING ARRANGEMENTS

Amendments made: No. 97, in page 46, line 26, after 'are' insert '—

(a)'.

No. 98, in page 46, line 27, leave out 'or Northern Ireland'.

No. 99, in page 46, line 28, at end insert—

', or

(b) arrangements which qualify under section (*Qualifying arrangements: Northern Ireland*).'.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Clause 102

QUALIFYING ARRANGEMENTS: FURTHER PROVISION

Amendment made: No. 100, in page 46, line 42, at end insert—

'(5) The Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment in Northern Ireland (or a person designated by it) may make arrangements with a body in connection with the making by that body of arrangements which qualify under section (*Qualifying arrangements: Northern Ireland*).

(6) Subsections (2) to (4) apply to arrangements under subsection (5) as they apply to arrangements under subsection (1); and for this purpose references in subsections (2) to (4) to the Secretary of State are to be treated as references to the Department.'.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Clause 108

PROVISION OF SERVICES

Mr. Boswell: I beg to move amendment No. 78, in page 49, line 38, after 'particular'", insert—

', while having regard to the needs of all young people for access to independent guidance and to a mode of service which is appropriate to their particular circumstances'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 103, in clause 109, page 50, line 21, after 'team', insert—

'( ) a Connexions partnership'.

Government amendments Nos. 9 to 12.

No. 8, in clause 117, page 55, line 17, leave out "may" and insert 'shall'.

Government amendments Nos. 13 to 16.

New clause 4—*Support for 11–25 year olds: Wales: provision of services*—

'. The National Assembly may provide or secure the provision of services which the Assembly considers will encourage, enable or assist (directly or indirectly) effective participation by young persons in education or training.'.

Mr. Boswell: After those brisk exchanges, I accept, of course, that Ministers wish to act in good faith, and I am sure that their assurances on clause 89 and on the amendment which deals with the Connexions strategy are well intended.

In response to a blunt question in Committee, the Minister has already given me the specific assurance that all young people will have access to independent guidance. I thought it appropriate to try to embody that in the Bill, and, in effect, to help the Minister to honour his assurance. In respect of that and of the second part of that amendment, considerable concerns remain in what might be described as the guidance professions and the careers services. Those have been reflected in representations to us by the Guidance Council and the Careers Service National Association. The concerns were also mentioned earlier by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan), but I did not intervene then, so as to save time and repetition.

Those in the careers services are concerned that, as a result either of signals from Ministers or of constraints on resources, activity has been diverted to young people who may be, or are in danger of being, socially excluded, at the expense of other young people. Frankly, if the Minister is to solve this problem, he will have to work something out—perhaps, although I anticipate it only in general terms, in the comprehensive spending review—to enable him to deliver a proper service to all young people, and a specific service to those in danger of social exclusion. Of course, he cannot comment on that at the moment.

On the substance of the amendment, we need to ensure that the undertaking that the Minister has given—that all young people will have access to independent guidance—means what it says. Essentially, that means access to a guidance interview, and/or to continuing support from guidance services if that is appropriate.

I believe that all of us who have had children who have passed through that age appreciate that, whatever their intellectual or other abilities, at some stage they need an opportunity to talk to someone outside their school and family who can give them well informed—and above all, independent—advice. That is the great virtue of the guidance and careers profession, and long may it continue.

In certain cases, access to IT information or a database may be appropriate and all that is needed, but in most cases the individual should meet a real person and receive real advice about their circumstances. That is a talisman which we all, on both sides of the House, need to preserve, and it is of great concern to the guidance profession.

In the second part of amendment No. 78, I refer to

a mode of service which is appropriate to their particular circumstances . . .

That sounds rather like a piece of Sir Humphrey-speak. Perhaps I may explain what I have in mind, because there is a real issue here about the way in which the Connexions service is delivered.

There is a genuine, although I hope only potential, criticism of a service that is still in its early days of establishment—that everything is focused on the needs of the socially excluded. For example, there is a very strong emphasis on personal mentoring. It would not be appropriate to reopen all those debates tonight, but although the relationship required for the potentially socially excluded young person may be of a mentoring nature, it would be unfortunate if what, for shorthand, I shall call mainstream young people did not have access to a different mode. For example, they could be taught by their teachers, in school or whatever, and then have access to independent guidance, not necessarily on the referral of a mentor but as a procedure that they could ask for or choose.

The danger with the way in which the Government have structured the service is that they require some 20,000 personal mentors. If those are recruited in large numbers from the guidance profession—which, as I recall, numbers some 7,000 staff at the moment—there will be no separate guidance profession left to deliver the independent guidance that we all wish to see. That would cause the independent guidance to fall, by default.

[Mr. Boswell]

It would perhaps be better to move more slowly, and with greater sensitivity to the needs of individuals. There may be a role for the personal mentor, especially for the target groups that Ministers have mentioned, but that does not necessarily mean that the model must be universally applicable to all young people, or must be the same whatever the region or local circumstances. Ministers have talked about that, and I think that they will be flexible in considering the bids for the plans that have been put forward for the Connexions service; the local tendering has now concluded its first phase.

I am not unhopeful, but I say to the Minister in all seriousness that there are still some real concerns in the guidance profession that this matter has not been got quite right yet. We need to hold to the principle of readily accessible independent guidance for all young people, and we need to find the right model of guidance and support for all young people. It will not always be the same for each and every one of them.

Mr. Rowlands: I shall speak briefly to my amendment No. 8. Whereas in an earlier debate I said that I thought that the English had a superior solution to some of the problems, in Wales the arrangements for the development of youth services as proposed in clauses 117 and 118 are, if not superior to those proposed for England, at least more appropriate to Wales than the English provisions of Connexions would be. But if we are to make those youth services work, the money must be where the legislation is.

I note with considerable interest that clause 117 says that the National Assembly

may direct a local authority

to provide such services. It may actually make provision for grants. However, clause 118 states that a local authority

shall comply with a direction

served by the National Assembly under clause 117.

Amendment No. 8 would require that if the National Assembly for Wales issues such a direction and insists on a local authority's compliance with it, the Assembly "shall" rather than "may" provide the money for the local authority to fulfil that service. Without such a provision, the situation will arise—as it has so often in the past under all Governments—in which increased duties are placed on local authorities without adequate finance.

If, under clause 117, the National Assembly issues a direction to a local authority to provide certain youth services, as clause 118 states that authorities must obey such directions, surely the National Assembly should be obliged to provide the grants, loans or other financial assistance required to deliver the service. There is a compelling logic to my amendment and I hope that the Minister will accept it, so that clause 117(4) reads, "A direction under subsection (1) . . . shall include provision for grants, loans and other kinds of financial assistance" to local authorities.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): I support the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) on a matter that I mentioned on Second Reading. In parts of the country such as the one that I represent, there is real concern that the diversion of resources for an admirable intent—to assist those who are disadvantaged and who perhaps need more help—is at the expense of other sectors of the community.

In a recent letter to me, the Guidance Council said:

much of the traditional support available to all young people . . . has fallen off sharply. Resources have been diverted to the most needy.

The council referred to the switch of resources from the many to the few. That is consistent neither with the Government's objectives, as we understand them, nor with the interests of our children or our economy.

In a fast changing world, it is vital that more able children have access to good specialist advice. If such access is curtailed to fund support for the less advantaged members of society, we shall all reap the consequences in the poorer choices made by more able children. If they do not receive the training and direction that they need when they are young, not only their future but the future of our economy will be in jeopardy.

Mr. Ian Bruce: My hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) spoke so briefly that I nearly failed to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I support amendment No. 78. I want to probe the Minister on the age ranges that would be covered under clause 108, especially if the amendment were accepted. Many colleagues are aware that young people with learning difficulties or mental disabilities will be greatly helped by the guidance referred to in the Bill.

I note that the clause relates to young people aged up to 20. However, such an age specification would often be inappropriate for young people receiving those services. The amendment might help local authorities by ensuring that appropriate guidance was available and the clause was not so prescriptive. It would provide that young people aged over 20 whose mental age was not more than 20 could receive further guidance to ensure that they could continue their career or obtain the training that they needed.

Will the Minister address that point? I have come across cases in local technical colleges, for example, in which there is an age cut-off beyond which assistance cannot be offered to such young people, although they are probably more in need of that guidance than their able-bodied counterparts.

Mr. Wicks: On the hon. Gentleman's final point, the service for those with learning difficulties will not be restricted to the normal age group of 13 to 19. We shall extend it to those aged up to 25, to help them with transition. That is important.

12.15 am

My hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands) referred to the new local service for young people. I think that the crux of his concern was that suitable resources should be available to get the job done. Clearly, resources will be an important element, and I want to provide the reassurance that they will be available. However, other matters might need to be covered by an Assembly direction under clause 117. Those might, for example, include the need for local authorities and other service providers to have regard to Assembly guidance on consulting young people and on the design of local management services.

We discussed the concerns of the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) many times in Committee. The Connexions service for all 13 to 19-year-olds is universal; it is for all in that age group. All the children and young people in the critical teenage years need first-class impartial, independent and expert guidance about learning options at 16 and other stages. They may need guidance about going to university or about the modern apprenticeship scheme, and they may need guidance and advice about careers.

In a modern age, the way in such advice is delivered will vary. We need to make use of information and communications technology and we shall establish a telephone line, Connexions Direct, so that people can receive such advice. However, face-to-face contact is vital, so there will be a universal service for all young people. Special groups, particularly those from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds or those with learning difficulties, will need advice and guidance, but others, such as our most able boys and girls, sometimes need special help to get through school because of their high abilities. I recall that the Select Committee on Education and Employment produced a report on that subject a year or two ago.

The service will be universal because all young people will need it. However, the word mentor has been used, so I shall quote one of my academic mentors, the late Richard Titmuss of the London school of economics. He used to teach his students that if "poor people's services" are just for poor people, they tend to be poor services. Those of us who are universalists remember that. It will be a universal service for all people, because that is the most civilised and dignified way of giving support to the most disadvantaged.

Amendment negatived.

Clause 111

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS:INFORMATION AND ACCESS

Amendment made: No. 106, in page 51, line 40, leave out—

'and city colleges for the technology of the arts,'

and insert—

', city colleges for the technology of the arts and city academies,'.—*[Mr. Wicks.]*

Clause 114

INFORMATION: SUPPLY BY PUBLIC BODIES

Amendments made: No. 9, in page 53, line 16, after 'the' insert 'persons or'.

No. 10, in page 53, line 19, after 'person' insert 'or body'.

No. 11, in page 53, line 20, after 'Those' insert 'persons and'.

No. 12, in page 53, line 23, at end insert—

'( ) a chief officer of police,'.—*[Mr. Wicks.]*

Schedule 7

INADEQUATE SIXTH FORMS

Mr. Clappison: I beg to move amendment No. 105, in page 85, leave out lines 20 and 21.

My hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) has rightly made known our concern about some of the Bill's provisions and their effect on sixth forms. I intend to be brief, but let me make it clear that we regard it as an issue of great importance. We certainly share the objective that we should deal with any institution for 16 to 18-year-olds that fails to provide a good education for its pupils and fails to help them to realise their ambitions and fulfil their aspirations.

There are clearly problems with the definition of inadequate sixth forms. It is confined to school sixth forms. It does not include the other types of institutions, notwithstanding the fact that school sixth forms have a better record of providing good GCSE results earlier on and better academic A-level results than other types of providers.

The definition of inadequate sixth forms is wholly unsatisfactory, and the amendment is designed to put it right. *[Interruption.]* I am not sure whether it will succeed in that purpose unless I have the attention of the Under-Secretary of State, who will not hear the problem that I shall outline if he does not listen.

A school's sixth form is said to be inadequate if

the school is failing or likely to fail to give pupils over compulsory school age an acceptable standard of education, or . . . the school has significant weaknesses in one of more areas of its activities for pupils over compulsory school age.

We have problems with that definition. We think that it is not clear or comprehensive, especially in respect of paragraph (b), which refers to "significant weaknesses" of schools. It is clear from that that a school may not be failing, or likely to fail, to give an acceptable level of sixth form education, but it could still fall foul of paragraph (b) because of "significant weaknesses". We need to know what are these "significant weaknesses", which are covered by paragraph (b) but not by (a).

Is the Minister able to tell us what these "significant weaknesses" might be? For example, might they relate to a school that provides a limited range of subjects, or to a school that has small classes in its sixth forms, even though the school is providing a good or adequate level of education? This is of particular interest to rural sixth forms, because they seem to be under the most pressure from the combined effects of the schedule, which gives more powers of intervention to learning and skills councils to close school sixth forms, and of earlier provisions that relate to funding.

The Government are taking more and more powers to intervene in respect of sixth forms. Earlier, the Secretary of State said that interventions should be in inverse proportion to success, but successful institutions are having more and more intervention brought to bear against them. If they are to face closure through being described as inadequate, we must have a better definition of what amounts to an inadequate sixth form than the Government have given us.

Mr. Ian Bruce: The amendment draws attention to an extraordinary situation. I think that the Minister, who is a fair-minded man, will understand what is likely to happen if lines 20 and 21 remain in the Bill. As a fair-minded man, I think he will say that deleting the words would not damage the purpose behind the provision.

There are very successful sixth forms in my constituency. Yet—I hope that this will not be a headline in the Dorset Echo tomorrow—each one of those sixth

[Mr. Ian Bruce]

forms could be classed as inadequate under the definition in the schedule. They all, and the sixth form college that provides sixth forms—although I do not think that it is covered by the provision—have significant weaknesses in one or more areas of their activities for pupils over compulsory school age. I am sure that each of the head teachers would say that, under that definition, they are trying to do things that they need to do better. They have to have more pupils, more resources or whatever. They are building up certain areas of their sixth form, and they may find that it is failing to meet expected standards in some areas.

All the sixth forms have been started since the inception of our sixth form college, as schools have decided to build up their own sixth forms. The success of the education offered to children in those schools has been improved by the introduction of a sixth form. However, when a sixth form is introduced and is in the process of being built up, it is, by common consent, inadequate—in terms of the range of subjects available, class sizes and so on.

Imagine a school inspector carrying out a normal Ofsted inspection and asking himself how he should define the situation regarding the sixth form. On reading the definition in schedule 7, he will have to tell the school that he is sorry, but he has to write in his report that the sixth form is inadequate. That would be the death of sixth forms that were just starting to build up a reputation—no one would want to attend them, so they would have no chance of developing.

No one would quarrel with the definition of "inadequate" set out in paragraph 1(2)(a)—that a school has an inadequate sixth form if

the school is failing or likely to fail to give pupils over compulsory school-age an acceptable standard of education.

Clearly, that is the test of whether the individuals currently in the sixth form will receive an adequate post-16 education. On occasion, when a particular department is not doing well, the school decides to close the department and not offer those subjects to its post-16 students; those students can then go to another school in the area or to the sixth form college to study the subject. However, that is not a reason for including paragraph 1(2)(a) in a statutory definition of an inadequate sixth form.

The Minister is a fair-minded man and I am sure that he is convinced by our argument. So that we can reach Third Reading and have a proper debate on it, I am sure that he will accept our sensible amendment.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I share my hon. Friends' concern. For some time, we have suspected that Ministers have a hidden agenda to reduce the number of sixth forms in secondary schools. Ministers believe that sixth forms cost too much and give some schools an advantage over others, despite the fact that when the Select Committee on Education and Employment considered the issue a couple of years ago, it found that there was very little difference in funding for sixth forms in schools and those in colleges.

My concern about the two lines identified in the amendment, on which my hon. Friends have not touched, is that the scope of a school's sixth form may be reduced to those subjects in which the head teacher and governors are absolutely confident that performance and delivery are beyond question. As a result, the variety of courses that A-level students seek might be denied them, not because the school wants to restrict their choice, but because it fears that the quality of provision in certain subjects might not quite pass muster when the inspector comes to call; and that, because of that single failing in that single subject, the future of the whole sixth form in that school will be jeopardised. That will be the effect of the schedule as drafted.

The definition encompasses not courses but "activities". One of the activities undertaken by school sixth forms is the provision of advice on university admissions. From the views expressed by Ministers in recent weeks, we know that they think that sixth forms throughout the country are failing their students in terms of the advice they give them on access to university. Tony Higgins, chief executive of UCAS, was quoted in *The Independent* earlier this week as saying that

there's far too low a proportion of those from low socio-economic groups applying to go to university.

I agree. One of the reasons may be that those pupils are not getting the right advice from their schools. The solution is not to close down the sixth forms, but to bolster them.

As a result of the provision, the curriculum that those sixth forms offer will become even narrower in future, and many of them will fear that, because of their weakness in that respect, they are at risk of being closed down across the board. On such flimsy grounds, the Government could come in and reorganise sixth form provision in many parts of the country.

12.30 am

Mr. Bruce: My hon. Friend reminds me that the Government say that sixth forms must take pupils over 16 from lower socio-economic groups and get them through A-level. Even a brilliant sixth form where all the pupils were doing well could still be classed as inadequate because pupils were not staying on. The sixth form would therefore be failing in an activity that the Government expected it to undertake.

Mr. St. Aubyn: My hon. Friend touches on the reason why the word "activities", which is ill defined, is so wrong. It is surely up to the governors, the head teacher and the parents to decide what sort of school they want. We believe that it is their choice. It is not for some Government Minister to go round the country ticking one box and crossing another, deciding which schools are allowed to survive and which schools he or she will close down.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): When I raised the matter on Second Reading, my remarks were greeted with derision on the Government Benches. I drew to the attention of the House the importance of sixth forms in providing sixth-formers with an opportunity to exercise administrative responsibility over their juniors, and the benefits of that to sixth-formers. That was regarded by Labour Members as so unfashionable as to be derisory.

In my capacity as a Territorial Army officer responsible for the recruitment of further officers, it is my experience that pupils who have had this opportunity and responsibility often stand head and shoulders above their peers who have not had the same responsibility. That is

an important function of sixth forms. To what extent does the ability to offer sixth-formers the opportunity to exercise administrative responsibilities over the rest of the school feature in the Minister's definition of adequacy?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Michael Wills): I am glad that the Opposition share our objective that every student should receive an acceptable standard of education. However, most of what I have heard has been an alarmist attempt to whip up fears—I know that the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) will be fascinated by what I am saying—about an agenda that does not exist.

I shall immediately answer the question asked by the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison). The definition of "inadequate" is consistent with the statutory definitions of schools requiring special measures and schools with serious weaknesses. A sixth form or an LEA-maintained 16-to-19 institution will be found inadequate if it is failing or likely to fail to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education, or if it has significant weaknesses in one or more areas of its activities for pupils.

That judgment will be made on the basis only of the quality of education that a school provides for its sixth form pupils. We will work with the chief inspector to develop detailed criteria that take account of the common post-16 inspection framework. Those criteria will be published.

For serious weaknesses to be identified in a whole-school inspection report can have equally serious consequences for a school. As with the judgment that a school requires special measures, a judgment of serious weaknesses will trigger the LEA's powers to intervene by appointing additional governors and suspending delegation of the school's budget. If the necessary improvements are not then made, the school is likely to be judged as requiring special measures at its next inspection, which would trigger the Secretary of State's powers to direct that the school be closed.

Mr. Ian Bruce *rose—*

Mr. Wills: I shall not give way, because I want to make progress and I am absolutely confident that when the Opposition have heard the power of my arguments they will feel impelled to withdraw their amendment.

We resist the amendment because it would narrow the definition of "inadequate" to sixth forms that are failing. But removing the possibility of closure for sixth forms with serious weaknesses would not be in the interests of students. They should be assured of high-quality provision wherever they choose to learn. Let us be clear in this respect: serious weaknesses are just what they say, not just minor problems about which anyone can afford to be complacent.

We shall also resist the amendment because it would cut across the careful way in which we are providing in the Bill for consistent inspection arrangements across post-16 learning, with similar standards applied to schools and colleges. If those arrangements are to be successful in encouraging improvements, rigorous follow-up arrangements must be in place; and where any provider of post-16 education is not meeting the standards that students have a right to expect, it must make the necessary improvements or face the possible consequences. The Bill therefore contains provisions for the LSC and the CETW to intervene in colleges where students are not being offered the quality of education to which they are entitled. It is therefore entirely right that the councils should have parallel powers where 16 to 19 provision in schools is not of adequate quality.

Schools will not be left to struggle alone with the vital task of improvement. Local education authorities have a responsibility to help schools draw up and implement their post-inspection action plans, and, where appropriate, diocesan bodies should also provide support. These proposals are about safeguarding high quality. As we have made consistently clear in Committee and again tonight, we have no agenda for removing sixth forms and reducing choice for 16 to 19-year-olds. The hon. Member for Maidenhead keeps bringing up this subject. I hope that she is listening to what I am saying.

Many sixth forms are achieving high standards and excellent examination results, and we want more of them. We have made it very clear that schools that are providing high-quality education for their sixth form pupils have nothing to fear from the proposals in schedule 7, and it would not be right for sixth forms with serious weaknesses to be in that same secure position. As I have already set out, they will have three important safeguards.

Mrs. May *rose—*

Mr. Wills: I will not give way, because the hon. Lady will be persuaded by the time I finish.

Sixth forms with serious weaknesses will be allowed a reasonable time to put things right after a first adverse inspection report. The crucial judgments about quality will be made by independent inspectors; and, finally, the statutory decision-making process will enable all the relevant issues to be fully aired.

We have made it consistently clear that our aim is that all post-16 provision will be of high quality. Our proposals for inadequate sixth forms are consistent with that aim, and with the principle that intervention should be in inverse proportion to success. I hope that the hon. Member for Hertsmere will therefore be persuaded to withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Clappison: I am afraid that the situation remains as unsatisfactory as it was before the Minister spoke. He referred throughout to "serious weaknesses". I respectfully draw his attention to the fact that that is not the terminology used in paragraph (2)(b), which refers to "significant weaknesses".

The Minister was not able to give us an example of what a serious weakness might be. He said that serious weaknesses meant serious weaknesses, but could not give us a single example of a serious weakness that fell outside subparagraph (a) but came within subparagraph (b). It is no use the Minister's saying that it is related to education provision, because if it were it would fall under subparagraph (a), which concerns giving an acceptable standard of education. Nor did the Minister answer the point quite properly made by my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) that subparagraph (b) refers

[Mr. Clappison]

not only to school lessons or the curriculum but to activities, which makes it much broader and widens the scope for finding that a school has a significant weakness.

Mr. Ian Bruce *rose—*

Mr. Clappison: I will give way, but before my hon. Friend intervenes, I should like to make the point that the Minister also failed, interestingly, to deal with the point that I made about whether a limited number of subjects or small classes would amount to significant weaknesses.

Mr. Bruce: I tried to intervene on the Minister. Doubtless he will jump to his feet and explain the point if my hon. Friend cannot do so. The Minister clearly suggested that the powers are exactly the same as those that already exist to deal with failing schools. If that is the case, why are sixth forms singled out by the terrible phrase "inadequate sixth forms"? Why is the closure of sixth forms, rather than the school, mentioned?

Mr. Clappison: I am sure that my hon. Friend's anxieties are shared by many hon. Members who have heard what the Minister has said—or failed to say—tonight in response to the problem. The worries remain. I am dissatisfied, but, in view of the need to make progress and the lateness of the hour, I do not propose to press the amendment to a vote. However, genuine anxieties remain.

I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Remaining Government amendments and new clauses agreed to.

Order for Third Reading read.

12.41 am

Mr. Wicks: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

At the end of a concert in Japan, the great lifelong learner and songwriter Mr. Bob Dylan observed that it was the time of hour when we had to run. Some of us were born to run, so it is therefore important that we keep the debate brief.

I believe that the Bill is a measure for a new century. The way in which we invest in the skills of our people and take seriously the concept of lifelong learning will determine Britain's economic future. The way in which we determine our sense of community and fairness is equally important for some of us. We are considering not only economics but social inclusion. We are setting up new structures to help the young to pursue workplace development and further education, and to promote adult and community education.

12.42 am

Mr. Boswell: I begin by briefly commenting on the Government's strange pendulum management of their business. Yesterday, the business was so thin, bland and non-controversial that we were sent home by tea time. Today, substantial matters are being discussed well past midnight.

The Opposition remain concerned about the Bill for the reasons that we set out in our reasoned amendment on Second Reading. Above all, we are worried about the centralisation of power and the risk of bureaucracy. It is not that the Minister is an arrogant man; his look of injured innocence if anyone seeks to assert that puts me off making such a claim. However, the dynamics of the position or, more sinisterly, those shadowy educational theorists who lurk in the wings of education policy but occasionally find themselves centre stage, may wrench matters in a direction that Parliament has now empowered them to take. An example could be the unresolved threat to close down sixth forms or, to put it in industrial relations terms, progressively and constructively to dismiss them, not so much necessarily by deeming them inadequate as simply by gradually starving them of funding.

The Ministers who served on the Standing Committee are certainly not lacking in personal charm, and I concede that they have sought to set out their stall as a reasonable case when the details of the Bill are being considered. Only today, however, in the discussion on the disposition of training and enterprise council assets, we had an example of the mask slipping. However much Ministers may claim to be acting in defence of the public purse and, as ever, with reasonableness, there will be those—and they will not all be twisters or people trying to take away Government assets—who will feel that their services and contribution have not been acknowledged, and that the Government's means of thanking them is to rig the course and create an inequitable solution on the disposition of assets.

I come down from the high horse of principle to a more practical level in my closing remarks on our concerns about the Bill. If nothing else, Ministers have, in one Bill and at one time, set themselves the task of introducing a single framework for post-16 education and a parallel connection strategy, both of which involve the schools sector and many other providers. That is, as Sir Humphrey Appleby would no doubt have commented, "Extremely courageous, Minister."

The policy, and the Bill that has been derived from it, are increasingly seen to be assembled in kit form, before our very eyes, in Committee and in the House. Only today, a new version of the transition planning document thumped on to my desk. That process will continue as the consultations continue, until vesting day next April and long afterwards. This is a policy of continuous experiment, if not necessarily of continuous improvement.

Until this late hour, and this last gasp, we have continued to seek from Ministers, and even occasionally to receive from them, assurances. After our deliberations tonight, one final hurdle remains in another place, and after that we will leave this over-sold, over-ambitious and under-achieving Bill with some trepidation. We cast it forth to await the consequences that have not been foreseen and, more widely, the judgment of events.

12.47 am

Mr. Willis: We have spent nearly nine hours on the Bill, and of that, 15 minutes have related to its substance. From the Opposition, we have had sex, selection, division and privilege, which are key areas for a Tory Opposition, but nothing about the substance of what we should be here to discuss—educational provision for 16 to

19-year-olds and adults, which is desperately under-represented, desperately under-resourced and desperately in need of support.

Anybody who read the skills taskforce report this week will be aware of the disgraceful skills situation among the adult population. The Small Business Service estimates that billions of pounds are lost because we do not have a work force with the skills to carry out the necessary tasks. Yet we have spent nine hours obsessing about sex, selection, division and privilege.

The social exclusion unit report, "Bridging the Gap", was a graphic reminder that 170,000 16 to 19-year-olds leave school with no qualifications, no hope and no nothing, but they have not been mentioned in the nine hours that we have spent discussing sex, selection, division and privilege.

As we end our consideration of the Bill, there is great sadness because this should have been a ground-breaking Bill. We sought a unified structure in post-16 lifelong learning, education and training. In 1992-93, the Tories created a marketplace. That was their answer to the problem: drive down costs and increase numbers. Everything would take its place. It has not. In reality, the Bill is a disappointment. Members on both sides of the House will share that disappointment. It has retained the narrow provision on the 16 to 19 age group. It has not extended its horizons beyond that, yet there is a classic need to address the underskilling of the adult population.

The Bill does absolutely nothing for small business, which was looking to the Bill to allow it to tap into a network to upskill our people. There is little in that regard. It has decimated the careers service into a Connexions service. We hope that that will be highly successful, but it is at the expense of an adult careers service and of careers services for people who achieve more than five A to Cs. The Bill has created a new bureaucracy that may or may not be more successful than previous ones. Through the back door, it has brought in city academies.

At midnight, I spent a few minutes doing a television programme, on which the official Opposition said that, when the Bill hit another place, all the problems in the House of Commons and previously in another place in terms of sex, grammar schools and selection would simply be regurgitated to kill off the Bill. If that happens, it will leave in limbo the TEC movement, the Further Education Funding Council and the whole of the reorganisation. The hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) and her colleagues must not allow that to happen. Despite our differences, we on the Liberal Democrat Benches feel that there is enough merit in the Bill to give it its Third Reading and to support its passage back to another place.

12.52 am

Mr. Brooke: I was not able to be present at the conclusion of the Standing Committee because I was making a speech in the Second Reading debate on the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill. Therefore, I say briefly what I would have said then.

The Government had a certain choice of Ministers to put on the Bill. I will remark neutrally that I think that they chose extremely well. The three Ministers who served on the Bill served the legislation, the Committee, the Government and, indeed, Parliament well. As I said when we debated the sittings motion originally, our side necessarily had fewer resources and had less to choose from, but we were admirably served in the leadership of the official Opposition by my hon. Friends the Members for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) and for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison).

In Committee, I enjoyed all the observations by the Liberal Democrats and by Government Back Benchers. Lest I sound like the dodo in "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland", handing round prizes to everyone, let me say a final word about the Bill—something that came up from time to time in Committee. The Government had assured us that it was a bottom up Bill, not a top down one. My only regret about our time in Committee and about the Bill as a whole is that the Government never sought in Committee or, indeed, on Report to justify the claims that they made for it.

12.53 am

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the debate, having since late last year been a member of the Education Sub-Committee of the Select Committee on Education and Employment. I was surprised to find that the Select Committee had not published a report on the Bill—a lamentable omission—but, before my time, it published a report on further education, which, extraordinarily, the Bill seems flatly to contradict.

In the 11 months since I was elected to the House, I have it made it my priority to visit as many schools as possible in my constituency and to listen to parents, pupils, teachers, governors and the various youth groups and youth councils which are active and doing an admirable job in my constituency. In those many meetings, we have often discussed the basic proposals in the Bill as they have been progressively revealed to us. What they have been saying seems to be at odds with what the Government claim they have been listening to.

My constituents have the fortune of living in Cheshire, a relatively high standard education area compared with England as a whole. It has a relatively good take-up rate for 16 to 18-year-olds to pursue their education seriously. The questions are, first, "What do the Government think they are doing by trying to encourage parents to vote to scrap grammar schools?" As there are none in Cheshire, they look across the county border to Trafford and say, "Isn't this just another example of the Government's determination to level down and stamp on excellence rather than celebrating it and drawing upon it?" That cause has no finer advocate than my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady). Other questions that are asked include, "Why do the Government want to get rid of the TECs?"; "What will happen to the jobs in those TECs?"; and "Is my sixth form safe?"

If the Government really intend to introduce new sex education guidelines, why are they so embarrassed to promote marriage? If they are so keen to establish city academies in inner-city areas, why are they so grudging in their recognition of the involvement of the private sector in education? What is the Connexions service really going to deliver for the Winsford youth council? Surely all young people require access to guidance in an unpatronising way tailored to their individual circumstances.

The Bill does not address those straightforward questions from my constituents. I hope that the Minister will address them in his reply to the debate, given that the Government rejected amendments that would have answered each and every one.

[Mr. Stephen O'Brien]

There is a consistent thread in the Government's approach to the Bill—their lack of trust in those who have the front-line knowledge and expertise to deliver their objectives. That lack of trust is fuelled by their difficulty with the concept of competition—and even that word. As has been demonstrated, it is best to draw on the excellence of grammar schools and encourage other schools to compete, rather than threatening them with the Damoclean sword of repeated ballots. Surely the right approach would have been for the Government to take advantage of that excellence to drive up standards by competition rather than to hide behind the word collaboration, resulting in a cloud of bureaucracy and the inability for anyone to accept responsibility and accountability.

My concern, along with those expressed by my Front-Bench colleagues, is that the Bill started with fine aims, as peddled by the Government, but has lamentably failed by creating the potential for obfuscation, bureaucracy and centralisation, where it would have been far better for the Government to have trusted in the local delivery of the very services that they seek to promote in the spirit of competition, which would level standards up, rather than one of collaboration which, over time, will have a levelling down effect.

12.57 am

Mr. Swayne: When we considered the Bill on Second Reading, I thought that it attached to training a bureaucracy that would have been worthy of collective farming. However, it had two redeeming features: it provided a measure of protection for the teaching of the importance of marriage and, arguably, it put an end to the class warfare in respect of grammar schools. Both those redeeming features have been removed from the Bill during its passage through the House, so I could not support it on Second Reading and I certainly cannot support it now.

I apply to the Bill what I call the Ringwood school test. Ringwood school in my constituency was a comprehensive school that was transformed by the experience of becoming grant maintained. One of the elements of its transformation was its acquisition, in the teeth of opposition, of a sixth form. It is now a thriving and, most importantly, a growing sixth form. My question about the Bill—the Ringwood school test—is what does the Bill do for that school. My estimate is that it does nothing. Indeed, it threatens the existence of that sixth form. The only assurance that we have been able to get from Ministers during the passage of the Bill is that the funding of that sixth form will not shrink. That is a growing sixth form, and we need an assurance that the funding will grow with it. We have not had it and that is reason enough to vote against the Bill.

1 am

Mr. Brady: I would hesitate to support any Bill that failed the Ringwood school test, the new and important threshold that any piece of education legislation should pass.

Members of the Committee enjoyed a civilised discussion, and I echo the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) regarding the politeness of Ministers during the Committee. I am sorry that that attitude did not continue this evening. On occasion, Ministers have been bad-tempered and reluctant to be drawn on the detail of some of their proposals. They have also been reluctant to justify the implications of what they are doing, particularly in regard to city academies.

When the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) said that there was centralisation and bureaucracy and that the careers service was being decimated, I was sure that the Liberal Democrats would try their hand at opposition for a while. However, the hon. Gentleman reverted to type by saying that he would encourage his party, as usual, to support the Government.

There are serious flaws in the Bill. Some of the difficulties that remain regarding the replacement of TECs by learning and skills councils are a concern. As my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) pointed out, the removal of some aspects of the Bill is also a cause for regret. We should have had an opportunity this evening to improve on the botched job that the Government made of previous legislation regarding the future of grammar schools. It is a cause for regret that, having seen that their policy in that area was palpably failing, the Government were reluctant to look at how to reform the legislation to remove the uncertainty and the threat hanging over some of the best schools in the country.

I regret that the Government have not been prepared to listen; to think a bit more; and to argue more cogently for the policies that they are pursuing. The Bill could have been so much better and it is a source of regret that it is not.

1.3 am

Mr. St. Aubyn: I appreciated the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady), although it would have been easier to hear them if there had not been so many conversations being carried out by Labour Members. I hope that they will do the House a courtesy and hear the Bill out in silence. If they have so little respect for the Bill, perhaps none of us should let it go through. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. There is a great deal of background noise in the Chamber. It is late in the evening, so let us listen to the hon. Gentleman, as a courtesy.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Was that all right for the hon. Gentleman?

Mr. St. Aubyn: That was delightful; I could not have asked for anything more.

The Select Committee on Education and Employment looked at the matter a couple of years ago, and I remember a very different Liberal Democrat Member from the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis). Labour Members concurred that the further education system had been working well and that the Further Education Funding Council was a success. The report found that its formula was well understood and we

heard again and again that the last thing that the colleges wanted was another reorganisation or change in the rules that would mean a new layer of bureaucracy, administration, time and expense while they got to grips with a new system.

I do not think that the Bill ushers in anything like the new era depicted by the Minister. It is primarily an attempt to rebrand an approach to further education developed by the previous Conservative Government. Under that approach, further education colleges were taken away from the dead hand of local education authorities and given their freedom. That freedom came with a framework of standards and fair funding that enabled colleges to deliver many more courses to many more people at a far more attractive cost to the taxpayer.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough talked about obsessions. He and his party, and many Labour Members, are obsessed with the amount of money going into further education. Conservative Members are focused on what comes out the other end—the massive increase in the numbers who went through further education as a result of the previous Government's reforms.

I elicited a series of parliamentary answers from the Minister in which he revealed that the numbers going through further education in the first few years of this Government had fallen by 189,000 full-time equivalents. That number is equivalent to the 500,000 people who would have gone through courses if the rate of achievement attained by the previous Government had been sustained. At the same time, as I have pointed out in other debates, the number of vacancies in the economy now totals more than 1 million. That is the highest level for more than 10 years, and represents exactly the sort of cost pressure on wages and demand for employees that could well lead to boom and bust.

That wage-cost inflation is a direct result of the Government's failure to deliver, through the further education system, sufficient numbers of people with the right training for the jobs on offer. There is nothing in the Bill that answers that problem. On the contrary: at a time when education systems around the world are trying to become less political and include the dynamism of the private sector, this Bill represents a retrograde step. It brings back more political control over colleges and their links with local businesses.

The TEC in my area has been singled out for praise in previous Select Committee reports for the way it works in partnership with colleges and local businesses. It is having great difficulty in persuading business people to carry on giving of their time under the new skills councils system. Many such people remain to be convinced that their voices will still be heard, and that the business approach that is so vital in this area will continue to carry the weight that it deserves.

City academies are another example of the Government picking up a good Conservative idea. I am delighted at that, although it has taken them a long time to acknowledge the success that the previous Government achieved. The Government are rebranding the idea, and widening slightly the terms of reference of the academies, but they have given no clue as to how they will get more useful members of the private sector involved.

The Government take the unfortunate view that the private sector is some sort of milch cow that will add extra resources to the education process. There is no appreciation of the role that it can play in developing new ideas and the sort of stronger management that will deliver a better school system.

The Government are too obsessed with the amount of money going into education and not obsessed enough with how those resources can lead to better results, higher standards and an increase in the number of people gaining qualifications in the excellent range of colleges inherited as part of the previous Government's golden legacy.

1.11 am

Mr. Ian Bruce: I had the good fortune in my first Parliament to serve on the Select Committee on Employment. It was interesting to see the transformation of view among Labour colleagues on the Committee about TECs being a good thing. When the previous Government abolished the Manpower Services Commission, which was a great employer in the Secretary of State's constituency, the TECs were at first universally condemned by the Labour party. Realising that those bodies were doing an extremely good job, however, Labour became wedded to the idea of co-operating with them, and trade unions became involved.

The Government are obsessed with modernising—as they describe it—everything in sight, particularly when it comes to anything created by the previous Government that was successful in improving training. Therefore, the Government have to rebrand the TECs and come up with a new proposal.

I am the first to acknowledge that when we introduced TECs, there was a lot of bureaucracy. The Treasury, in particular, wanted to re-audit the figures three or four times, whereas in a normal business, people would just get on with it. Abolishing the TECs and going through the rigmarole of removing their assets and creating a new body with new assets and employment rights means that the bureaucracy that had to be dealt with in the previous scheme must be dealt with all over again.

Many people from other countries came to the United Kingdom to discover how we cured the British disease and reinvigorated our work force. Ministers consistently tell us how unemployment has gone down—and it has. Yet it appears from what they say that all the changes made under the previous Government that led to the creation of jobs and the training that people have had within companies, colleges and universities can be dismissed as though nothing has happened.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), who I understand earned his living as a professional in the educational establishment before coming to this place, told us what an awful job he had done. I do not agree with him—I think that he probably did a very good job. I am grateful to all those in my constituency who develop training and enterprise.

I am particularly concerned about sixth forms. There is an interesting situation in my constituency. When the grammar school was abolished, a sixth-form college was created in the further education college. It was the only sixth-form college in the Weymouth and Portland area of my constituency. Local schools decided that it would be a good idea to have sixth forms as well, which led to the college complaining about the amount of money being given to schools for sixth forms. The college wanted equality of funding.

[Mr. Ian Bruce]

The Government announced that they would provide equality of funding and the college rejoiced. Indeed, I congratulated the Government—it just shows how foolish one can be. We now know what that equality of funding means. The Government looked at the cost of sixth forms in further education colleges or other sixth-form colleges and realised that they could get the same provision for the same price through schools. They then froze the amount that schools will receive. The Bill contains mechanisms to abolish sixth forms, so as they become more inadequate because the funding has been frozen, the Government can then decide to abolish them.

When I challenged the Under-Secretary of State for Wales about unemployment, he produced the standard line that is no doubt produced by all the spin doctors and the people in Millbank tower. I shall explain why the Bill needed to do something about the failure of the new deal. The hon. Gentleman was probably looking at the figure of 115,000 two years ago for the long-term unemployed. He looks at those claimant figures now and he probably says, "Look, only 45,000 claimants." However, the new deal statistics, which are produced for us constituency by constituency across the entire country, show that in addition to the 45,000 who are classified as long-term unemployed, who are on the gateway, 65,000—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has gone a long way from the Bill. This is a Third Reading debate and he should return to that subject.

Mr. Bruce: I am sorry to have gone on at some length, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If I could just finish the last two figures—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has finished what he was saying on that matter. He should deal with Third Reading and then sit down.

Mr. Bruce: I am grateful for your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am sorry that I will have to give the Minister a seminar outside this place. Clearly, he has been misinformed by his own statistics.

The Government claim that unemployment is down, and it is, but not on the long-term side. They have said that they are looking to train people and to develop new ways of training. I would not for one moment suggest that, as an economy develops, one can simply set systems in aspic, but with companies crying out for employees and having more vacancies than there are people to fill them, the Bill should have ensured that they would train their own staff. It should have done more to get employers involved in the training councils.

The previous Labour Government had one very successful feature—they introduced the Open university, which is universally acknowledged as a way for people to take responsibility for their own training. The more we can get individuals to do that the better.

Many of us congratulated the Government on the university for industry, which we thought would be another pillar of the Bill. In fact, the UFI has become a UFO: no one has seen it: it has disappeared.

We are looking to see what the Government intend to do. The Bill is a wasted opportunity. It is very long, but, frankly, it was a waste of the Government's time and it was certainly a waste of an opportunity to help people to get the training and skills that they deserve.

1.18 am

Mr. Hayes: I do not want to detain the House unduly, but I wish to return briefly to the city academies. They have been broadly welcomed—Conservative Members certainly welcome them because they build on the fine tradition of the city technology colleges and specialist schools, which are so greatly revered by hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber.

However, the many criticisms of city technology colleges and specialist schools remain unanswered in respect of the city academies. I refer to three matters. The first is the precise status—the nature—of these new schools. I hope that when the Secretary of State sums up he will confirm that, to all intents and purposes, they will be private schools. The second matter is their relationship with other schools within their area. The great criticism of specialist schools and CTCs was the impact that they would have on neighbourhood schools. We want to know, and we have not heard it yet, what obligations city academies will have towards other local schools; what responsibilities they will have for school places and numbers; and about their possible impact on neighbourhood schools in those respects.

Thirdly, precision is required in respect of the funders of the city academies. My hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) referred to that. However, he did not mention the transfer of assets. When that matter was discussed in Committee, there was a lack of clarity.

I feel that we certainly need from the Secretary of State an assurance about the nature of the transfer of assets and about who those assets will ultimately belong to if they are transferred back to a private body and might become involved in a city academy. I suspect that, without that clarity—although I am sure it will be forthcoming from the Secretary of State—it will be very difficult for Members on either side of the House to vote for Third Reading.

1.20 am

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): All the remarks of the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) were dealt with in the first two hours of this afternoon when he was not present, and had I known that the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) was going to go on at such length at this time of the morning, I would personally have carried 78 people to the polls in 1997.

My friends know that I am totally in favour of timetabling all major Bills, and tonight's antics merely reinforce the argument that that is the most sensible thing that we could do in modernising this place for a 21st-century legislature.

I want to thank hon. Members for being here at this time of the morning and for supporting Third Reading, and to reinforce the very generous words of the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), who was kind enough, on the last Standing Committee on which he will serve before he retires, to pay tribute to the Ministers who served in Committee, who did a sterling job. I thank them and the Whips for what they did on that Committee.

The judge and jury of the Bill will be those who, in years to come, benefit from it.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed, with amendments.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

CRIMINAL LAW

That the draft Criminal Justice Act 1993 (Extension of Group A Offences) Order 2000, which was laid before this House on 12th June, be approved.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Question agreed to.

ESTIMATES

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 145(2) (Liaison Committee),

That this House agrees with the Report [22nd June] of the Liaison Committee.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Religious Broadcasting

1.22 am

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): I am very grateful to have the opportunity to present a petition supported by more than 2,000 of my constituents which relates to the injustice whereby religious broadcasters, such as United Christian Broadcasters, are prevented from bidding for national radio broadcasting licences. Such organisations already broadcast successfully to local communities through local radio and satellite, but, for no good reason, are barred from seeking to broadcast to a wider audience. The petition has been organised by my constituent Mrs. Catherine Van Zoen, to whom I am most grateful.

The petition states:

That current broadcasting legislation is unfair in the way in which it discriminates against religious broadcasters and that religious organisations should be able to compete on a level playing field with secular organisations for the full range of broadcasting licences.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your honourable House will urge the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to bring forward proposals to amend the legislation to remove discrimination against the ownership of broadcasting licences by religious bodies, and to require the Independent Television Commission and the Radio Authority to amend their Rules and Codes of Guidance to remove provisions which discriminate, in wording or in practice, against religious bodies.

To lie upon the Table.

Planning Policy (Chelmsford)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

1.24 am

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): A matter of great concern to my Chelmsford constituents is the amount of housebuilding that is expected to take place during the next 11 years. They fear that whole swathes of greenfield sites—possibly even greenbelt land, if the Liberal Democrats have their way—in Margaretting and Battlesbridge will be concreted over and lost for ever, thus despoiling our environment.

The cause of that concern is the requirement for 69,600 houses to be built in the county of Essex and in Southend-on-Sea between 1996 and 2011. According to figures given by the Deputy Prime Minister, the total could be even higher. My constituents and I want that number to be reduced, as it is unacceptably high.

The current system for housing allocation and the computation of housing need is deeply flawed and unsatisfactory. It is based on a top-down approach—from the Government through county councils to borough and district councils—rather than on the bottom-up approach which would be a more satisfactory and sensible way of dealing with a highly contentious issue throughout the country.

Between 1996 and 2011, Essex and Southend must provide 69,600 new homes. Under the structure plan, they have been allocated throughout the county taking several factors into account—including locally generated needs; the economic potential to support further housing and population increases; and a range of environmental and planning constraints. That will have a bad impact on the town of Chelmsford in my constituency, especially as the land available for housebuilding is, in theory, restricted because the whole of an area in the southern part of the town is green belt—as is the land in Battlesbridge to the south-east of the district council area. My hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh (Dr. Clark) is extremely concerned about the impact of greenbelt changes on Battlesbridge in his constituency.

Chelmsford has been allocated the largest number of new dwellings in the area—11,950. That is wholly disproportionate and unfair for reasons that I shall outline.

First, building land available in Chelmsford is restricted by the fact that we have a significant amount of greenbelt land in the southern part of the town and in Battlesbridge. Secondly, we do not have the infrastructure to sustain the amount of housing that has already been imposed on us under the Essex county council structure plan.

Thirdly, I understand that 2,250 of the allocated dwellings are intended to meet the needs of people from outside the borough. Apparently that is because Chelmsford

has a strategic role to play in relieving south Essex of housing pressures because of its close proximity to this area.

I bitterly resent that. We are being made a dumping ground to meet the housing requirements of other people in the county. Indeed, I understand that one district authority has been allocated no extra housing.

Instead of trying to offload south Essex housing pressures on to Chelmsford, why not put the 2,250 houses—or some of them—in the Thames gateway?

[Mr. Simon Burns]

As infrastructure improvements have already been carried out in that area and more are proposed, it is better suited to meet the Government's wider sustainability goals and objectives. Furthermore, the Thames gateway is nearer to that southern part of the county in which housing pressures are so great that Chelmsford is expected to bear them. I urge the Minister and the Government to ensure that the final guidance reflects the potential of the Thames gateway by ensuring that it takes higher levels of housing provision to stop Chelmsford having to shoulder the burden.

Fourthly, the Government have stated that 60 per cent. of the buildings should be on brownfield sites, and I wholeheartedly agree with those sentiments and that policy decision by the Government. However, as I pointed out to the Deputy Prime Minister on 7 March, Chelmsford does not have enough brownfield sites to take 60 per cent. of the new buildings. When account is taken of the homes built since April 1996 and the housing land available at April 1999, the number of extra dwellings needed in Chelmsford before 2011 will be about 7,700. However, most of the brownfield sites have already been used or earmarked for redevelopment.

The Deputy Prime Minister extremely helpfully recognised the problem when, in answer to my question, he said:

> The 60 per cent. brownfield site that we have agreed is a national figure and will vary from area to area. In London it could be as much as 80 per cent., but areas outside London—

such as Chelmsford—

> do not have that proportion of brownfield site available. That is why we have set a national figure.—[*Official Report*, 7 March 2000; Vol. 345, c. 880.]

That answer suggested to me that he intends to use the 60 per cent. figure as a flexible guideline.

If that is a correct assumption of how the Government will implement the policy, I urge them to intervene to implement it as quickly as possible so that we can start reallocating on a national average basis to take into account those areas that have more brownfield sites than others. If we do not take such a course of action sooner rather than later, district councils will have to plan for and implement the housing allocation numbers that they have been given. The flexibility that the Deputy Prime Minister envisaged will pass them by, because it will be too late. I urge speed in trying to put the flexible system into place.

Finally, I come to the question of what Chelmsford borough council seeks to do in allocating the 11,900 houses that it must find room for within its boundaries unless the figures are revised downwards, as I desperately hope that they will be in the not too distant future. I certainly do not envy the council or its planning department. They will have to try to find reasonable sites in which to place that housing. That will be difficult for the reasons that I have mentioned—the lack of brownfield land and the complication caused by the fact that greenbelt land lies within the council's boundaries.

I have been surprised by some of the ways in which the Liberal Democrat-controlled council have come up with recommendations. To be fair, I accept that the recommendations are for consultation and that no decisions have been made. I also accept that it would place the Minister in an invidious and impossible position if I were to ask her to make any decisions on the suggestions that have been put forward. She is not able to do that. Decisions on greenbelt land may ultimately come before her and her colleagues, so she cannot compromise her position.

In May last year, the whole council came up for re-election. The Liberal Democrats, who formed the majority before the elections, fought them on a pledge to the people of Chelmsford that, if they were re-elected to power, they would increase the southern band of the green belt in Chelmsford the whole way round the limits of the town in order to seek to prevent housebuilding in our suburbs. I could quite happily have signed up to and supported that policy, which is the one that the Liberal Democrats fought the election on.

The Conservative party did significantly well, by noticeably increasing its number of borough councillors and the Liberal Democrats lost overall control of the council. However, within four months of the election, they suddenly announced to the people of Chelmsford, out of the blue, that it was not possible to implement such a policy. It surprised me that they could not find that out before the election, but they did not.

It could be assumed from that that the Liberal Democrats are deeply committed to the green belt, but their consultation document that has gone out for the people of Chelmsford to respond to—it deals with where the housing should go—refers to the village of Margaretting, to the amazement of my constituents, and to the considerable anger of most of them. Margaretting, which is to the south of Chelmsford, has no transport infrastructure worth talking about except that the A12 rather noisily passes by it. It has no education infrastructure apart from a very good primary school and, with a population of about 800, it has very few houses. It is entirely within greenbelt land. However, the preferred option of the Liberal Democrats is to have 2,500 houses placed in the village.

The villagers of Margaretting are outraged, as is anyone in Chelmsford who cares for our environment. If the borough council, in the light of its consultation, is to disregard the representations that it receives and press forward with the proposal, I can assure the Minister that I will be knocking on her door with many of my constituents to try to ensure that the Government do not relax the green belt in that part of Chelmsford.

There is a problem in the north-east of the town. The proposals that have gone out for consultation contain the idea that north of the Boreham interchange there will be an additional 1,000 dwellings. In the village of Boreham, or on the outskirts, between 1,500 and 2,100 dwellings could be placed.

Boreham is a relatively small village and local community. To impose suddenly such a significant amount of housing upon it would destroy the nature and character of the village. With the possibility of 1,000 houses north of the Boreham interchange, the village—it is about three or four miles from the outskirts of Chelmsford—could become a suburb of the town, which is not acceptable.

These examples demonstrate the difficulties caused by placing a significant amount of housing in a relatively small geographical area. The county council should certainly reconsider the way in which it has carved up the county, giving Chelmsford the largest proportion of

additional houses when that is unwarranted, unrealistic and unsustainable. The preferred option of Margaretting in the borough council's consultation document is unacceptable. I do not accept that what it is planning for Boreham and other parts of the borough is the most sensible way of proceeding.

I would hope that, even at this stage, we could see a reduction in the number of houses that the county is expected to have built between now and the year 2011. We do not want our environment to be destroyed by the bulldozer, the brick and concrete. We want our villages to remain villages and our green belt to remain green belt. We want our open spaces and countryside to be just that, rather than a mass of urban sprawl.

1.39 am

Mr. John Whittingdale (Maldon and East Chelmsford): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) on obtaining the debate on an issue that is of enormous concern both to his and my constituents in Chelmsford. I thank him for allowing me to make a brief contribution to his debate.

I do not want to repeat the arguments that he has advanced so powerfully and cogently. I merely say that I strongly endorse everything that he has said. He has spelled out some of the history of the proposal for considerable extra development in Essex, especially in Chelmsford. Suffice it for me to add that the original target contained in the Serplan—south-east regional planning committee—recommendation that Essex should take almost an extra 4,200 houses every year was regarded by many people in the county as far too high, and the new target of 5,420 new houses each year, which the county has been given as a result of the Deputy Prime Minister's actions, is impossible to achieve. I do not believe that the county infrastructure is capable of sustaining such a level of development, so I strongly urge Ministers to think again.

My hon. Friend and I are principally concerned about the extra housing that is to be built in and around Chelmsford—the borough council has been told that it is required to find space for 7,700 new properties. The three preferred locations identified in the plan lie outside my constituency, but several of the others mentioned lie in my constituency—one in Galleywood, one in Great Baddow and one just north of Sandon—and all have substantial drawbacks, as is made clear in the borough council's document. However, my real concern is less about the specific locations under discussion within the borough of Chelmsford than about the principle involved, because, whatever the location, so much extra housing will place intolerable strain on our local infrastructure.

Our area has already had a huge amount of development in recent years. As a result, schools are at capacity: two secondary schools in my constituency are full and are turning away parents who want to send their children there. Waiting lists for hospitals in north Essex are lengthening. As my hon. Friend knows only too well, north Essex has the worst waiting times in the whole country, and those times have lengthened dramatically in the past three years.

The road system is already clogged, with the A12—the main route between Chelmsford and London—often at a standstill. The water supply is under tremendous strain; although, given the rainfall of the past few weeks, it might not be immediately apparent, Essex has been one of the driest counties—if not the driest county—in England, and the Essex and Suffolk water company is having considerable difficulty meeting existing demand. In addition, it is already proving difficult to find sufficient space to dispose of the waste generated in the county. None of those problems have apparently been considered by those who have made the proposal, yet all will be made far worse if the proposal goes ahead.

My message to the Minister is: think again. Such a large amount of housing will cause havoc in the county, especially in the borough of Chelmsford. I endorse my hon. Friend's remarks and urge the Minister to look at the matter afresh.

1.43 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) on securing this debate, in which he has expressed concern about the additional housing that Chelmsford will have to accommodate in the next few years.

For our part, the Government are keen to ensure that, in acting to meet the need for housing, the local planning authority adheres to our policies on housing provision. However, it is important to remember that the planning system is designed so that once the overall scale and distribution has been determined through regional planning guidance and the county structure plan—about which both the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friend the Member for Maldon and East Chelmsford (Mr. Whittingdale) are concerned—decisions on the precise location of development have to be taken locally. I shall speak later about the procedure governing that decision, but I am sure that both hon. Gentlemen would agree that it must be for the people of Chelmsford to make their views known and for Chelmsford borough council to take account of those views and justify its proposals through the local plan process. I shall say a little more later about the policies that must be observed. I hope that that will be helpful.

On the main point made by the hon. Member for West Chelmsford, I do not accept that a top-down process is involved in overall allocations through RPG, and there is a requirement for distribution decisions to be taken at local level.

As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, the council has embarked on a review of the current borough local plan, which expires next year. The new plan will need to include policies and proposals for accommodating the significant amount of new development required in the borough up to 2011, as he said. In preparing the new plan, the council must ensure that it conforms with the replacement structure plan which is simultaneously being prepared by the county council and Southend-on-Sea borough council.

Clearly, the replacement structure plan has major land use implications for the borough, particularly in relation to new housing and employment use. It was the subject of an examination in public last summer and, as a result of that process, Chelmsford borough's share of the overall amount of housing judged to be needed will be 11,650, which is 300 fewer than the number identified by the panel. I am informed that 9,200 of those houses are

[Ms Beverley Hughes]

required to meet locally determined need. The hon. Gentleman implicitly acknowledged that by saying that the remaining 2,450 houses were in addition to locally determined need.

Chelmsford borough council must now decide, as the hon. Gentleman acknowledged, where in the borough those 11,650 new dwellings should be located. The council must reach that decision in conjunction with local people, taking into account local views and national policy.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about the 2,450 houses, the county as a whole, and perhaps Chelmsford as well, needs key workers from outside. Therefore, the argument that Chelmsford should meet only its locally determined need cannot necessarily be sustained.

I return to the point about policy, on which I hope to be helpful. We will expect Chelmsford borough council, in deciding where the new dwellings should be built, to have regard to the policies on the location of new housing and the form of residential development that are included in the emerging replacement structure plan. Those policies must in turn reflect PPG3, about which there has recently been much discussion in the House.

A particular requirement of PPG3 is that a sequential approach be adopted to the identification of housing sites, so as to deliver brownfield land for development before greenfield sites. That means that the council must seek to maximise the use of brownfield sites, previously occupied buildings, and so on. I note the hon. Gentleman's reference to the Deputy Prime Minister's response to him, which I believe he has interpreted correctly, so it may provide some comfort.

I realise that Chelmsford probably cannot meet the target of 60 per cent. development on brownfield sites. In cases where not all development in urban areas can take place on brownfield or previously developed sites, as PPG3 requires, the Government look to local planning authorities to find the most sustainable option.

There are priorities governing the way in which the sequential approach should be applied. The most sustainable option is likely to be planned extensions or peripheral development on the edge of existing large urban areas, especially where it is possible to utilise existing physical and social infrastructure, good access to public transport, shops, jobs, leisure facilities, and so on.

That is the first priority. The policy on the sequential approach in the replacement plan also states that where new housing cannot be provided within or on the periphery of large urban areas it should be provided in the form of expanded settlements. These should be large enough to provide a range of employment, shopping, educational and other community facilities, with a capability for providing a choice of means of transport.

The plan also allows for small-scale housing to be provided in small towns and villages, in line with policy, on a scale sufficient to meet local needs. So in terms of overall housing provision only a limited amount of housing can normally be expected to be accommodated in expanding villages, although the Government are concerned that there should be adequate housing provision in rural areas to meet the needs of local people, and we expect Chelmsford borough council to make sufficient land available either within or adjoining villages to enable local requirements to be met.

There is clearly set out in policy a priority order of application of the sequential approach. Indeed, the document produced by the council acknowledges that sequence of priorities on page 6, although, for reasons that it argues, its proposals do not necessarily conform to it at this stage. But the council may have a valid argument about that, and I am in no way making any judgment.

In recent months, Chelmsford borough council has been consulting residents about the land use planning issues that need to be covered in its local plan. In particular, the council has published a report containing a number of options and stating a preference. The important point to recognise is that, in taking that process forward and in going through the various stages of consultation, the council will be required to demonstrate the reasons for its preferences, and particularly how far it has been able to adopt the sequential approach, as I have outlined it and as policy in terms of the priority stages of that approach would require.

The onus is on the council to justify its proposed housing policies through the local plan process. The council has made it clear, as it is required to, that, at this stage, it is only seeking comments on the possible choices put forward, and not all the locations suggested might be developed.

The next stage is for the council to place on deposit a draft version of the new plan, which will be open to formal objection. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that, when that happens, the Secretary of State will look closely at the extent to which the proposals are in conformity with all our national planning policies, including those on housing.

After a second draft deposit stage, about four months later, outstanding objections to the plan will be considered before an independent inspector at a local public inquiry, probably late next year or early the year after. It is at the inquiry, in particular, that the merits of the council's proposals will be thoroughly examined and the sustainability of the options for locating new housing, tested against the Government's policies in PPG3, will be examined alongside the views of objectors.

I hope that I have clarified the detail of the policy for the hon. Gentleman. I am sure that he will be assisting his constituents to make their views known at the appropriate time, and I assure him that the Secretary of State will also give the matter careful consideration, if and when it comes to him.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at six minutes to Two o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 28 June 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Order for further consideration, as amended, read.

To be further considered on Wednesday 5 July.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Health Service

1. **Mr. Ted Rowlands** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): If he will make a statement on progress on the reform of the health service in Wales following the most recent meeting of the joint ministerial committee on health. [126693]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): The purpose of the joint ministerial committee on health was to provide an opportunity for all parts of the United Kingdom to share ideas and best practices.

I know that everyone has found the exchange of experiences a useful tool for putting together plans for the future.

Following the three meetings held so far, I understand that Jane Hutt, the Assembly Health and Social Services Secretary, will be making a statement to the National Assembly for Wales in July on progress in improving the NHS in Wales and her plans for further action.

Mr. Rowlands: Following the joint ministerial meetings, can my right hon. Friend say what has emerged as the most immediate, urgent reform required in the NHS in Wales? May I suggest that one fundamental reform would be a formula to ensure that the large amount of new money that we are putting into our health service is distributed to the areas of greatest deprivation in health terms? While I very much appreciate and warmly welcome the most recent announcements of additional support for the national health service in North Glamorgan, I am sure that my right hon. Friend will agree that they represent only the beginning of the fundamental requirement to produce a 21st-century national health service in North Glamorgan.

Mr. Murphy: Yes. I take the point that my hon. Friend makes. The joint ministerial committee dealt with the relationship between social services and the health service. In that respect, we can learn from Northern Ireland. We looked at the question of preventive medicine and, in respect of Scotland and Wales, what we can offer by way of telemedicine. There will be other important announcements in July. So far as the specific issue of deprivation is concerned, again I take my hon. Friend's point and remind the House that my hon. Friend, other right hon. and hon. Members and I met Jane Hutt this week to discuss the very points that he raised. Like my hon. Friend, I represent a valleys constituency and I understand the importance of tackling the deprivation which undoubtedly exists in Glamorgan and Gwent. I know that the Assembly has already put a great deal of resources into our valleys.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Has the joint committee considered the financing of health in Wales via the Barnett formula and the tendency of that formula to move towards convergence, so that if a service such as health requires more money in Wales because of socio-economic and industrial conditions, it may need money to come from outside what otherwise would have been the health block? Given the need for those additional resources, more resources for ysbyty Glan Clwyd and the £30 million required to deal with asbestos, can my right hon. Friend give an assurance that the July comprehensive spending review will include a consideration for maximising health money for Wales?

Mr. Murphy: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer dealt with the question of health spending when he explained to the House the considerable increases in the health budget for Wales resulting from the earlier spending review. It means that Wales will receive an extra £1.3 billion over the next few years. I hope that the money will go to the areas of greatest need. The joint ministerial committee has not discussed the Barnett formula. Of course the right hon. Gentleman knows as well as I do that the Assembly Finance Secretary and others discuss these matters regularly.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): In his discussions with other health Ministers, will my right hon. Friend discuss consultants' contracts? Does he recognise the concerns of my constituents who find that if they are on a waiting list they are sometimes advised that if they went privately, the procedure would be carried out much more quickly? Does he agree that what might have been necessary for Aneurin Bevan in 1948 is not suitable for the health service of the 21st century? We should not have restrictive practices which continue to allow consultants to have their mouths stuffed with gold.

Mr. Murphy: I understand exactly what my hon. Friend says and I assure him that these matters are being discussed. I hope that a number of them will be addressed in the national plan for health which will be announced later this year. At about the same time, the National

Assembly for Wales will be making its own deliberations and announcements regarding the matters to which my hon. Friend referred.

Transport

2. **Mr. Humfrey Malins** (Woking): What recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary with regard to transport in Wales. [126694]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): My right hon. Friend meets the First Secretary on a weekly basis, and transport issues are discussed regularly. I also discuss transport issues in my regular bilateral meeting with the Assembly Environment, Transport and Planning Secretary.

Mr. Malins: Under the present Government, the people of Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom have faced huge rises in the price of petrol—so much so that the price of a litre of petrol will soon reach £1. Do the Government realise the devastating effect that that is having on people who depend on the rural economy in Wales, with many people being forced off the roads by the Government's petrol pricing policy? Will the Minister please make representations to the Chancellor on that point?

Mr. Hanson: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to Welsh questions. I know of his Welsh antecedents, and of his keen interest in Welsh matters. He will be aware that the previous Conservative Government introduced the fuel duty escalator, and that it was this Government who ended it. It was announced in this year's Budget that, beyond the automatic increase in line with inflation, there would be no increase in fuel duties. It is important to remember that revenues from any increases that do take place in fuel duties will now go straight into a ring-fenced fund for improving public transport, and that Wales will get a share of that.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): With regard to public transport and especially to rail services, some of us had the opportunity yesterday to meet Railtrack representatives. That followed our meeting last week with representatives from Prism Rail, and it is clear from our discussions about an all-Wales rail franchise that investment depends on the effectiveness of the shadow Strategic Rail Authority in lobbying on behalf of the rail system in Wales. The fact that the shadow SRA has only one representative from Wales blunts the competitive edge when it comes to negotiating for investment in the Welsh rail system. What does the Minister intend to do about that?

Mr. Hanson: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the matter has been discussed extensively. It is true that there is one Welsh representative among the 15 members of the shadow SRA, but that is on a par with the representation for Scotland. In terms of proportional population, it adequately represents Welsh interests. The Welsh Assembly was consulted on the appointment, and welcomed it.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): No Labour Member standing on the subject of petrol prices, Madam Speaker? It seems that none of them really care. In rural areas of Wales the car is not a luxury, yet the Government use taxation on petrol as a tool of rationing. In 1997, petrol cost 61.7p a litre: today, it costs 84.2p, and even more in some parts of Wales.

A report from the AA published yesterday shows that an increasing number of people are paying more in petrol taxes than in income taxes. I assume that that would include Prime Minister's chum Lord Levy but, for people on the breadline, petrol prices have hit crisis point. What discussions has the Minister had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer to explain to him the appalling effects on the economy of Wales of his stealth-tax policy?

Mr. Hanson: I would only ask, "Who introduced the fuel duty escalator?" It certainly was not this Government. We have reviewed the fuel duty escalator and have given a commitment that, beyond the automatic increase in line with inflation, there will be no increase in fuel duties. Moreover, money for public transport will be provided by the Government. That is in stark contrast to what happened under the Conservative Government. We discuss matters with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor on a regular basis, and I am pleased to say that there is more money for public transport in Wales as a result.

Mr. Evans: There is no consolation in that response for the hard-caned motorist in Wales. On top of the exorbitant petrol prices that they have to pay, motorists who use either of the two Severn bridges face the prospect of VAT being imposed, which would take the toll to about £5. That would hit tourism and the Welsh economy hard, so what representations is the Minister making to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to secure some protection against the wholesale fleecing of the motorist by the Government and the European Commission?

Mr. Hanson: I think we have adequately covered the fact that the previous Conservative Government introduced the fuel duty escalator, so I shall move on from that. The hon. Gentleman should know that the proposal to impose VAT on charges at toll bridges is at present subject to proceedings in the European Court. No decision is expected until 12 September 2000. The Government are looking at the matter and will discuss it in due course, when a decision is pending.

NHS Waiting Lists

3. **Mr. Nick St. Aubyn** (Guildford): What discussions he has had with the First Secretary with regard to the number of patients waiting over 18 months for an operation on the NHS. [126695]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): Both my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I regularly meet the First Secretary and the Assembly Health and Social Services Secretary to discuss a range of issues, including health issues and waiting lists.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I am surprised that the Minister did not refer to this morning's press release from the National Assembly for Wales, which reveals that the number of patients in Wales waiting more than 18 months for an

operation has trebled to nearly 5,000 since this Government came to power. Is that not yet another example of how this Government tax more and deliver less?

Mr. Hanson: If the hon. Gentleman had looked at the figures carefully, he would have seen that in Wales, more than 1,100 more patients are treated every week under Labour than was the case under the Conservative party when it had its chance to run the health service in Wales. When the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) was Secretary of State for Wales, the annual increase in health expenditure in Wales was 1 per cent. a year. This year, under the Labour Government, there will be a 5.6 per cent. increase in health spending in Wales. I think that that answers the hon. Gentleman's point.

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): Is the Minister aware that the south Wales valleys, including my area of Blaenau Gwent, have some of the worst health problems in the United Kingdom when it comes to heart disease, respiratory disease and cancers? Will he comment on the announcement by the Welsh Assembly that it will be another two years before it publishes its formula to tackle health deprivation? Does he accept that the first three years of the life of the Assembly will be totally irrelevant in dealing with the massive health problems in my community?

Mr. Hanson: There is keen concern in the National Assembly and in the Government about the health disparities in valley communities. I know that the National Assembly has commissioned work to see how this can be tackled. It is undertaking a considerable amount of investigation for which there is financial support, and it is looking at primary health care. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State met this week the National Assembly's Health and Social Services Secretary, Jane Hutt, to discuss this issue. I am sure that my hon. Friend will welcome the fact that some of the extra £1.3 billion that the Government are putting into the national health service will, in the next couple of years, find its way to meeting the needs of the important communities that he represents.

Hunting

4. **Mr. Simon Thomas** (Ceredigion): What discussions he has had with the First Secretary on the implications for Welsh farming of the proposed Bill on hunting. [126696]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I meet the First Secretary on a weekly basis and we discuss a wide range of issues including the proposed Bill on hunting and its implications for Wales.

Mr. Thomas: Does the Secretary of State agree that one of his key tasks, post-devolution, is to act as a conduit between the National Assembly for Wales and the Cabinet? In the light of yesterday's vote by the National Assembly in favour of having an option in the proposed Bill for Wales to decide on hunting at Assembly level, what representations will the right hon. Gentleman be making in Cabinet to include such a proviso in the Bill?

Mr. Murphy: None.

Mr. Alun Michael (Cardiff, South and Penarth): Does the Secretary of State agree that it would be right for Members of this House, when we take a decision, to listen to the views of Assembly Members, as I have listened to the Assembly Member representing Cardiff, South and Penarth? Does he also agree, however, that we should be clear that this issue is a responsibility of this House, and that devolution means partnership between the two bodies, rather than the separation that the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) obviously wants?

Mr. Murphy: I agree with my right hon. Friend. I think that the principle of whether we ban fox hunting with hounds should be a matter for this House of Commons alone. However, I accept that there may be implications in the detail of that legislation, with regard to pest control, for example, which may well be dealt with by the National Assembly. Those issues would have to be taken into account during the passage of the Bill in its parliamentary proceedings. However, I repeat that I agree with my right hon. Friend that the principle should be a matter for this House.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Does the Secretary of State not accept that hunting and farming are inextricably linked? What assessment has he made of any potential ban on hunting on the Welsh countryside, on Welsh farming and, in particular, on those employed by the hunts in Wales?

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Lady knows that the Burns commission looked at this issue in some detail. It could not come to a firm conclusion one way or the other about the effects on the rural economy. The National Assembly and the Government are doing everything in their power to ensure that the rural economy is improved.

In Wales, at least nine very rural constituencies and many other mixed rural and urban constituencies are represented by Labour Members of Parliament. We, too, are conscious of the importance of the rural economy in our constituencies—it is not only the Conservative party which is interested in these matters.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): As the Minister knows, I support the proposals of the middle way group of MPs for the regulation of fox control, an activity regarded as essential by many mid-Wales farmers. I suspect that the Secretary of State and many of his colleagues have a different view, but will he agree that we must listen to opposing views to see whether there might be a more consensual approach to the issue than may have seemed the case in the past?

Mr. Paul Murphy: The hon. Gentleman knows that he and I disagree on the issue of fox hunting, but he also knows that one of the purposes of the Bill to be introduced is for hon. Members to have the opportunity to debate the different options available.

National Parks

5. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): If he will discuss with the First Secretary policy on tourism in relation to national parks. [126697]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): During his weekly meetings with the First Secretary, my right hon. Friend discusses a variety of areas, including tourism and the countryside. I also discuss these issues in my regular meetings with the Assembly Secretary with responsibility for planning, the environment and national parks.

Mr. Fabricant: The Minister will know how beautiful the Brecon Beacons and Snowdonia are; many visitors visit them every week of the year. However, he will also be aware of the plight of farming in Wales, where hill farmers' incomes have dropped by more than 40 per cent. in just three years. What steps is he taking to ensure co-existence between tourism and agriculture in our national parks?

Mr. Hanson: I am aware that the hon. Gentleman recently climbed Snowdon. I am sure that when he got to the top he could not see a Conservative seat for miles. Farming and tourism go hand in hand, and it is important that we have sustainability. The Government have put in additional resources following the recent agriculture summit that I attended on behalf of Wales. There will be a range of measures that the Government can take. It is important that we maintain stable tourism prospects. Tourism brings up to 100,000 jobs directly and indirectly into Wales and brings extra money into Wales. Farming and tourism go side by side and are both important to Wales.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Given that one of the remits of the national park authority, for example, in Snowdonia is sustainable development, may I suggest to the Minister that we should look for a more productive approach to tourism and that the authorities should have a remit to encourage sustainable tourism, together with a budget so to do? Much of the work is now done by voluntary groups such as Betws-y-Coed and District Tourism Association. They do very hard work and it is well worth while, but it is all voluntary. Should not the work be done on a more definite footing?

Mr. Hanson: The hon. Gentleman may be aware that the National Assembly recently launched a new tourism strategy for Wales entitled "Achieving our Potential". The three national parks played a full part in the consultation process. They were particularly keen to look at sustainable development, and I fully support the idea of bringing extra tourists to Wales in a way that sustains the beauty that attracts them in the first place.

Unemployment

6. **Mr. Chris Ruane** (Vale of Clwyd): What discussions he has had with the First Secretary about the number of unemployed people in Wales in May 1997 and May 2000. [126698]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): My right hon. Friend regularly meets the First Secretary to discuss a wide range of issues, including employment in Wales. In addition, I hold quarterly liaison meetings with the Assembly Secretary for Education and Training.

This Government's continued record of commitment to getting people off benefits and back into work is highlighted by the fact that the number of claimants on jobseeker's allowance for April has been significantly reduced to 59,170, compared with 80,322 when the Conservative Government left office in May 1997.

Mr. Ruane: I thank my right hon. Friend—I mean my hon. Friend, although he should be right hon.—for that answer. In my constituency, unemployment has fallen by 29 per cent. Youth unemployment has fallen by 69 per cent., despite the fact that I lost 800 workers when Kwik Save closed down. However, I am still concerned about the number of economically inactive people in Wales. What discussions has my hon. Friend had with the First Secretary on reducing the number of economically inactive people in our work force?

Mr. Hanson: I am pleased that unemployment has fallen by such a significant amount in my hon. Friend's constituency, thanks in no small part to the new deal and the efforts of the Government. The Government are working in conjunction with the Assembly on lifelong learning, social inclusion and active employment action—all things which I hope will help bring the economically inactive back into the workplace so that we can obtain the maximum benefit from objective 1 and ensure that unemployment falls still further.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): The House will be somewhat disappointed that the Minister did not give credit to the bright economic legacy left in Wales by my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague). That was the reason for the fall in unemployment in the past three years. But what of the future? Objective 1 status will make a contribution to lowering unemployment, but when will we see the money behind that? This week, the European Commission gave its agreement to objective 1 status for Wales. Can the Minister tell the House whether he and the Secretary of State have convinced the Treasury to give full match funding in addition to existing plans for the Welsh block grant? A simple yes or no will suffice.

Mr. Hanson: The bright legacy left to this Government was the legacy of no Tory MPs in Wales.

As the hon. Gentleman is aware, there is a process and it has been discussed. It has been explained to him on many occasions. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have told him at every possible opportunity that the matter will be sorted out with the comprehensive spending review in July—it will be addressed at that stage.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that the bright economic legacy to which he referred resulted in 80,000 people unemployed in Wales; there are now 59,000 people unemployed in Wales—it must be brighter under Labour.

Aerospace Industry

7. **Mr. Barry Jones** (Alyn and Deeside): If he will make a statement on the prospects for the aerospace industry in Wales, with particular reference to Raytheon Systems and BAE Systems in Deeside. [126699]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I am in frequent contact with the First Secretary on a range of issues and we discuss many aspects of industry in Wales. This has included the BAE facility at Broughton. I have also visited both companies with my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones).

I was pleased to hear that orders for more than 50 A3XX Airbus planes have been received. I also welcome the announcement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence that the UK will be placing an order for 25 A400M aircraft and that the Ministry of Defence intends to buy more of the advanced medium range air-to-air missiles, produced by Raytheon, to equip Eurofighter when it comes into service.

Mr. Jones: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. He might agree that the Airbus factory is a jewel in the crown of Welsh manufacturing. I have to tell him, however, of the growing anger and perplexity at the grudging attitude in Cardiff with regard to the company's application for a £25 million grant. Does he agree that nowhere else in Europe would he find a national assembly that was not prepared to follow the national Government's vote of confidence by granting such moneys—certainly not in a German lander or a French département. Does he also agree that Lord Rogers's glass seagull perch cost in excess of the grant for which we are asking? We should very much like my right hon. Friend to intervene to ensure that the grant is paid, to show us that we are on the Cardiff agenda.

Mr. Murphy: I know that my right hon. Friend battles hard for his constituents and for that important facility. He is right to point out, of course, that the UK Government gave £530 million in launch investment by way of loan to BAE. I shall ensure that his points are relayed to the First Secretary.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): How will the moves by British Aerospace to link up with Boeing affect the Welsh aerospace industry?

Mr. Murphy: Obviously, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry takes a keen interest in that matter. As the hon. Gentleman is a member of the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs, he will be aware of the importance of the industry and of that facility to all the people in the north-east and, indeed, to his own constituents. I know that he supports the UK Government in doing all that we can to ensure that the facility is enlarged.

Economy (Deeside)

8. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): What recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary about the Deeside economy of Wales. [126701]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I have regular discussions with the First Secretary on matters relating to the economy of Wales and have visited Deeside on a number of occasions.

The Government's decision to give £530 million launch investment to BAE is good news for the UK and, I know, for my hon. Friend's constituents.

Mr. Chapman: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Deeside economy is unitary? To that extent, my constituents who work at BAE also welcome the A3XX and hope that regional selective assistance will be awarded. Does my right hon. Friend also agree that the environment too is unitary and that there is concern in my constituency about the Castle Cement kiln? Can he say what account has been taken of the views of my constituents in any decisions on planning permission for that kiln?

Mr. Paul Murphy: Yes I can. Obviously this is a matter for the National Assembly for Wales. It has called in the planning application, and a planning inquiry into the application will take place on 11 October.

Hunting

9. **Mr. James Clappison** (Hertsmere): What recent representations he has received about hunting with dogs in Wales. [126702]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I have received no representations about hunting with dogs in Wales. Together with my Whitehall colleagues, I am taking a keen interest in developments on these issues and I of course am sensitive to the reactions of the Welsh rural community to this matter.

Mr. Clappison: The Secretary of State spoke earlier about the details of the Burns report. What thought has he given to the conclusions of the Burns report as to how difficult it would be to control fox numbers in the upland areas of Wales in the absence of hunting with dogs as it is carried on in Wales? What message does he have for farmers who are worried about their stock, and who face a difficult enough time already?

Mr. Murphy: Conservative Members know that there will be debate on that matter in the House of Commons in a week or so. The hon. Gentleman will be able to express his views then. On the question of pest control in Wales, the hon. Gentleman knows that, in Wales particularly, the farmers themselves flush out foxes with dogs, and he is also fully aware that other methods that are used in Wales could control pests, including foxes. It is not just hunting with hounds that can control foxes. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman also knows that the great bulk of Members of Parliament in Wales—and, for that

matter, as far as we know, Members of the National Assembly—do not believe that hunting with foxes—[HON. MEMBERS: "Foxes?]—is a good idea.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [126723] **Mr. James Clappison** (Hertsmere): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 28 June.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I will have further such meetings later today.

Mr. Clappison: Does the Prime Minister have a view as to why crime is now rising for the first time in six years? Could it have anything to do with the fact that police numbers are going down?

The Prime Minister: Of course, crime doubled under the Government of which the hon. Gentleman was so proud. It is correct that in the last few years of the previous Government, and in the first few years of this Government, police numbers have been falling. However, as a result of the extra money that we are able to put in, which the hon. Gentleman's party would cut, by the end of the year police numbers will be rising again.

Q2. [126724] **Dr. Ian Gibson** (Norwich, North): The recent announcement of two new medical schools, one in Norwich at the university of East Anglia, and the Peninsula medical school in Cornwall and Devon, should be hailed as a great success for our national health service. At the same time, the prospect of the human genome research in rolling out an understanding of the genetics of cancer means that we shall move things forward on that scientific front. Will my right hon. Friend play a major role in the development of our national cancer plan, and will he ensure that we consider, as the Select Committee on Science and Technology is doing, a national cancer institute, and perhaps 12 Royal Marsdens? Certainly, the postcode lottery for treatment with drugs and therapies must disappear.

The Prime Minister: The recent scientific discovery in relation to the human genome is immensely important not just for science but for this country, as we have played a leading part in developing it. I am delighted to say that the establishment of the new medical school at the university of East Anglia, which I know that my hon. Friend campaigned for and supported, will mean that we shall get the first brand-new medical schools in this country for 25 years. We are also increasing the number of medical school places by at least 1,000—the biggest increase in a generation—and, as a result of the additional spending in the national health service, we shall be able to make the investment not merely in bricks and mortar, and in nurses and doctors, but in medical schools as well. What the country should know is that all that spending would be cut by the Conservatives, because of their risky tax policy.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): After three years of the mounting stealth taxes with which the Government have clobbered the hard-working people of this country, will the Prime Minister now tell the House what the price of a litre of petrol was when he took office, and what it has increased to today?

The Prime Minister: First, I think that people remember the 22 tax rises under the Conservative Government, including the doubling of VAT after they said that they would not do that. As for petrol, yes it is true that petrol prices have gone up, and it is true that, in the first two years of the present Government, they went up substantially as a result of increases in fuel duty. However, it is right to point out that of the rise in the last year—a rise of about 18p a litre—only 2p has been due to fuel duty. Sixteen pence—in other words, the vast bulk of it—has been due to the rise in oil prices, and that is affecting not just this country but countries right round the world.

Mr. Hague: Millions of people are paying the right hon. Gentleman's stealth taxes every day, and he is so out of touch that he does not know how much they are paying. The price of fuel has gone up 44 per cent. at the pump since he took office, and 34 per cent. of that is due to increases in taxation. It has gone up from 59p a litre to 85p a litre. When the Chancellor said in his Budget speech that he was indexing pensions and petrol by inflation, did the Prime Minister realise then what no pensioner could have known—that the inflation figure that he used for petrol was three times higher than the figure he used for pensions?

The Prime Minister: No. As I said in the House last week, the formula used for pension rises is exactly the same as the formula that has been used for the past 12 years. Yes, it is true that this year it has meant a small pension rise. Last year it meant a larger rise, as it will next year. The formula is the same as that used by the Conservative Government of which the right hon. Gentleman was a member.

Mr. Hague: Since the Prime Minister took office, pensions have been indexed by 8 per cent. and petrol by 34 per cent., so trying to make out that somehow that has been of advantage to pensioners is an utterly laughable proposition. Will he now confirm that when the Chancellor said that pensions would go up by inflation, he meant 1.1 per cent., and when he said that petrol would do the same, he meant 3.4 per cent., because he changed the method of calculating the petrol increase from that used by the previous Government? Will the right hon. Gentleman now confirm that when Ministers told the House on 6 April that they had not changed the methodology, they were not telling us the correct story?

The Prime Minister: That is wrong, for the reason that I have just given. Precisely the same formula is used for pensions as was used under the previous Government. As a result of the fuel duty escalator in the first two years of this Government, fuel duties went up, as was the case

under the previous Government, of which the right hon. Gentleman was a member. There is a choice, it is true. We decided that we had to erase the deficit that we inherited—£28 billion in borrowing and a doubled national debt. As a result, we have interest rates that average 6 per cent.—under the previous Government, they averaged 10 per cent.—and we can now make the extra investment in schools and hospitals. Is the right hon. Gentleman saying that he would not have taken those measures on petrol, and would therefore have cut the money spent on schools and hospitals?

Mr. Hague: If the right hon. Gentleman wants me to give him a Budget, he can hand over as First Lord of the Treasury any day. I am asking him a question to which he has not given an adequate answer, as everyone who is watching knows. It turns out to be the case that the switch to a forecast figure for petrol duties was introduced by this Chancellor. It is no good the Prime Minister talking about the escalator, because petrol duties have gone up twice as much in the past three years as in the previous three years. When he abandoned the escalator, he got into a lift instead. For people who have saved up for their cars, people in rural areas who need a car, and people who are old or disabled and need a car to get about, is it not bad enough that he fleeces them at every opportunity, without using every opportunity to cover it up as well?

The Prime Minister: Of course, the fuel duty escalator was introduced by the previous Government. It is correct that we kept it. Petrol prices have gone up significantly, and of course that is difficult for people in rural areas and those who go long distances by car. However, it is worth pointing out that, although it is correct to say that it may cost more than £50 to fill up the average 1600 cc motor car in England, it is also correct to say that it costs more than £40 to do so in France and Germany, and that France has motorway tolls and vastly higher income taxes. I accept that we had to put petrol duty up, but there was a choice: either we could cut the deficit and make the investment in public services, or we could decide not to take those measures. I do not believe that we would have 1 million extra jobs in the economy or interest rates at 6 per cent. if we had not taken those measures. If the right hon. Gentleman is telling us that he would cut fuel duty, that means that he would also cut the money that we are putting into schools, hospitals and transport.

Mr. Hague: This Government cannot even tell the truth about the duty on a litre of petrol. They are so busy with trivia such as banning musical chairs, bailing out the dome, telling the royal family to move house and counting the number of fat people on television, that they have forgotten what really matters to people in this country. Is the time not coming when the people who cannot now afford to run a car will take their revenge on the people who cannot manage to run a Government?

The Prime Minister: Let us see who managed the economy best. The party now in government has created 1 million extra jobs, got interest rates of 6 per cent., managed to halve the deficit that we inherited—in fact, get rid of it—and taken a million children out of poverty. Was it our party or the right hon. Gentleman's party which, in government, doubled the national debt, had interest rates—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. Stop it.

The Prime Minister: It is the comparison that Conservative Members do not like.

Which party had interest rates averaging 10 or 11 per cent., took unemployment figures over 3 million, had manufacturing output cut by 7 per cent., devalued the national health service and our schools, and doubled crime and poverty? [HON. MEMBERS: "Go on."] Yes, I could go on for a long time, as there is a sad story to tell. There will be a choice, and on the day that there is, people will compare the record of this Government with that of the Government of which the right hon. Gentleman was a member—and they will know that the Tories are worse and more extreme than ever.

Q3. [126725] **Mr. Anthony D. Wright** (Great Yarmouth): I am sure that the Prime Minister will join me in welcoming the 18 per cent. drop in unemployment in my Great Yarmouth constituency. The statistic for the young unemployed is even more impressive, with a drop of more than 50 per cent. in the past three years. Despite that good news, however, Yarmouth's unemployment rate is one of the highest in the country. Indeed, it is three times the East Anglian average. Will the Prime Minister outline to my constituents what the Government intend to do to build on the good news that we have had over the past three years and ensure that sustainable jobs are created in areas such as Great Yarmouth?

The Prime Minister: Of course I am delighted that 1,000 people have started on the new deal programme in my hon. Friend's constituency, and nearly 500 of them have gained jobs. *[Interruption.]* For those Conservative Members who are shouting, I shall repeat that they would abolish the new deal. People who have got jobs under this Government know that they would have those jobs taken away by a Conservative Government. Moreover, my hon. Friend's constituents, whose mortgage rates have come down from the appalling levels of the early 1990s under the Conservatives, know that under the Conservative boom and bust policy, they would go back up again.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): Can the Prime Minister confirm that health action zone funding will be maintained in 2000–01 at the levels originally set and announced by the Government?

The Prime Minister: The health plans will be set out by myself; I am covering the July plan in a few weeks' time. We shall set out the details of our spending proposals. Health action zones are immensely important and do a very good job in many local areas, and obviously we want to continue them.

Mr. Kennedy: I think that the whole House would want to continue them—*[Interruption.]* I was just trying to be inclusive. If the position is as optimistic as the Prime Minister says, why, in a letter that came into the public

domain today, did the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton) state:

I appreciate the programme funding—

for 2000–01—

is less than previously indicated?

The accompanying notes from civil servants state:

We . . . will, in effect, be announcing cuts to anticipated Health Action Zone Budgets this year.

They go on to say in ministerial advice:

This will not be received as good news and we do not recommend a press notice.

Why do the Government continue to announce funding *that does not exist*? Will the Prime Minister not admit that this is another attempt at the triumph of spin over substance?

The Prime Minister: That is absurd. The Government have announced new money for the national health service, and it is already going into the service. When we came to office, health authorities had huge deficits, which, as a result of the new money, are largely being cleared. There are already 7,500 new nurses, and there are thousands more to come. There are also extra doctors, accident and emergency departments are being renovated, and extra spending has been announced not only for this year but for future years.

As for the right hon. Gentleman's point about health action zones, I shall look into that for him, but I think that he will find that, when taken with the money given to health authorities in those areas, the funding has gone up, not down. I shall set it all out for him in a letter.

Ministerial Visits

Q4. [126726] **Mr. David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire): When he next plans to visit North-West Leicestershire.

The Prime Minister: I have no immediate plans to do so.

Mr. Taylor: As one of a north-west Leicestershire family who ran the post office in my home village for most of the 20th century, may I ask my right hon. Friend how likely it is that the extra income from community banking, electronic commerce and online government will compensate local offices for the losses that will result from automated credit transfer? When he does visit us, will he reassure rural and urban communities that the local post office network really is safe in his hands?

The Prime Minister: The proposals to be announced by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry later today will do that, and I think that they will be widely welcomed. It is important that we set out a plan for post offices that will allow them to modernise and develop, which is essential, and ensure that in every way possible, we protect rural post offices for the local communities that they serve.

I say to my hon. Friend that in this exercise we have had to work closely with people in both rural and urban post offices to devise a plan that accords not only with people's desire to keep their local post offices, but with reality. Every year, 500,000 more people get their benefits paid into their bank accounts. We have to take account of that in any plans for post offices, and we will. When my right hon. Friend sets out his plans later, the House will see that they will ensure that post offices have a future. That will be yet another dividing line with the Conservatives, because their tax policy would not allow them to fund the programme that we will be funding.

Engagements

Q5. [126727] **Dr. Phyllis Starkey** (Milton Keynes, South-West): May I tell my right hon. Friend that in October 1999, the waiting time for a cataract operation at Milton Keynes general hospital in my constituency was 12 months, whereas now, thanks to additional Government funding for an extra ophthalmic surgeon, the waiting time has been reduced to between four and six months? That is much better, although there is still room for improvement. Does that not demonstrate that the best way to reduce waiting lists in the NHS is to use public money directly to recruit extra doctors and nurses, and not, as the Conservative party proposes, to waste £1 billion on tax relief for private health insurance, half of which would be for those who can already well afford to pay for private insurance?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted that the waiting times for cataract operations are coming down in my hon. Friend's area, although as she rightly said, there is still a considerable way to go. Of course, the Conservatives want to drive everyone needing non-urgent treatment, such as a cataract operation, out of the NHS altogether. We still have not had an answer from them as to how their £1 billion plan for private medical insurance would be funded, if it is not to be funded from cuts in the NHS.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): When the Prime Minister next enjoys a weekend in the Buckinghamshire countryside, will he commit himself to preserving that countryside for my other constituents by overturning the unwanted and excessive housing targets that his deputy now wants to impose?

The Prime Minister: First, let me point out that the targets put forward by the Deputy Prime Minister are lower than those for many of the years of the previous Conservative Government, of which the hon. Gentleman was a proud supporter. *[Interruption.]* That is entirely true. Secondly, we did not accept the original plans, and we have increased the amount of building that must take place on brownfield, rather than greenfield, sites.

In addition, obviously we are trying to make sure that we do not end up with no houses being built in the south-east at all, since that would put extraordinary pressure on the people already living here. A balance must be struck, and most people believe that the Deputy Prime Minister, in accepting figures well below those in the plans put forward by the independent body, has steered a wise course and reached a sensible compromise.

Q6. [126728] **Ms Margaret Moran** (Luton, South): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the recent opening by Vauxhall Luton of a £5 million research and development engineering technology centre, and the investment of £189 million in United Kingdom plant? Will he join me

in congratulating all the workers of Vauxhall Luton on the work that they have put in to secure that investment? Does he not agree that that is a significant boost to UK manufacturing industry, which stands in sharp contrast to the actions of the Conservatives, under whose regime 26 million manufacturing jobs were lost—*[Interruption.]* Manufacturing output dropped by 28 per cent., and they constantly talked down UK manufacturing industry?

The Prime Minister: I think that it was actually 2.6 million jobs that went under the previous Government. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members seem to be rather proud of that record. There is good news not just from Vauxhall but from Leyland Trucks, too. Manufacturing has been through a difficult period indeed, but the single most important thing for the whole of our industry is to maintain stability in inflation and in the interest rates in the economy. All the manufacturers whom I speak to—even those who are worried about the high level of sterling recently and about manufacturing—accept that the last thing they need is a return to the policies of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when interest rates were at 15 per cent. for a year, and a million or more manufacturing jobs went in a couple of years.

Q7. [126729] **Mrs. Teresa Gorman** (Billericay): Will the Prime Minister confirm the story in *The Guardian* today that his press secretary, the fabled Alastair Campbell, has instructed every Department to produce at least two good news stories every week for two months during the summer recess, to cheer up the Labour party's image? Is it not time that that gentleman was taken off the public payroll and put back in on the payroll at Millbank, where he belongs?

The Prime Minister: I agree with the hon. Lady; it was an entirely redundant message since there is lots of good news that we can tell people about—for example, the record literacy and numeracy results in primary schools, the additional spending in 11,000 schools up and down the country, the 250,000 jobs got through the new deal, the extra money for pensioners, the extra money for children and child benefit, the extra money for schools and the extra money coming for the police after the comprehensive spending review. I agree that he need not have sent that out; we can do it ourselves.

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): Will my right hon. Friend welcome, as I will, the close of business in the House today, by which time, if all goes well, the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill will have completed its passage? Will he join me in ensuring, to the extent that he can, that those in the other place do not interfere too much with the Bill, so that the Government can fulfil yet another pre-election promise?

The Prime Minister: Certainly, to the extent that I can, I will.

Q8. [126730] **Mr. Paul Tyler** (North Cornwall): Does the Prime Minister accept that No. 10 Downing street is an historic building of considerable public interest? Does he not think that, as he is the head of a so-called modern Government, it is about time he got out? Is it Government policy to ask the present occupant of Clarence house to vacate it—and when will all this end?

The Prime Minister: I think that we should all stay put.

Q9. [126731] **Mr. Vernon Coaker** (Gedling): Will my right hon. Friend take this opportunity to encourage local authorities such as Tory-controlled Gedling borough council to use the new powers that the Government have given them to tackle anti-social behaviour in their communities? People are fed up with the yobs. They are fed up with bad neighbours. They want something done about it. We have given local authorities the powers. Is it not about time that they used them?

The Prime Minister: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. A breach of such an order is a criminal offence with a maximum penalty of five years in prison. Although the use of those orders is now on the increase, far more could be done. There is nothing worse than if a family has to live in an inner-city estate or in a town next to families that perhaps are engaged in criminal activity, drug dealing and all the rest of it. They make their lives absolute hell, and those anti-social behaviour orders are there to be used. I urge all local authorities to use them, particularly the Conservative ones that are slow to do so. They are there for the protection of the public, and the more we use them, the better.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): Will the Prime Minister have a word with the Department of Health about its disingenuous policy of, on the one hand, stating that it opposes euthanasia, while, on the other hand, it allows passive euthanasia by the withdrawal of medical treatment, including food and fluids, from those who are not dying, thereby making even more vulnerable the frail, the elderly and the disabled?

The Prime Minister: I do not believe that that is the policy of the Department of Health at all.

Q10. [126733] **Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick** (Poplar and Canning Town): Yesterday, the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) and Sir William McAlpine performed the topping-out ceremony at EXCEL, London's new international conference and exhibition centre in docklands in my constituency, barely a year after the Deputy Prime Minister performed a ceremony at the beginning of building. EXCEL opening in November will be a key element in the regeneration structures for east London. However, one of the more eagerly awaited pieces of transport infrastructure is the channel tunnel rail link coming into Stratford. Can the Prime Minister reiterate the Government's commitment to the building of phase two of CTRL, which is important not just to London and the Thames gateway area, but to the whole of the UK, to provide fast rail access to Europe?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly confirm the commitments that we have made. Of course, that is an infrastructure project that will bring not just better infrastructure but jobs to the area. I know that my hon. Friend has been working hard with other hon. Members

in regenerating that particular part of London. As a result, literally thousands more jobs are being created. That is good for local business and local people.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Will the Prime Minister confirm Lord Wakeham's assertion, as reported in *The Independent* today, that he came under considerable Government pressure to fudge his report on the House of Lords?

The Prime Minister: No. I will not confirm that at all. I thought that it was a good report, but it was Lord Wakeham's report.

Q11. [126734] **Mr. Michael Clapham** (Barnsley, West and Penistone): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the Health and Safety Commission recently announced its future health and safety strategy, including 10-year targets. Those targets are to reduce ill health in the work place, to reduce fatalities and to reduce the number of major injuries. Does he agree that those targets need teeth, that the Government should look towards legislation that will support sanctions against people who breach health and safety legislation, and that named directors of companies should be responsible for health and safety policy?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend that that is a serious issue, which is why, a short time ago, the Deputy Prime Minister set out a new strategy that sets targets for improvement over a period of 10 years. The cost to the economy of health and safety failures is some £18 billion a year. Fatal accidents cost 400 people a year their lives, and 25,000 have to give up work due to accidents, never to return, so I entirely agree with my hon. Friend that it is a very important issue. We will work with employers, trade unions and others to improve the situation.

Q12. [126735] **Mr. Andrew George** (St. Ives): Bearing in mind the fact that 11 men have lost their lives in the fishing industry in my constituency in the past three and a half years, leaving 23 children without fathers, does the Prime Minister understand just how disappointed the industry was when the Minister of Agriculture cut fishing safety grants in May last year? People were encouraged when the Deputy Prime Minister promised to reinstate them a year ago, but there has been no action since then. Will the Prime Minister intervene to ensure that fishing safety grants are improved, so as to improve fishing safety throughout the UK?

The Prime Minister: First, I express my sympathy to the families of the hon. Gentleman's constituents who lost their lives. Secondly, on the forward-spending plans of the Government, I am afraid that he will have to wait for the comprehensive spending review.

Post Office Network

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): With permission, Madam Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the post office network. Post offices are a vital part of the fabric of our country. They serve 28 million people every week, performing a vital role in local communities, whether they be rural or urban.

However, the Post Office also faces challenges. Its traditional work needs to respond to the changing requirements of customers, to changes in society and to the opportunities arising from new technology. Last October, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister asked the performance and innovation unit to draw up a strategy for the future of the post office network. The PIU's report is being published today. Copies are being placed in the Library of the House and will be available from the Vote Office. The Government accept all the report's 24 recommendations. Working with the Post Office and the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, we will implement the measures proposed in full. We will back them with financial support—we will be setting aside ring-fenced funding as part of the spending review to be announced in July.

The Post Office is the largest retail network in Europe. More than nine out of 10 people live within a mile of a post office. However, for too long the post office network has been a neglected national resource. Now is the time to harness its full potential and to develop it in totally new areas.

The PIU report identifies three such areas where developments should take place, made possible only by the investment by this Government of £500 million in modern online computer systems for every one of the 18,500 post offices throughout the country. The three developments are, first, to establish a universal bank; secondly, to provide internet access and exploit e-commerce; and thirdly, an enhanced role in government services.

First, the Government are aware that our decision to move to a system of automated credit transfer between 2003 and 2005 has caused concern. However, people were already voting with their feet and choosing to have their benefits paid into their bank accounts. Today, I can guarantee that, even after the move to ACT, pensions and benefits can still be paid in cash in full at a post office if that is the choice of the individual pensioner or benefit recipient.

The universal bank outlined in the PIU report would provide the means of achieving that objective. It would ensure that all benefit recipients and pensioners, now and in the future, could continue to use post offices to receive their cash. It would be a post office-based solution, as called for by the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters.

Today in Britain, about 3.5 million adults have no bank account. The universal bank would bring those people into the banking mainstream by providing basic banking services. Customers of the universal bank would be able to get out cash at any post office and use cash machines to take out money. They would be able to set up direct debits to pay bills, enabling them to benefit from discounts on gas, electricity, telephone and other bills. That would be a real bonus to people on low incomes who, at the moment, are the unbanked.

Secondly, we want to provide internet access and to exploit e-commerce through the post office network by installing internet terminals in front of the counter and ensuring that post office staff are trained to provide assistance. Post offices also have an opportunity to market themselves as a convenient local place for people to collect goods that they have ordered over the internet.

Thirdly, we want an enhanced role in government services for the post office network. Post offices have traditionally been places where people can do a range of government business, from renewing a car tax disc to getting a fishing licence. That role will be further strengthened with the PIU's recommendation that post offices become one-stop shops—general government practitioners—for advice and information on government services. We shall support pilot projects on this and on internet access.

This vision of the 21st century for the Post Office applies to the entire network. However, the PIU report also identified the particular needs of the network in urban areas and in rural communities. The rural post office network has been slowly contracting over the past 20 years; the Government are committed to ensuring that it is maintained. The importance of rural post offices cannot be underestimated. Often, they are the last remaining local shop, providing a vital service and also acting as a focal point for the local community.

The maintenance of such services is, above all, a tribute to the invaluable role of sub-postmasters and mistresses, who often provide to their communities much more than is required or expected of them. The Government have already made provision through the Postal Services Bill to provide financial assistance to post offices, where necessary. In order to protect rural post offices, the Government will place a formal requirement on the Post Office to maintain the rural network, and also to prevent any avoidable closures of rural post offices. Our commitment is clear: to maintain the rural network and prevent any avoidable closures in that network.

An unavoidable closure would be when no one was prepared to take over from a departing sub-postmaster, or where an associated retail business was no longer commercially viable. Otherwise, the network will be maintained. The PIU report recommended that the requirement to maintain the rural network should apply in the first instance for a period of six years. We accept that recommendation. During this period, the Postal Services Commission, together with the Consumer Council for Postal Services, will monitor the network, and the commission will report annually to me on the rural network.

At present, the Post Office defines a rural post office as one which covers 6,300 inhabitants. Currently, 7,500 post offices are covered by that definition. However, the Countryside Agency defines a rural post office as one serving a settlement of 10,000 or fewer people. Around 10,000 post offices would come within that definition. I am pleased to inform the House that, for the purpose of the policy of protection from avoidable closures, we shall apply the wider definition and thereby cover nearly 10,000 post offices.

It is not just in rural areas that post offices play an important community role. We want to maintain convenient access and improve the quality of post offices in our towns and cities, as well as in the countryside.

[Mr. Stephen Byers]

Under pressure from changes in the pattern of retailing, the quality of many post offices and associated retail business has declined in urban areas over the years. We believe that the best way to address that is for the Post Office, working closely with the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, to build bigger and more extensive offices, reversing years of underinvestment. As the PIU recommended, we will encourage them to do so.

Post offices in deprived neighbourhoods and estates have a particularly important role, often providing the basis for the only local shop. Our aim is to ensure that people in these areas, where there are few other facilities, continue to have access to high quality post offices, preferably co-located with good shops. To support that, we will set up a new fund to improve the quality of post offices in deprived urban areas, thereby better serving the needs of the local community. Uses of the fund would include installing security measures and modernising premises.

These proposals provide a significant package for guaranteeing access to post offices and enabling them to provide new services which meet the changing needs of customers. By providing financial support for these initiatives, the Government are backing a viable, sustainable future for the post office network. However, the Post Office itself needs to respond to the challenges. The PIU report shows that much more needs to be done: to maximise the commercial potential of the network; to improve efficiency; and to raise the quality of post offices.

The vision set out in the PIU report, which we support, is closely in line with that of the general secretary of the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, with whom we have been in close dialogue. The package announced today complements the measures in the Postal Services Bill. Post offices and their customers, in all areas, will benefit from the wide range of opportunities offered by a modern online computer system in every post office and proposals to establish the universal bank, internet learning and access points and general government practitioners.

Customers in all urban areas should benefit from bigger and more expensive post offices offering a wider range of services. Those in rural areas will also benefit from the requirement to maintain the rural network. Those in inner cities and estates will benefit from measures to ensure that post offices provide good local shops which serve the community.

This announcement will ensure that people throughout the country—in rural communities and in our cities and towns—have convenient access to a post office providing quality services. It will offer the opportunities that the Post Office needs to face the future with confidence, and to build a network that can thrive rather than just survive in the 21st century. I commend the statement to the House.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State is making a statement on the sub-post office network. It would have been so much better if he had found some solutions to the problem that he caused when he scrapped a scheme last year simply by circulating a letter on a "Dear colleague" basis. We know that his announcement means that £400 million of income will be removed from the sub-post office network from the year 2003.

As a result of the uncertainty that the Government have created among sub-post offices, over the past year there has been an escalation in sub-post office closures to about 500. That uncertainty has been demonstrated by the sub-postmasters themselves, who attended a rally on 12 April and presented one of the biggest petitions ever to a Government, when 3 million signatures were handed in at No. 10 Downing street.

We have devoted two Opposition days to debating this matter. The Secretary of State's statement is light on detail and particularly light on fact and financial detail. I hope that, when he comes to answer specific questions, he will not duck the issue but will say how much money is on the table as part of the package that he has announced. Can he guarantee that what he has read out will make up the £400 million shortfall that the Post Office will suffer from 2003?

On the universal bank, will the Secretary of State please explain—I have asked this before, and we really need to hear the detail now—where the charges will fall? Supposedly, 3.5 million new account holders will be members of the new bank. Do the charges fall on the customer, on the Post Office, on the bank or on the taxpayer? Who will bear the transaction costs of money from existing bank account holders who may still want to draw their money from their post office? He and the Government have given guarantees in the past that those people will not have to bear the transaction costs. Who will bear them?

The Secretary of State paid much attention to the rural post office network. Some of the most fragile post offices are in rural areas. What minimum number of sub-post offices will he guarantee to keep open in the network?

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned information technology. Conservative Members welcome the opportunities that IT offers the sub-post office network, because it was our policy to put computers into sub-post offices in the first place. Given the increase in e-commerce and, we hope, the rapid escalation of home deliveries—but to a population in which so many people are now out during the day—is it his intention to allow the sub-post office network to handle parcels from private sector parcels companies other than Parcelforce, as that would certainly increase the sub-post office income?

What additional government services has the Secretary of State already discussed in relation to this one-stop shop that he talks about? The Government are pledged to deliver electronic government by 2005—50 per cent. is supposed to be ready by 2003—so Departments must be well advanced in knowing what services they will deliver electronically. Rather than just giving generalities, will he tell us exactly what Government services the sub-post office network will be allowed to tender for, so that people can plan for their financial future and know where their income is coming from?

We have heard a lot from the Secretary of State about subsidies. Exactly what does he mean by the Government using subsidies? The National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, with which he says he has been in contact, has said in terms that it is looking not for subsidy but for genuine alternative forms of income. If he intends to subsidise individual post offices, what analysis has he made of the distortion that such a subsidy would create for either the next nearest sub-post office or, for that matter, for the village shop, which may not be a sub-post

office but may sell products in competition with it? Is he not at all concerned about the small business aspect of creating artificial competitive distortions in the market?

I know that sums are not the Secretary of State's strong point, but he will have to address the figures eventually. The Post Office had to bear a £571 million write-down as a result of his policy change in this financial year's annual report. Will the sums that he is talking about, albeit in general terms, be another write-down in next year's accounts for the Post Office itself, or is this some new money that he has got from the Chancellor, which the taxpayer will have to provide through the Treasury?

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is she for it or against it?

Mr. Byers: Now we know why 3,000 post offices were closed while the Conservatives were in government. Are they for it or against it? Who knows from the hon. Lady's contribution?

The hon. Lady asked some specific questions. The wonderful benefit payments card has been held up as the way forward. When we came to office, it had already overrun by three years, was over budget and was set to be obsolete by 2007. The Conservatives may deny it, but that was the reality. The hon. Lady knows it, and the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) knows it too, because he was the architect of the chaos that surrounded the benefit payment card.

The hon. Lady is right to say that there is difficulty with delivering goods over the internet because fewer people are at home during the day. That is because 970,000 more people are in work as a result of our policies.

The hon. Lady talks about the views of sub-postmasters. We shall wait to hear what they say about this afternoon's announcement. I am confident that, as members of a reasonable organisation, they will warmly welcome my statement and the PIU report because they provide a real vision for the future of the Post Office.

The hon. Lady raises the important issue of transaction costs. We know that, at the moment, a transaction cost is paid by commercial agreement between the federation, the Post Office and the banks if they are acting as an agency. That will not change when a universal bank is introduced, but those bodies will enter into commercial negotiation.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): What about the 17p?

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman talks about 17p. In fact, for a pension the figure is 13p at the moment. He should get the facts right if he can. The figure will be part of the transactions entered into, and it is appropriate that that should be so.

We have made provision in the spending review to underpin the report's recommendations, and that will be made clear in July when we announce those proceedings.

The Conservatives' difficulties on the Post Office were very clear from the hon. Lady's response. Their policy was to privatise and break up the Post Office. We have given it commercial freedom and we will support modernisation and the development of new areas of business. The message for the Post Office and rural and urban communities that care about it is clear: neglect, decline and closures under the Conservatives; vision, investment and a future under Labour.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. Does he agree that the image that the media continuously put over of most vulnerable post offices being in the countryside is not totally accurate? Will he tell the House of his Department's analysis of measuring vulnerability by size of income that sub-post offices receive from social security transactions? On that analysis, do not the sub-post offices in his and my constituencies rank about 70th in the vulnerability league stakes? Will he therefore give an undertaking to those of us who represent inner-city areas that, when he gets down to the detailed implementation of his welcome announcement, he will pay particular attention to ensuring that inner-city post offices survive, as should rural post offices?

Mr. Byers: My right hon. Friend raises a very important point. In today's announcement, we draw particular attention to the important role that post offices play in deprived urban areas such as his constituency and mine, not just as a post office but as part of probably the only commercial retail outlet serving some of our most depressed estates. He is right to point out that they are the most vulnerable on the question of benefit transactions. We will be providing financial support to underpin post offices in those areas.

Many of my right hon. Friend's constituents and mine will be among the 3.5 million people who are unbanked and therefore cannot take advantage of direct debits and the cuts in bills for electricity, gas, the telephone and so on that that brings. The universal bank will, for the first time, allow those 3.5 million people to enjoy those benefits. The ability to enjoy the advantages of reduced basic utility bills, which many in this House take for granted, will make a huge difference to families and people on low incomes. Extending such benefits will be beneficial to individuals, communities and the Post Office as well.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I welcome the elements in the statement which give a firmer commitment to both public subsidy and the preservation of the network, and identify useful new sources of income generation. A similarly comprehensive approach adopted 20 years ago at the beginning of Conservative rule might have prevented the closure of many of the 4,000 branches which have closed.

How much of the lost £400 million income in 2003 will now be replaced by a combination of subsidy and new sources of income? I appreciate that the Secretary of State cannot identify the subsidy sum before the public expenditure review, but what will be the gap in the cash flow as a result of those two combined elements?

Secondly, can the right hon. Gentleman be more specific about his commitment to the preservation of the network? He said that there will be a guarantee for 10,000 sub-post offices. What will be the status of the other 8,000, many of which are loss-making? In particular, what is the status of those in urban areas, which have just been referred to? The right hon. Gentleman will have discovered in Tottenham last week that there is a lot of

[Dr. Vincent Cable]

sensitivity about the closure of sub-post offices. Clearly, many of those will be modernised, but of those that are not, how many are likely to shut, and what provisions are there for preventing the closure of sub-post offices in inner-city areas?

Thirdly, will the right hon. Gentleman say more about what is meant by a jointly owned universal bank? What is the relative shareholding of the Government and the private banks? What will happen if a Barclays cash machine is installed in a sub-post office as part of the joint project? Will customers pay Barclays charges, which, as he knows, the bank is determined to impose in defiance of the anti-cartel provision of the Competition Act 1998?

Finally, I welcome the internet provision, particularly taking advantage of the logistics opportunities of the Post Office. But how will internet be provided in the many remote areas where there are no ISDN lines? How will the internet be universally available for the post office network?

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that, had our comprehensive approach been adopted some 20 years ago, the network would be in a far stronger condition than it is at present.

The hon. Gentleman raises a number of important questions. On the savings that will come from the movement towards ACT, clearly there will be an element of financial support to the network, which will be announced as part of the comprehensive spending review. We are confident that, coupled with the new areas in which the post office network will be able to develop—we mentioned three in particular on the basis of the PIU report—if there is any shortfall in the sums coming into the network, it can be made up by the new activities into which the post offices will be able to enter.

The hon. Gentleman made the point that some 10,000 post offices will be covered by the commitment that we have given to maintain the rural network. We calculate that probably 2,000 more will come within the category of urban deprived. The other areas will benefit from the new developments to which I have referred. There will be greater commercial opportunities for those post offices. In total, the package that we have put forward today has something to offer all 18,500 post offices presently in the network.

The Post Office and the major banks are discussing the detail of the universal bank. The Treasury, on behalf of the Government, has said today that high street banks that participate in the universal bank and make financial contributions towards its establishment would meet their financial exclusion obligations. That will make a big contribution to ensuring that the universal bank is a success.

I have asked the Post Office to present, by 1 September this year, a business plan giving details of how the universal bank will work in practice. In terms of internet access, once again I have asked the Post Office to present a report to me by the end of this year.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. More than 40 hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye. I shall not be able to call anywhere near that number. I ask for brisk questions and answers from now on.

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the report. Some of us were worried when the Horizon project was substantially altered. Today's statement has dealt with most of our anxieties, and those who run post offices in rural and disadvantaged areas will have some hope. The package of support, the encouragement of diversification and the announcement about the universal bank are heartening.

I want to make a point about the record of Post Office Counters in negotiating with external bodies about franchised services. We all know about the loss of Powercard in the past couple of years, and the great disadvantages that that created for many of our constituents. I hope that my right hon. Friend, commercial freedom notwithstanding, will keep an eye on the rather macho approach that Post Office Counters sometimes takes in negotiations. I hope that we will not lose the opportunity of gaining access to important services through the Post Office because of the simplistic approach that Post Office Counters sometimes adopts.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend raises an important point. There is no doubt that, as we map out a programme of genuine change for the post office network, we need Post Office Counters managers who will be able to take advantage of the new opportunities. Some new management has already been put in place, and we are beginning to experience benefits from that.

The Powercard problem was a Scottish matter, but it shows the way in which mistakes can adversely affect post offices, communities and individuals. They should not be repeated in future. We will therefore ask the Post Office, with Post Office Counters, to prepare business plans and make detailed proposals so that the Government can ensure that we are discharging our responsibilities to the post office network and the communities that it serves. If we can move together in a genuine partnership, we shall be in a strong position to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): I am sorry that the Secretary of State chose to repeat a falsehood for which the Minister of State has already apologised to me.

Madam Speaker: Order. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will withdraw the word "falsehood" and select another word that is acceptable in parliamentary terms.

Mr. Lilley: I am sorry that the Secretary of State chose to repeat a statement for which the Minister of State has already apologised to me and the House. That statement conflicts with that made by his predecessor.

Let us now concentrate on the key issue. Will the Secretary of State tell the House whether sub-post offices will receive the same amount or less per transaction than they currently receive from the Post Office? Will the same number of transactions or fewer transactions be made? If sub-post offices receive the same revenues, from where will the savings come that the Secretary of State anticipates? If they receive less revenue, will not post office closures accelerate in future?

Mr. Byers: The right hon. Gentleman will know from experience the way in which the transaction costs are negotiated. He also knows that the Government are not

involved in the details of the transaction costs of those commercial negotiations. There is no reason for post offices and sub-postmasters to receive less than they currently receive in transaction costs. Nothing in today's statement will lead them to receive less. It is a matter of commercial negotiation.

The right hon. Gentleman asked whether the number of transactions will diminish. That depends on whether the Post Office can persuade people to choose to have their benefits or pensions paid in cash at post offices. The individual will have that choice; that is perfectly appropriate. The right hon. Gentleman knows that the current order book system has massive potential for fraud. We calculate that approximately £100 million a year will be saved by preventing fraud through the introduction of the universal bank system. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will be prepared to support that saving.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): I note that my right hon. Friend's statement today would have been impossible if the Tory Government's plan to privatise the Post Office had gone ahead and I also note that the welcome given to the statement by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) contrasts starkly with the lies spread in Liberal Democrat "Focus" documents about the Government forcing pensioners to collect their pensions from banks.

Will my right hon. Friend accept from me, as a representative of an inner-city constituency, that my constituents will welcome the increased facilities that will be available to people on low incomes and benefits and will be grateful for the fact that the support structure in inner cities for local sub-post offices will continue?

Mr. Byers: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. The post offices in inner-city areas provide a valuable resource to many constituents who need the support that a local post office can offer. I am pleased that the announcement that we have been able to make today can both address the understandable concerns of the rural network and, at the same time, discharge our responsibility for those people who live in our cities and towns. The announcement is a balanced response to a good analysis of the state of the network, and will offer new opportunities and a totally new vision for the Post Office for the 21st century.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): As an officer of the all-party group, the importance of the core income of sub-postmasters was drilled into me at the recent lobby. Does the Secretary of State accept that the Government are likely to save annually between £400 million and £600 million? That core income must be replaced, somehow, after 2005. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), I am prepared to give the statement a qualified welcome, but I was anxious about the answer given to the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) in which the Secretary of State said that the issue was nothing to do with him but with the Post Office. Does not he accept that if he does not drive Government business in the direction of the sub-post office network, it will wither on the vine whether he likes it or not?

Mr. Byers: The core income that sub-postmasters receive has been in decline for several years because people have voluntarily chosen to move to ACT. The announcement today will enable us to ensure a greater diversity, so that new sources of income will reach the post office network. The hon. Gentleman knows that it is not for the Secretary of State to negotiate the transaction costs, because that is a commercial matter. I do not negotiate the pay of those working for the CWU or the pay of sub-postmasters and mistresses, because that would be inappropriate. What we can do is to ensure that the post office network is attractive and that people will wish to visit it for their transactions. The statement I have made today will achieve that.

On the specific point of government business, I am able to announce today that whenever government services are to be provided, the Post Office will be entitled to tender for that work. That has not been the case in the past, but from now on the Post Office will automatically be on the list, and that will make a big contribution.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): My right hon. Friend's statement is welcome news for many of the communities left high and dry by the decision of Barclays bank earlier this year to close 172 branches on one day, leaving 84 towns and villages bankless. The statement has the potential to provide a financial lifeline to communities facing financial exclusion. The all-party group on community banking, which it is my privilege to chair, has long argued for creative solutions to financial exclusion, using the existing post office network. In what way will the new and welcome universal bank differ from the Girobank, which was privatised by the Tories? If the Tories ever get their hands on power again, what guarantees will we have that the universal bank will not suffer a similar fate?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend has been a great champion of providing financial services to many communities, and he has done valuable work on exposing the actions of some high street banks. He is also right to point out that the strategy adopted by many banks gives the Post Office a golden opportunity to provide financial services to many individuals who are now denied them as a result of that strategy. The role of the universal bank will be quite different from that of Girobank, which has now been linked with Alliance and Leicester. Essentially, the universal bank will be geared to the 3.5 million people who are unbanked. Those who do not want to use it as a banking facility can simply access their benefits or their pensions at their local post office, but those who want to use it for a wider range of financial services will be able to do so. It will be a matter of choice and we believe that that is the appropriate approach.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): The statement does indeed sound good, but the Secretary of State will be aware that sub-postmasters and others have come to realise that there is sometimes a difference between how Government statements sound and their real meaning. How much will it cost to install the new technology that will be required for the new services at sub-post offices? Who will pay those costs?

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out the importance of working closely with the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, which is what we have been doing. That is why I hope that it will feel able to welcome the announcement this afternoon.

[Mr. Byers]

The hon. Gentleman asked about the costs of installing the new facilities. It will cost over £500 million to provide the modern online computer facilities that will be in every post office by the spring of next year. As he will know from last week's Post Office accounts, some of that money will come from the Post Office and some from the Government. In terms of the additional facilities over and above the online computer facilities, as I made clear in the statement and in reply to hon. Members, I am asking the Post Office to present me with a business plan for the universal bank by 1 September, and for the other proposals by the end of this calendar year, so that we can see exactly how much will be required to deliver those new opportunities to the post office network.

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on rising to the challenge of creating a financial environment in which we can have a thriving and prosperous network of post offices. Is he aware that my constituents will particularly welcome the fact that he recognises that post offices in some of the less affluent urban areas are even more vulnerable than those in rural areas on the move to automated credit transfer? Those same constituents will attach huge importance to the potential of the universal bank which he has announced today. While recognising that the small print and the details of the agreement with the commercial banks will be produced later, is my right hon. Friend satisfied that he will reach an agreement with the private banks that will enable the universal bank to achieve its full potential to sustain the network? For example, will an individual who already has an account with a private bank be able to open an account with the universal bank?

Mr. Byers: My right hon. Friend is right to say that there are many aspects of today's announcement will be of real benefit to his constituents and to many other people living in inner-city areas. Much of the work conducted by the performance and innovation unit revealed that many of the 3.5 million people who do not have a bank account felt that a bank account was not appropriate for them for two main reasons: first, they felt that they were talked down to and they felt uncomfortable about going into a bank; and secondly, they did not want to get into debt as a result of having an overdraft facility. The reason why they liked the idea of a universal bank was that they trusted the Post Office and felt comfortable with it. They felt that they could trust the way in which the Post Office dealt with their affairs. People who already have bank accounts will be perfectly entitled to join the universal bank and they will be offered the whole range of financial services that the banking sector provides. Once again, that will be a matter of choice, but I am confident that the universal bank will open up a new direction in terms of offering financial services to many people who are presently excluded from many of the benefits that most of us take for granted.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): The Secretary of State said that there would be a new fund to help post offices in deprived urban areas. Will he confirm that there will be a mechanism to give the same help to post offices in deprived rural areas? Does the ring-fenced money to which he referred apply equally to both urban and rural areas? Will he clarify conclusion 10 on page 89 of the report, which states that that ring-fenced fund will apply in England, but that similar arrangements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will be matters for the respective devolved Administrations? Will he confirm that any ring-fenced money will be additional for those areas, as it will be for England?

Mr. Byers: As to the position with regard to the devolved Administrations, I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales is making an announcement this afternoon about how he intends to deal with these matters in Wales.

The ring-fenced funding has been negotiated in the context of the comprehensive spending review, and it will apply to Wales as well as England. The right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) is right to point out that targeted financial support must be supplied to deprived rural areas as well as to deprived urban areas, but that support will take different forms. The power to put subsidy into rural areas is contained in the new Postal Services Bill, but the fund for deprived urban areas is exclusively for those areas, and will be ring-fenced accordingly.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): Proprietors of sub-post offices in my constituency are very worried about the declining value of their businesses. They tell me that they want not subsidy but proper recognition for the valuable service that they provide, much of which is on behalf of the Government. The measures announced today will go some way towards alleviating their concerns, but there is likely to be some delay in their implementation, and the report states that the universal bank concept needs more work.

In the meantime, business is being lost, and not only because people are choosing to move away from post offices. Sub-postmasters and mistresses in my constituency tell me that their customers say that staff at the Department of Social Security are misleading people into believing that their benefits must be paid into their bank accounts, even though they would prefer to have them paid at the post office.

I notice that the Minister of State with responsibility for pensions, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker), is present, and I hope that he will talk to colleagues about how the Department can encourage its clients to opt for the universal bank. I hope, too, that the Department will recognise that there are security advantages to allowing people to collect benefits from a post office rather than from any branch of their bank.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend was right to say that postmasters and postmistresses do not want a subsidy. They want to make their businesses commercially viable by moving into new areas and diversifying into new facilities. The announcement that we have been able to make today will go a long way towards assisting them.

Today's announcement will also introduce to the network a new confidence that has been lacking over recent years. We have been able to lift the cloud of uncertainty that has hung over the post office network. People can now plan ahead with confidence, as they will know the direction the Government intend to take with the network.

With regard to what my hon. Friend said about the Benefits Agency, we will make sure that benefit recipients and pensioners are made fully aware of the options and the genuine choice available to them. The big change on ACT does not begin until 2003, so there is a period in which we can make sure that the various initiatives are in place and functioning effectively. That is the challenge of the next few months, but I hope that today's statement will mean that many sub-postmasters and mistresses in my hon. Friend's constituency feel that they can plan ahead with confidence, in the knowledge that the network has a viable future.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Since the House last debated post offices, I have been informed that the post office in Kirk Langley in my constituency is to close. Ten days ago, I was informed that the sub-postmistress at Brassington, who had her home converted to run the post office, has received a communication from the Post Office about reducing her wage substantially. What comfort will the Secretary of State's statement today bring to the proprietors of those two post offices?

Mr. Byers: If the Kirk Langley and Brassington post offices serve rural communities, they may well be covered by the proposals that I have introduced in connection with the protection and maintenance of the rural network. I cannot guarantee that, as I have not seen the details of the cases to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but people who read the statement will accept that there is much in it that will give reassurance to the rural network in the future.

The problems being experienced by Kirk Langley and Brassington have nothing to do with our proposals to move to ACT from 2003 onwards. They are already having difficulties. That is one of the reasons why we wanted to make the statement today—to instil some confidence in the system. I hope that in the future the problems experienced in Kirk Langley and Brassington will be overcome, but I regret that it may be too late for those two particular post offices.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): I welcome the my right hon. Friend's statement, particularly the proposals for a universal bank for sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses to carry out a Government general practitioner role. In that context, could they also have a role as welfare benefits advisers? Sub-postmasters are in touch with the poorer sections of the community. With regard to the elderly, sub-postmasters probably know more about care allowance, attendance allowance and the minimum income guarantee than, say, Thora Hird, and such a step could be very cost-effective. Could post office employees be paid to alert the Department of Social Security to benefit fraud?

Mr. Byers: When the role of a Government general practitioner is brought forward and we can see the detail, we will be looking at the areas mentioned by my hon. Friend with great interest. We will want to know to what extent sub-postmasters and postmistresses can be trained to give good quality advice about the welfare benefits system and a whole range of other issues. They are in an ideal position to act as the interface between the Government and individuals in many communities up and down the country. Post offices provide a network that can form the backbone of communication between the Government and citizens. They have not been used in that way in the past.

The report that we have today and the Government's response to it will ensure that the Post Office network can grow in the future and move in different directions, in a way that I believe will provide greater satisfaction to many sub-postmasters and postmistresses who want to develop a Government service role.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. We shall obviously be coming back to this subject. We must now move on.

Points of Order

4.22 pm

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. First, I apologise for having used an improper word, but is there any precedent for a Secretary of State failing to apologise for repeating a statement for which his own deputy has previously apologised to the House?

Madam Speaker: I fear that that is barely a point of order for me. I can well understand that there are some problems and difficulties with exchanges across the Floor of the House from time to time, and I refer hon. Members, as I did yesterday, to the wise words of "Erskine May" about good temper and moderation in our language. I hope that Front Benchers will have heard what the right hon. Gentleman said, and will take his point to heart.

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I am not sure whether this is a point of order, but I hope that it is. The whole House will have heard the Secretary of State say in his statement that the importance of the Post Office cannot be underestimated. It is clear that the right hon. Gentleman must have meant "overestimated". He may want to correct that, because *Hansard* is bound to record what he said—namely, that its importance cannot be underestimated.

Madam Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is being very helpful to us all, as well as to *Hansard*.

House of Commons (Reserved Matters)

4.23 pm

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prescribe which Members of the House of Commons may participate only in proceedings on reserved matters under the Scotland and Northern Ireland Acts 1998 or may be appointed only to a ministerial office having responsibility for such matters.

I also hope to overestimate the importance of this Bill. It is the next stage in the devolution path on which the Government have set forth. Early on in this Parliament, the Government enacted their key election manifesto pledges of devolving power to Scotland and Northern Ireland and, in a more limited respect, to Wales. Nobody who participated in that debate could believe that it was a one-off measure—that somehow we would be so clever, in a Parliament's early stages, to see through all the moves that would be necessary to ensure the success of such a programme. Indeed, those with more insight and wisdom than I prophesied as we began the debate that we were moving from a unitary to a federal state. The Bill that I seek leave to introduce today is another small, important step on that journey.

The Bill seeks the authority of the House to create two powers. The first is to make Members from Northern Ireland and Scotland unable to vote in this House on matters that have been devolved to their Parliaments. In a second respect, the Bill seeks to limit the power of Members for seats in Scotland and Northern Ireland to hold United Kingdom Ministries, where the relevant powers have been devolved to their regional Parliaments.

The Bill also has, as hon. Members would expect, a clear timetable. We were elected to this Parliament on a mandate to put through devolution without changing our own powers. The Bill does not seek to change those powers, but it sets out a timetable by which we might legislate in the next Parliament so that the legislation would become effective in the Parliament after that.

A major purpose of the Bill is to initiate a debate. Already, it is beginning to have some effect. So hon. Members will not be surprised if I address myself to what are called the main objections that have already arisen from some people who are concerned about the next stage of devolution: people whose nerve appears to be cracking in following the path on which we are safely set.

First, I am told quite correctly that when I was a Minister I did not vote against the devolution proposals. Some of the older Members here will know that, in government, the choice that one has is to be part of the payroll vote or to resign. I chose to resign on a different issue, but I hope that many of my colleagues on this side of the House appreciate the opportunity that they have now, as opposed to then, when we were compelled to vote on a three-line Whip. I am not sure what the Whips are planning for this afternoon, but in theory there will be a free vote. Hon. Members may thus be able to express their views more accurately than they did when we discussed the matter earlier in this Parliament.

Another objection is why I am raising this issue now. It is not an issue which is present in everyday politics. As Members of Parliament, we have a crucial duty both to attend to the immediate issues that affect our constituents and to consider those issues that are beginning to appear on the radar screen, and to try to deal with them so that

we do not sour the nature of our politics. Who would have thought that, already, the issue of fox hunting would be raised within the framework of whether Members of Parliament for Scottish seats, whose own Parliament will decide the issue for Scotland, should be able to vote in this House on fox hunting in England and Wales? The legal position is clear for all to see: Scottish Members have every legal right to vote when we come to consider fox hunting for England and Wales. Whether they would be wise to exercise that vote is another matter.

Another objection to the Bill is that it creates two tiers of Members of Parliament, but the clear fact is that we already have at least two tiers of Members. The Bill leaves the powers of this Parliament untouched. I suppose that our constituents will yawn slightly on hearing Members of Parliament say that the Bill creates two tiers of Members of Parliament. I hope that they will forgive us for being so egocentric. For they might say, not that we already have two tiers of Members of Parliament, but that we have created from the Act already on the statute book two tiers of voters. Between national Parliaments and the UK Parliament, we shall see increasingly what we see locally: people vote one way for their local council and a different way for their national MP. That will occur increasingly in voting patterns in Scotland and Northern Ireland and for this place.

The final argument that has been made shocks me. It is: "Why are you so foolish as to introduce this measure? May there not come a time when we will need the votes of Scottish Members to put through a programme affecting English Members that a Labour Government would not be able to carry without those Scottish Members?" The test is simple. Do we give our loyalty primarily to our party? All of us have some, or great, loyalty to our party. Or is our loyalty primarily to the democratic system that we have inherited and that we have a duty to hand on?

Devolution is a Labour issue. I am pleased to see so many Opposition Members in the Chamber, but when we were discussing devolution, they opposed every word, every clause, every line and every page of the legislation. As we know, there is great rejoicing in heaven over the sinner who repents. There is clearly a party breaking out up there at the repentance of the Opposition.

Before anyone tries to prevent us from continuing the debate on the Bill, may I issue one warning? The Tory wasps are beginning to swarm around our hive, which contains the devolution honey. Are we going to let the wasps have it, or shall we take the measure safely towards its logical conclusion? The logical conclusion is that we should debate it today and continue the debate thereafter.

At this stage, the aim of introducing the Bill is, of course, not to try to get it on the statute book; it is that we shall be able—in our own ways—to influence our parties and the programme that they propose for our re-election to the next Parliament. I emphasise that the Bill would not change the powers of Members in this Parliament; it will prevent a feeling of unfairness among voters in England and Wales who, as time goes on, will feel that, however great our devolution programme has been, it remains incomplete. Who better to complete that programme than those Labour Members who had the courage to initiate it?

4.33 pm

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): I beg to oppose the Bill. The proposal of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) is beguiling, even seductive. There is an implacable logic to his analysis.

The right hon. Gentleman is right to imply that, in their haste to head off, contain and discipline Scottish and Welsh nationalism, the Government have left unaddressed the question of the position of England. Given the existence of a Scottish Parliament, he is right that the position of Scottish MPs in the House is anomalous and, to some people, perhaps even provocative. He is right to accept that, just because a majority is, in general, tolerant and at ease with itself and its identity, its own rights should not be left unattended.

However, he is wrong in his prescription. He is wrong because his proposals would create two Parliaments within the one body—Parliaments with different majorities, different ambitions and competing and contested legitimacies. The proposal would create an English Parliament—a haphazard, accidental creation within the body of the UK Parliament.

There may be a case for an English Parliament, although I am not sure that I share the Arthurian reveries of some of the people who regularly gather to display the flag of St. George at the approach to this place. If there is to be an English Parliament, it must be a deliberately created one—apart and separate from this House; it must have an undisputed legitimacy so that this place is uncompromised as the forum for debating the British interest. The Parliament itself must be the creation of deliberate policy, not of procedural accident.

Create an English Parliament if you want one, Madam Speaker, and, if you like, put it in Winchester. Even better, put it in York. If you like, dare I say it, put it in Liverpool. But do not demean, denature and destroy this place by imposing on it an institutional schizophrenia. However much we pretend otherwise, we would also be creating an English Government—a sort of bastard Government not born in its own right.

Let us imagine a situation which the right hon. Gentleman has mentioned, where the withdrawal of Scottish MPs left a majority on English matters in the House different from that of the UK Government. One would then, necessarily, end up with a Government elected on a manifesto significant parts of which they could not deliver, and a competing Administration, unable to deliver their manifesto because they would not command the business of the House, and would therefore depend on the opportunistic hijacking of Government proposals.

The most persuasive claim made in support of our system of elections is that it delivers firm government. The proposal in the Bill to graft an English Parliament on to a UK Parliament with competing aims, programmes and majorities would spell incoherence at best and, literally, incompetence at worst. If we want an English Government, let us have a genuinely federal system, with four national Parliaments and Administrations, together with a UK-wide Parliament for non-devolved matters—not the disfigurement of this Parliament and the deliberate disabling of its Government.

I am English—according to my French wife, very English. I feel comfortable in my skin; I do not feel threatened, and although I might grumble about such

[Mr. David Curry]

things as per capita spending in Scotland when compared with that in England, I do not feel abused by the differential. I do think that we should beware of the dangers of the aggressive assertion of the English interest expressed as a political mechanism.

We English are not a minority in these islands; we do not have an identity to prove or a history to rescue. When a federation exists in which there is a massive disequilibrium between the size and weight of one of its components and the others, there is a particular responsibility on the dominant partner to behave with restraint.

I do not believe that the Union is at risk from Scottish nationalism if that nationalism is left to sustain its own momentum and renew its own energy, if it can; but give it the adrenalin of an assertive English nationalism against which to identify itself, and I do fear that we shall be providing the weapon for an assault on the integrity of the Union.

The politicisation of English nationalism will risk making the disequilibrium at the heart of our federation of UK nations, which devolution, however clumsily and self-interestedly, has sought to address, unsustainable. We do need to reflect on the nature of the Anglo-Scottish relationship, about which, to be honest, I am not even remotely sentimental. We have already, through devolution, created structures that need to negotiate with one another to co-exist—resulting in the plethora of concordats that lie at the heart of the relationship between the different parts of the United Kingdom. If we exclude Scottish MPs from our deliberations on purely English affairs—assuming that those can be isolated and defined, which I doubt—we go one stage further in putting intergovernmental relations at the heart of British governance. We shall appropriate the idea that the UK is made up of foreign countries. Worse, we could let loose forces which, if ruthlessly exploited, could makes us strangers to ourselves.

Question put, pursuant to Standing Order No. 23 (Motions for leave to bring in Bills and nomination of Select Committees at commencement of public business):—

The House divided: Ayes 131, Noes 190.

Division No. 242] **[4.39 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Dalyell, Tam
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Godman, Dr Norman A
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Tredinnick, David
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Wilshire, David
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Peter Atkinson and
Mr. Michael Connarty.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Casale, Roger
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chidgey, David
Church, Ms Judith
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Curry, Rt Hon David

Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davidson, Ian
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fearn, Ronnie
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hinchliffe, David
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hurst, Alan
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kingham, Ms Tess
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Mudie, George
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Quinn, Lawrie
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Sloate, Dr Howard
Stunell, Andrew
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Eleanor Laing and
Mr. Tom Brake.

Question accordingly negatived.

Orders of the Day

Limited Liability Partnerships Bill *[Lords]*

As amended in the Standing Committee, considered.

New Clause 2

RETURNS TO REGISTRAR

'.—(1) Each limited liability partnership shall make an annual return to the registrar setting out—

(a) all claims made against the partnership for work performed by it;

(b) a statement by the relevant regulator that the partnership has complied with the relevant regulatory framework in its field of business; and

(c) the average rate of pay for the partnership's employees in the top and bottom quartiles (in terms of remuneration).

(2) Any returns or reports made by limited liability partnerships to the registrar shall be made available for public inspection.'.—*[Mr. Mitchell.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

4.52 pm

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: New clause 4—*Report of regulatory infractions and censures*—

'.—Limited liability partnerships trading outside the United Kingdom shall report to the registrar all infractions of regulatory rules and all censures by regulators in other jurisdictions.'.

New clause 7—*Disclosure of emoluments*—

'.—Any limited liability partnership in which the amount of profit before member remuneration and profit share exceeds £200,000 shall publish details of director emoluments comparable in detail to those required of companies by Schedule 6 to the Companies Act 1985.'.

New clause 8—*Statement of assets, etc.*—

'. Each limited liability partnership shall, when filing annual accounts with the registrar, submit a statement showing—

(a) the value of the net assets of each partner; and

(b) whether any partner is at that time involved in litigation.'.

Amendment No. 19, in clause 6, page 3, line 35, at end insert—

'(2A) A statement of the scope of authority to act of each member shall be lodged with the registrar, displayed in all partnership offices and made available to clients.'.

Amendment No. 24, in clause 9, page 5, line 7, after "days", insert—

'giving full details of the address, financial and property interests and other trading activities of new designated members, and, in the case of those ceasing to be designated members, the reasons why they are leaving'.

Mr. Mitchell: Let me make it clear, as I did on Second Reading, that I do not like the Bill in any way. Essentially, it gives a dodgy, dirty deal to fat-cat accountancy practices, and that should not be the responsibility of the Labour party and a Labour Government. I find the speed with which the deal is being done even more reprehensible, when we are not making any special concessions to trade unions or friends of the party. Indeed, many of our party's friends in local government, education and the union movement are being treated as the enemy within, while we are giving a dirty deal to accountancy houses.

The big accountancy houses have been pushing for this Bill, and have gone to extreme lengths to get it. The process was begun by the Conservative Government, and while it is perfectly right for a Labour Government to pursue that process, it is not right to introduce the Bill at this speed and this early in the legislative programme without countervailing concessions.

As a prelude to the long list of amendments that I shall move, I say to the House that I am resentful of the way in which my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) and I have been treated. We wanted to be on the Standing Committee, but we were not, and it would have been appropriate to have argued all this out in Committee rather than on the Floor of the House, when another, welcome Bill follows and we are under great pressure to shut up. I do not think that things should be done like that. The Hansard Society is to have a committee on the scrutiny of legislation, and I shall write a case study in which the Bill is an example of how not to scrutinise legislation. Instead of giving you my paranoia, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall deal with the new clause.

The general principle behind all the new clauses and amendments that I have tabled is consumer protection and ensuring that more information can be made available to the consumers of audit and insolvency services and all the other services that accountancy houses provide, because the Bill will protect accountants from the consequences of their own failure. If they carry out a bad audit—which often comes to light only when a firm fails—because they are so busy selling other services to the firm that they neglect or dilute the audit, they should be accountable in full for the consequences. If an insolvency is protracted, which does not serve the interests of the creditors because the insolvency practitioner owes no duty of care to them, they should also be accountable in full.

We are making a concession to the big accountancy houses without introducing any effective, independent regulation of accountancy and insolvency firms. We promised in our business manifesto that we would have full, independent regulation. We are not fulfilling that commitment; via so-called independent regulation, we are, classically, merely adding yet another layer to the existing chaos of regulation. There are eight regulators for 1,800 practitioners in insolvency. That is absolutely ludicrous, yet we are adding another layer above those eight. We are not providing independent regulation.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): I was listening to the hon. Gentleman's argument with great interest, but I left the Chamber briefly to find out how he voted on Second Reading. Of course he did not vote because there was no Division. I wonder whether he is against the principle of the Bill. I shall ask him a hypothetical question: if there had been a Division, would he have voted against the Bill?

Mr. Mitchell: Probably I would have voted against the Bill on Second Reading, but there was no Division.

How would I have pursued the Bill's aims? As I said in my introductory remarks, during which the hon. Gentleman left to find out information that was obvious

to everyone else, it was right to pursue the Bill's aims because the Conservative Government—our predecessors—had started to develop such legislation. I am a Fabian in such matters. Festina lente is the slogan.

Let us make progress with the Bill while introducing corresponding concessions to protect consumer interests and a corresponding framework of legislation to ensure that those accountancy firms that opt to become limited liability partnerships are accountable. That is the essence of my argument. Protection for consumers means providing a duty of care, which I shall attempt to do under later amendments, and reversing the Caparo judgment.

The basic principle behind all the amendments and new clauses that I have tabled, especially in this group, is that there should be maximum publication and recording of the available information because partnerships are inherently secretive organisations. There can be many variations of partnership and individual agreements.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): What makes a partnership more secretive than a sole trader?

Mr. Mitchell: I am not comparing partnerships with sole traders. We are talking about bigger organisations than sole traders. The accountancy houses were allowed to set up as limited companies under the Companies Act 1989, but only one accountancy house did so. Why? First, there are tax disadvantages in becoming a limited company. Secondly, there are publicity disadvantages; they have to disclose more information. They do not want to disclose. They are secretive, powerful organisations.

I want more disclosure. I want more light; it is as simple as that. The consumer has a right to know. People who might be affected by the business or insolvency of limited liability partnerships have a right to know what their strengths and weaknesses are, so they should be subject to exactly the same disclosures as a public limited company, as was provided for in the Companies Act.

5 pm

Another consideration behind the amendments, particularly this group of amendments, is the need to avoid fraud and tax fiddles. It is possible for all kinds of dodgy organisations to register as limited liability partnerships. The words "dodgy organisations" bring to mind Yorkshire Water, now the Kelda Group. It is attempting to perpetrate what must be a deceit upon its shareholders: a process of so-called mutualisation to pass on assets that do not yield much profit to the shareholders. It will then offer itself as a management company to run the assets for a fee.

That must be a monstrous deceit of the consumer. One of my later amendments seeks to preclude it all together, saying that publicly regulated utilities should not have such a facility. I mention that in passing because the main problem is the use of those organisations to reduce the tax burden and to perpetrate fraud and tax fiddles. The transfer to limited liability status gives rise to that.

I am glad that the Minister, in his many answers to my many questions, communicated that fact. I have also written to the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the matter. Rightly, the tax regulation differences between partnerships and limited companies is now being reviewed. They should be aligned as closely as possible. Why are we pushing for the legislation to be implemented before that review has been completed? People need to know what the tax benefits or disadvantages may be. In my view, there could be disadvantages—or there should be—in transferring, so I do not want the legislation to be implemented before the tax review has ended.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman is presenting a powerful argument as to why he opposes the principle of the Bill. I understand where he is coming from, but I am a little confused in one respect. He said in answer to my earlier question that, had there been a Division, he probably would have voted against Second Reading. He makes it clear that he is against the principle of the Bill. Why, then, did he not call for a Division on Second Reading, so that he could vote?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I urge the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) not to be seduced into a Second Reading debate.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you for warning me, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was not going to follow the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) down the path of his ignorance of parliamentary procedure and the role of amendments on Report—the stage of the Bill's proceedings in which I am participating.

Mr. Fabricant: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether you could explain something to me and for the benefit of the House: am I not right that someone can call for a Division if he is a Member of the House?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That has nothing to do with the matter that is before the House.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Lichfield should not raise silly, querulous points during my speech. He would have done better to use his position on the Committee to raise some serious points there, instead of fighting to extend the vested interests and privileges of the big accountancy houses. That was the essence of what he was doing on the Standing Committee, which had only one Division, and in which Opposition Members promoted those vested interests. It is a little nitpicking, to say the least, of him to raise those points with me, having failed to fulfil his own responsibilities on the Standing Committee. However, I do not intend to follow that argument.

I was saying that the measure should not be implemented until the review of the tax status of partnerships and companies is completed; only then should it come into effect. I wish to raise many points and to warn off the hon. Member for Lichfield, who has interjected three times in an attempt to prolong my speech and who does not seem able to count, either. I point out that this argument is, in essence, about the consumer and about the soul of the Labour party and the Labour Government.

Conservative Members had their opportunity in Standing Committee and earlier to represent the views of the vested interests, and they did that very articulately. Indeed, Liberal Members, who are now engaged in hasty consultation at the last minute, also did that. It was a shame on Second Reading to hear the Liberal spokesman

[Mr. Mitchell]

speaking for professional vested interests when the only effective opposition in the House of Lords came from Liberal Democrats and particularly from Lord Phillips of Sudbury who appears on the Jimmy Young show.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is again distracting the House from the new clause that he is supposed to be moving. Will he please address his remarks to new clause 2 and to the other new clauses and amendments that we are legitimately discussing?

Mr. Mitchell: I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for bringing me back to the path of virtue.

Mr. Burnett: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Mitchell: I will not give way on this point, because I think I can anticipate the hon. Gentleman's objection. It will lead me down a path along which I do not want to go.

On new clause 2, Ministers said that limited liability partnerships would be treated as companies. In fact—and this is the purpose of the new clause—they have been treated more leniently. When a company prepares its accounts, it must indicate its contingent liabilities under accounting standard SS18, which accounts for contingencies. It is right that companies should do that, because anyone to whom a company owes money or supplies services will want to know its liabilities. To decide on the financial standing of a company, people need to know its contingent liabilities. That protects creditors and suppliers and it provides information to the public.

It is important to bring LLPs into line with companies, because partnerships have few assets. All the assets of a company are in its name, and creditors can try to get hold of them if it becomes insolvent. That is not so with a partnership, which tends to have few assets and the case has to be pursued against the negligent partner. I hope to come to the issue of how people will decide who is the negligent partner and how he will be designated, because such information should be available. However, creditors find that much less is up for grabs in a partnership than it is in a company. The two entities should be aligned with each other. Initially, we were told that they would be, but that has not occurred. New clause 2 would achieve that aim.

New clause 4 is about compliance with foreign rules. That is important. In the United States, the Securities and Exchange Commission—which is the most effective independent regulator in the world and the type of body that we should have in this country—is making a concerted attempt to force differentiation in the big accountancy houses between the audit arm and the service arm. If the audit arm sells services to its audit clients, that dilutes the effectiveness of the audit by making the firm more compliant to the wishes of the directors selling the services. That creates an undesirable vested interest if we are to have effective and independent audits. That shows the importance of complying with foreign rules. Such an attempt is being made in the United States, and it will come to fruition. Already, the SEC, which is not satisfied with professional self-regulation as it exists in the United States, has produced a scathing report on PricewaterhouseCoopers.

The interesting finding from the SEC inquiry was the amount of negligence that exists. In two years, there were 8,000 violations of basic principles of accountancy and audit, particularly partners and employees of PricewaterhouseCoopers holding shares in companies that were being audited by PricewaterhouseCoopers. Eight thousand violations! The report stated that there were

serious structural and cultural problems

in PricewaterhouseCoopers' compliance in these matters. In other words, the firm did not give a damn. It was negligent, there was a culture of laxness in the organisation, and it violated the rules of the industry. That report was an eye-opener to—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May I gently remind the hon. Gentleman that he has tabled new clause 3, which deals with the United States, the Securities and Exchange Commission and so on? I am happy for him to pursue his argument now, as long as he does not repeat it when he comes to new clause 3.

Mr. Mitchell: The matter is better dealt with now, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall mention it only briefly later.

That inquiry has extended to other firms, and there is a concerted attempt to prise the audit arms apart. We should be inquiring in the same way. In my view, the big accountancy houses are far too friendly with Government. I saw in *The Observer* on Sunday that since the election, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Ernst and Young, and Pannell Kerr Foster had all donated staff to the Treasury to draw up tax legislation. We do not have panels of criminals coming in to advise the Home Office on the criminal law or police methods, but in the case that I mentioned, the interested parties are being brought in to advise Government.

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Although my hon. Friend is perfectly right to put his case, is he entitled to say that the largest and most reputable accountancy firms in our country are criminals?

Mr. Mitchell: If my hon. Friend had listened—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman's remarks are not a matter for the Chair. They are a matter for the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Mitchell: If my hon. Friend had listened, he would know that I said that we did not get criminals in to advise the Home Office, and that it was ill advised to get interested parties in to advise the Treasury on tax law. The analogy is there. I am aware of my hon. Friend's interest in those accountancy houses. The point is valid, because the question will always be asked whether we are soft-pedalling on the need to regulate those bodies because of the services provided to Government.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): I have been listening with care to what the hon. Gentleman has been saying. It seems to be a rant against a particular firm, which does not necessarily do the House any credit. Would the hon. Gentleman be prepared to repeat what he has been saying outside the House, without the cloak of parliamentary privilege?

Mr. Mitchell: What a ridiculous question. If the hon. Gentleman had said that he had listened with interest,

I would have been overjoyed. If he is listening with a police notebook in his hand, the point is fatuous in the extreme. I have quoted the SEC's report on one particular company and the facts about the firms advising the Treasury. That is all that I have done. That is repeatable inside or outside the House. It is a matter of public record. I am sorry that we have to come down to such silly, nit-picking points in objection to the argument that large blocks of power need to be controlled and regulated, which is the responsibility of government.

5.15 pm

Mr. Burnett: I understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Does he believe that the Government should impose on the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales more stringent rules with which it can govern the affairs of its members?

Mr. Mitchell: I do not believe in professional self-regulation. Chaps regulating chaps is almost a British myth. The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales is a puny body when compared with the enormous power of the big five accountancy houses, whose fees run into a total of £4.5 billion a year. These are enormous concentrations of power. A small professional body cannot effectively regulate them, and so-called independent regulation, which we are proposing, will not regulate them properly either.

I shall move on to new clause 7, despite the interruptions from vested interests on the Opposition Benches. The Bill introduces some highly desirable changes, but accountancy houses enjoy a state guaranteed monopoly on insolvency and auditing. It is therefore right to regulate. I am glad that my hon. Friend the Minister gave the commitment that legislation will include a requirement for financial disclosure equivalent to that which is required of companies. The new clause deals with the disclosure of emoluments. The Minister told us—it is in the Bill—that limited liability partnerships will provide information in the notes to accounts about the aggregate amounts withdrawn or applied on behalf of members during the financial year. There is also the requirement to disclose the earnings of the highest paid member in cases where profit exceeds £200,000.

The figure of £200,000 comes from schedule 6 to the Companies Act 1985. That Act requires that information that is published should include emoluments, gains made by directors on the sale of share options and amounts paid to directors under long-tem incentive schemes. I hope that the Minister will tell us that the same categories will be covered in the requirements on limited liability partnerships, and that his estimate of £200,000 is based on the categories to which I have referred. Will LLPs be required to publish these details?

We all know that there is considerable disquiet about fat cats. The public need to know how much they are being paid. It is possible for limited liability partnerships to own limited companies. We would therefore have the ludicrous situation in which the limited company would have greater obligations to disclosure than the LLP parent of that company, which is exempt from much of that disclosure. That seems to be wrong.

I know that Opposition Members are not keen on disclosure of public information, but it is the public's right to know, especially when incomes have been accrued in pursuance of a publicly granted state-conferred monopoly in audit and insolvency.

New clause 8 is about more disclosure of the assets of each partner. Concessions are conferred on accountancy and other firms that are trading as LLPs. In the event of insolvency, the creditors can call on the assets of an LLP, which as I have said will not be substantial. It is more the assets of the negligent partner that are important. I return to the point which I broached earlier, which is how the public know which partner is responsible for the negligence. Who is the negligent partner against whom actions must be pursued? Knowledge of that might dissuade some clients from having dealings with that partner.

Customers should have access to that information. If existing claims against a partner are such that a further claim would take all his assets, the public need to know. How will they learn who is the negligent partner and whether other allegations of negligence have been made against individual partners of a limited liability partnership? People need to know who they are dealing with and what their status is.

We are talking about public provision of information to safeguard creditors, including information about individual partners' assets, against which claims can be made. We are limiting liability, so we need to know what the assets are. In the case of a company, shareholders' liability is limited to the extent of the paid-up shares, and the balance sheet lists the assets and liabilities for anyone to see; but the balance sheets published by LLPs will not give the creditors full and fair information. All I want is parity between the information published by LLPs and by limited companies. That seems fair.

Amendment No. 19 deals with registration and is designed to let us know what authority each member has to act.

Amendment No. 24 is again a matter of necessary public information for creditors and potential creditors about the financial standing of the LLP.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will respond to some of my points and clarify whether my arguments are valid.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) delivered quite a rant and proved his inability to count: I intervened twice, not three times. Some of his arguments, if not persuasive, raise interesting questions that the Minister should address.

It is a good idea in principle for the liability of large partnerships to be limited. In this modern age, partnerships can comprise 50, 100 or even 200 or 300 people—and in some instances, several thousand—and it is not practical to expect them all to have joint and several liability, but I tend to agree with the hon. Gentleman that, if the state is providing some protection, it should demand a quid pro quo and expect certain information from the partnership.

I do not go as far as the hon. Gentleman. Judging from their faces, not many Government Members would go that far. It is interesting to note the divisions on the Government side. The Government feel—and I agree with them—that there should be some protection in the form of limited liability, possibly echoing some of the protections that are available to companies under the Companies Acts. Should not limited liability partnerships also have to meet some of the obligations of disclosure in annual returns that are imposed on companies under the

[Mr. Fabricant]

Companies Acts? I would welcome an unemotional and non-ranting answer to that question—the Minister is known for his unemotional and accurate responses.

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): I share much of the frustration and irritation expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) at the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Apparently, the Bill is technical and rather obscure—of interest only to a few people who have a particular interest in some obscure points of law and commercial practice. Yet it advances an important innovation in British commercial law, which could well be taken up by many presently unlimited liability partnerships.

The hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) said that the Bill was targeted at the needs of large partnerships. He and the Government must recognise that a number of partnerships that are not large may seek the protection and advantage of limitation of liability. That ought to give the House cause for a little caution.

We find ourselves discussing this quite complex Bill, which advances an important new principle, between the excitement of a statement on the Post Office, which is important, and the even greater excitement of debate on the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill. That is not the ideal circumstance in which to be discussing such a matter. It inevitably imposes a good deal of pressure—I do not suggest in any way that it is external pressure—on those taking part in the debate.

Mr. Fabricant: Of course the hon. Gentleman is right that small as well as large partnerships may seek the protection that the Bill will offer when enacted. However, given that there is similar legislation in other parts of the world, does he fear that jobs might be lost if larger partnerships centred outside the United Kingdom, in countries that offer partners protection?

Mr. Cousins: Of course I shall come to that point, although I hope not to be tempted too wide of the new clauses and amendments.

The hon. Gentleman asked my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby whether, in principle, he accepted the idea of limitation of liability in partnerships. Were I to be asked that question, my answer would be yes; I have no difficulty with the limitation of liability in partnerships.

The Partnership Act 1890 has always been considered one of the most ideal pieces of legislation. It has endured for more than a century without any tampering with or amending of its essential form or principles. It has stood the test of time; it has the clear concept of joint and several liability.

However, the Act was framed when all partnerships were extremely small, the people were individually known to each other, and the reputation, efficiency and performance of the partners could be measured and tested by potential and actual partners. Any problems could be addressed immediately, simply and directly. We have moved on: we now have partnerships that consist not merely of thousands of partners but sometimes of tens of thousands of partners, in which such disciplines cannot apply.

5.30 pm

It may be right to offer the protection of limited liability to such partnerships, but—this point has already been discussed—the limitation of liability being offered here is not confined to such circumstances. Small partnerships can also take advantage of it. Therefore, we are considerably modifying the structure of the principle advanced in the 1890 legislation, and we should be properly cautious about that.

I am prepared to consider the principle of limitation of liability in partnerships, but we must consider whether this is the right moment to introduce such legislation. We still have the unfinished business of the Caparo judgment, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby rightly drew attention. Auditors appear to owe no significant legally meaningful duty of care to the shareholders in the enterprises that they serve.

Accountancy was done no favours by the Caparo judgment. It opened a hole in accountability and responsibility, which we are still puzzling how properly to fill. The present proposal to create an independent regulator for accountancy, but not a statutory one, in a way seeks to undo the damage that was done in the Caparo judgment.

One of my anxieties about the Bill is that until we can see the real strength of the framework being offered under independent regulation—the proposals that are now being worked up in front of us in the area of accountancy—it is difficult to know whether the Bill is appropriate and soundly formed. There must be a legitimate anxiety about that.

Furthermore, there have been a number of legal actions. Out of respect to my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Mr. Bell), I shall not start a cascade of prominent names and cause him some agitation lest important people in our commercial world be denounced. However, my hon. Friend must recognise that those people are suing each other. Such matters may all be settled out of court. One would not attempt to speculate about that, but it is entirely possible. However, if matters do come to court, the rehearsal of the evidence will provide some important information which can guide us in legislatures and help us deal with some of the issues that arise in partnerships if we begin to limit liability.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: I do not dispute what the hon. Gentleman says about accountants suing each other, but to put it in perspective, much of what is happening is probably driven by the insurance cover that those partnerships have, whereby they are required to pursue their interests. The insurers drive them to that. Part of the point of the Bill is that limited liability partnerships will, to some degree, obviate the need for that depth of insurance and the expense of it, which is ultimately passed on to clients and consumers.

Mr. Cousins: That raises more issues than it tidies up. It may be true that insurance is one of the drivers behind large accountancy firms suing each other over responsibility for the disappearance of what, it must be recognised, are hugely significant sums of money. The loss of that money has damaged thousands of individuals, voluntary organisations—in the case of BCCI, a large number of voluntary organisations—and enterprises. We are not talking about something that is of no significance; it is of profound significance.

The hon. Gentleman says that partnership firms are suing each other because of the insurance driver, and that such legal actions would not otherwise take place. That worries me. What are we doing in this legislation, offering an alternative source of cover to insurance cover that can now be purchased perfectly properly, and which is the basis of those legal actions? What will this legislation cause to be hidden that would otherwise be exposed?

Mr. Fabricant: I am following the hon. Gentleman's argument with considerable interest, but surely there is nothing in the Bill that prevents any client of an organisation that is perceived not to have acted properly from suing the limited liability partnership?

Mr. Cousins: I have already referred to the great difficulty there. The pressure for the legislation began in the accountancy partnerships, and although I entirely accept that far more than accountancy partnerships may seek to take advantage of it, in the accountancy world we come up against the great problems that my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and I have mentioned—the Caparo judgment and its rather unfortunate inheritance.

Against the background of the Caparo judgment, any legal action against an accountancy partnership faces the difficulty of having to overcome the consequences of that legal decision. That point does not apply to other kinds of partnership that might seek to take account of the legislation. I fully acknowledge that. However, the House knows that the driving influence in the introduction of the legislation came from those accountancy firms. That is a relevant point.

Mr. Burnett *rose—*

Mr. Cousins: I do not want to take up too much time. I know that there is a custom whereby people who want to talk at length always say that they do not want to detain the House, but on this occasion I really do not want to detain the House, so I shall be careful about taking interventions.

The hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) drew attention to the fact that there are legal jurisdictions close to Britain—the one that is always mentioned is Jersey—in which limited liability has already been carried into law. The Conservative Government's motive for wanting legislation in this form was the fear that people would relocate to such regimes to take advantage of limited liability.

All that has been overtaken by other events, in particular concerns about offshore legal and tax regimes, which provide unfair competitive advantage. That is a difficult and complex issue, into which I do not wish to stray this afternoon, but all will recognise that the Government have offered leadership to Europe in striking a deal on the withholding tax only a fortnight ago, and setting up a regime based on the exchange of information, which is a real, genuine and significant breakthrough in tackling such offshore regimes. Therefore, it might again be wise to see how all that develops before we advance as an argument for this legislation the fact that there may be competitive, more attractive jurisdictions elsewhere in which people might seek to locate. That is an argument for a little caution and delay.

All the new clauses concern disclosure and the importance of making information available, which will allow outsiders to form proper judgments about the good conduct and good management of any regime which has the advantage of limited liability.

New clauses 2 and 8 advance the principle of openness in the specific context of financial information. The creation of limited liability partnership regimes gives rise to a potential tax problem. The Government acknowledge that in their correct intention to remove both the possibility of improper tax avoidance and the use of a variety of legal vehicles to take advantage of tax planning possibilities and thus improperly avoid taxation. I expected an intervention at that point, but no one wishes to intervene, so I shall move on.

We are considering an important point. It would be extremely helpful if my hon. Friend the Minister could clarify the Government's discussions about the tax regime that accompanies the Bill, and the way in which that regime will work. The House would then be well informed.

New clause 7 attempts to deal with one of the issues that features in the Government's agenda for company law reform. Sadly, we shall not legislate on that agenda until after the next general election. Again, there is a question of timing. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister intends the full force of current company legislation to be exercised over limited liability partnerships. We cannot speculate on any future changes—the House is not the right forum or platform for indulging in such speculation—but we are all considering the matter, and it would be helpful if my hon. Friend could tell us that the Government intended to reflect future changes in company law in the liabilities for disclosure affecting limited liability partnerships.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby rightly said, new clause 4 attempts to deal with what goes on in other jurisdictional regimes. My hon. Friend rightly mentioned the work of the Securities and Exchange Commission in the United States, and its attempts to provide for a proper relationship between general accountancy work and the specific work of audit. It ensures that those two functions are not confused, and that no market abuse occurs when people use their economic power in one context to achieve economic advantages by sweeping up all the audit work. The Securities and Exchange Commission properly tries to deal with fair competition and market abuse.

There is no point in Opposition Members saying that the Securities and Exchange Commission will not affect us here; it has already affected us. We are considering global partnerships that engage in economic activities all over the world, which are caught by the actions of the Securities and Exchange Commission. It is fair to ask how we will tackle those issues. It would be unfortunate to be led down a road of competing jurisdictional regimes with barriers between them, and all sorts of intergovernmental disputes over the propriety of one action by a regulator in one country when compared with the different framework of rules in another country. We must try to avoid that.

5.45 pm

The Government have referred a general bundle of issues to the Office of Fair Trading. It has been asked to consider the way in which professional partnerships work,

[Mr. Cousins]

and the way in which demonstrable problems will be tackled. It would not be proper for my hon. Friend the Minister to direct the OFT's work; it would be wrong, and I do not ask him to do that. However, it would be proper for him at least to direct the OFT's attention to the matter so that it could perhaps ascertain methods of avoiding the possibility of conflict between jurisdictions, and of attempting to introduce in our regimes governing market abuse and fair competition some of the benefits that the Securities and Exchange Commission brings to regimes in the United States.

I have mentioned important underlying issues, which all give grounds for caution; they are reflected in the new clauses. I accept that Back-Bench amendments are not always framed well. However, I have outlined the purpose of new clauses 2, 8, 7 and 4. I hope that I have explained the reasons for them, and that my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to assist us in dealing with them.

Mr. Burnett: I declare at the outset that I am a solicitor and that I no longer practise. I used to specialise in taxation and, to some extent, partnership matters.

Any trade or profession can become a limited liability partnership provided that at least two persons—that includes companies—come together to form one. As has been said, the usual rules for joint and several liability are not applicable to limited liability partnerships. Nevertheless, it is worth putting it on record that an individual member of an LLP is liable in tort for his or her actions, if they are negligent or held to be negligent. The firm and all its assets are fully liable.

Disclosure should be at the heart of the Bill. I refer the House to my words on 23 May 2000 on Second Reading. I said:

> Finally, a fundamental principle of the Bill should be that the price for the limitation of liability is full disclosure of the financial affairs of a business and that such information should be readily available to the public.—[*Official Report*, 23 May 2000; Vol. 350, c. 907.]

I have not changed my mind. It would be in the interests of those who did not serve on the Committee, or who have not studied the matter as deeply as others, and for the convenience of the House, if the Minister set out clearly the disclosure obligations in the Bill.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Dr. Kim Howells): I am well aware of the concern of my hon. Friends the Members for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) and for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) about accountancy and its regulation in this country. They have made it clear that they believe that limited liability partnerships are a concession to the professions, especially the accountancy profession.

By tabling the new clauses, my hon. Friends are trying to use the Bill as a means of regulating the accountancy profession. As I said on Second Reading, I admire their tenacity and their concern for the reform of accountancy regulation. However, it is not the Bill's function to regulate professional activity. When regulation is believed to be necessary, the activity, not the LLP as an entity, will be regulated.

Time and deliberation were mentioned on several occasions. This Government and the previous Government have consulted on the detail of the Bill for at least four years. A long and intensive debate has therefore taken place about the proposals.

On the issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central about the investigation of the professions by the Office of Fair Trading, I share the views of my hon. Friends that the issue of auditor independence—in particular, the extent to which an audit firm should be able to provide a non-audited service to audit clients—is important. That applies not only in the US, where the SEC has made proposals to deal with the issue, but in this country.

The OFT is conducting a review of the professions that will focus on, among others, accountants and solicitors. Iam sure that the review will address the balance between competition and regulation in relation to the accountancy profession. That work provides an excellent opportunity to examine the concerns that my hon. Friends have raised about the ability of auditors to provide non-audit services. The comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central encourage me to ensure that those conducting the review are fully aware of those concerns, and I undertake to do so.

It has always been the intention that an LLP will have applied to it, through secondary legislation, requirements similar to those that are applied to a company. The amendments, if they were accepted, would add a heavy additional burden to LLPs in comparison with those of a company. I am strongly of the opinion that that is not the right approach.

New clause 2 would add a substantial extra burden on an LLP in comparison to a company, and it would be manifestly unfair to require such extra requirements on an LLP. There are no Companies Act requirements for a company to set out any claims made against it for work done, nor does it need to have a statement from its regulator stating that it has complied with the relevant regulatory framework. In addition, I do not see what would be gained by giving details of employee pay, which should be a matter between the employee and the LLP.

Under section 709 of the Companies Act 1985, any person may inspect the records kept by the registrar, and that section will be applied to LLPs. New clause 4 would impose a burden on LLPs trading outside the UK that goes beyond the requirements imposed upon a company or a partnership. It is not the role of the registrar of companies to list infractions of regulatory rules, either in the UK or in other jurisdictions. It is a matter of policy for the regulatory body concerned to decide whether infractions should be reported. I shall try to return to that issue, because my hon. Friends raised some interesting points.

New clause 7 would require an LLP to publish details similar to the details of director emoluments that are required by schedule 6 of the Companies Act 1985. That issue was addressed by the Trade and Industry Committee, which agreed that there was no reason why the Department should revisit the issue of the disclosure of the highest paid members' drawings. I do not believe that making available any further details of members' drawings would add anything. All LLPs will need to provide information on the aggregate amounts withdrawn or applied on behalf of members during the financial year

in the notes to the balance sheet. That is in addition to the requirement to disclose the earnings of the highest paid member in firms where profit—before member remuneration and profit shares—exceeds £200,000. The disclosure of that information will allow potential creditors to take a view on how the LLP is being managed and whether members are making excessive withdrawals.

New clause 8 would require the annual accounts of the LLP to include a statement that would show the value of the assets of each partner and whether that partner was involved in any litigation. I share my hon. Friends' aspirations for greater transparency and this central issue is being examined by the independent company law review, which will make—I trust—some insightful and radical proposals.

As an LLP is a separate legal entity, we envisage that third parties will contract with the LLP rather than the member. For that reason, it is important that potential clients of the LLP are aware of the assets of the LLP and it is why we have applied the financial disclosure requirements for companies to LLPs. I do not believe that the disclosure of the net assets of members will add to creditor protection. Nor do I believe that providing information on whether a member is involved in litigation is right, because providing such information could be detrimental both to the individual and the LLP. The member should be seen as an individual separate from the LLP. I strongly believe that the new clause would be unfair and would go against our stated policy of having comparable treatment for LLPs and companies.

I see no reason why a statement of the authority to act of each member needs to be lodged with the registrar of companies and to be made available to clients, as suggested in amendment No. 19. It goes beyond what is required of directors of a company or of partners in a partnership. The Bill states in clause 6 that every member of the LLP is an agent of the LLP. A potential client will be able to find out who the members and designated members are, and details of the financial background of the LLP and any charges on the LLP will be available from Companies House. I am happy to inform my hon. Friends that we require designated members to give details of their addresses when they are appointed as designated members. That follows the requirements for the appointment of directors.

On the question of taxation, which my hon. Friends raised, I said on Second Reading that even though we believe that it is right to tax LLPs as partnerships, we are aware that, in some cases, the primary or only attraction of LLP status might be the tax treatment. As a result, we are considering the issue carefully with the Inland Revenue. Depending on our conclusions, legislation may be brought forward in the Finance Bill in 2001. We would, however, consult widely before legislating.

I emphasised that our intention was not to undermine the commercial certainty of the taxation treatment of LLPs for those businesses for which LLP status was intended, and I recognise that that might happen. I know that my hon. Friends are concerned about that point—both about the possible deterrent factor it might have, and about the uncertainties that would exist for those who take the plunge to become LLPs. I share the concerns that they have raised about companies that wish to become LLPs and about the need for greater clarity about the taxation implications of such a transformation. Indeed, the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) raised similar points in Committee.

I am of the view, therefore, that it is appropriate to await the outcome of the review before commencing the LLP legislation, so that anyone wishing to become an LLP may be certain of what tax treatment it can expect. I do not expect that, in practice, that will cause delay, because our expectation was that LLPs would not be available before early 2001. Clearly, were there to be legislation in next year's Finance Bill, we would need in any case to be certain of our intentions by that stage.

My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby raised concerns about the prospect of water companies using LLPs as a means of running not-for-profit mutualised companies. That is a novel idea that has suddenly emerged on the scene since several water companies decided that they cannot make profits out of supplying water. My hon. Friend expressed concern about the intention of the owners of one particular company—Yorkshire Water—to split it in two and sell its physical assets to a non-profit-making mutual company. In that context, a statutory undertaking under the Water Industry Act 1991 must be a company limited by shares and could not be a limited liability partnership. It is perhaps also worth noting that anyone wishing to become an LLP must be carrying on a lawful business with a view to making profit. An LLP is therefore not available as an option for non-profit-making organisations.

6 pm

The hon. Members for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) and for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) raised the general question of disclosure, and my hon. Friends the Members for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central and for Great Grimsby made a number of valuable and interesting proposals in respect of disclosure requirements for limited liability partnerships. It is, however, difficult to accept those proposals simply in relation to LLPs without considering corresponding application to companies.

It is our aim, as far as is possible, to keep the disclosure requirements for LLPs in line with those for companies and—I hope that this addresses the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central—to ensure that changes in circumstances and what those changes might generate in terms of demands for disclosure are allowed for within the remit and the report of the independent company law review.

As I said earlier, the provision of information by companies is one of the key themes of the company law review that the Government set up two years ago. The review has already published proposals which would change quite radically some of the disclosure requirements. This therefore provides the best opportunity for many years for my hon. Friends' ideas to be considered.

It is our intention that changes which are made to companies following the company law review should then be applied to LLPs to the maximum extent possible. Given those reassurances, I very much hope that my hon. Friends will withdraw their amendments.

Mr. Mitchell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister and I shall try to save what is left of my career by gibbering that gratitude to him for a little while. He has

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given us some substantial assurances. First, I particularly like the assurance that the Kelda Group—formerly Yorkshire Water—will not be able to get away with what I thought was a possible subterfuge by registering as an LLP. I am grateful for that assurance, although it was not made in relation to this group of amendments.

Secondly, I am grateful for my hon. Friend's substantial assurance that the Bill will not come into effect until the tax review is completed. That is important as it will enable people thinking of setting limited liability partnerships to know from the recommendations of that review what the tax regime will be. That is a substantial advance in our argument.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) and I have been entertaining the House with our nice guy, nasty guy double act—

Mr. Cousins: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I think that my hon. Friend meant to imply that I was the nice guy.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is not a matter for the Chair.

Mr. Mitchell: Of course my hon. Friend is the nice guy.

Thirdly, my hon. Friend the Minister's assurances on disclosure and bringing partnership law and safeguards into line with those that apply to limited companies through the company law review has given us the incentive to make submissions along the lines of the arguments that we have put before the House. We shall consider doing that in respect of both sets of provisions. That is another substantial point.

Fourthly, my hon. Friend assured us that the Office of Fair Trading review will be looking at these matters and I am sure that it will take into account fair competition considerations in respect of the sale of other services.

We are grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister for those substantial advances and we feel that we have achieved something in very difficult circumstances. Although Opposition Members tried to heckle us—in particular, they tried to heckle me rather than my statesmanlike hon. Friend—we were only doing the job of scrutiny that the Opposition singularly failed to do. Instead, they simply pressed for further concessions for the vested interests.

We have been doing a job of scrutiny under a handicap. As the Bill originated in the House of Lords, it will not be returning there for further amendment. I am grateful for the four substantial concessions that my hon. Friend has given us and I realise they are all that we shall get at this stage. I do not think that it should have been done in this way, but as it has we are grateful to my hon. Friend for the concessions that he has made. As I am a realist, I shall withdraw the motion and give notice that my hon. Friend and I shall not be moving any of the other amendments in our names. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: As the hon. Member for Great Grimsby has said that he does not intend to move his later amendments, we now move on to amendment No. 1, in the name of the official Opposition.

Clause 5

RELATIONSHIP OF MEMBERS ETC.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): I beg to move amendment No. 1, in page 3, leave out lines 22 and 23 and insert—

> (b) subject to paragraph (a), by the rules and principles which would apply if the law relating to partnerships applied to them.'.

Neither of these are relevant interests, but I remind the House that I am a chartered accountant, so I ask hon. Members to go easy on the language that they use against chartered accountants and others. Also, I do not currently practice, but I contribute six or seven articles a year to *Accountancy Age*.

Having sat through the debate on the new clauses tabled by the hon. Members for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) and for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins), I feel as though I am intruding on private grief. If the Labour party can tear itself apart on a relatively technical measure like this one, one can only wonder what machinations, discussions and divisions are taking place behind the scenes on issues of wider concern, such as Labour's failure to deliver on the national health service, education and crime.

Mr. Cousins: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we have had a most comradely exchange with the most comradely outcome. I should like to put that on record.

Mr. Gibb: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I am sure that it was comradely, but none the less Labour Members were split.

This is an important Bill which has had several layers of scrutiny. As the Minister said, it began life under the Conservative Government, but when it eventually began its passage through the other place, despite scrutiny and a report by the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, it still contained a number of problems.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby was wrong to say that the Opposition did not give the Bill considerable scrutiny. My noble Friend Baroness Buscombe and I discussed our concerns in great detail with the Minister, Lord McIntosh, and owing to pressure in the other place by my noble Friend and a reasonable approach taken by the Minister, many of our concerns were dealt with by Government amendments. Indeed, had the Government taken such an approach on some of their more controversial legislation, they would not be in their current position in regard to credibility with the public.

There are nevertheless some remaining concerns which we raised in Committee and which the Government have not dealt with adequately. Our first concern is that of the so-called default provisions. Clause 1(5) of the Bill states:

> except as far as otherwise provided by this Act or any other enactment, the law relating to partnership does not apply to a limited liability partnership.

The reason for that provision is, according to the Government, that as an LLP is a legal person in its own right and is therefore a body corporate; in general,

partnership law should not apply; and company law should apply instead. However, the very essence of an LLP remains that of a partnership.

It was in order to retain the partnership ethos that professional firms have sought this form of incorporation rather than becoming companies proper. An LLP will still have what is in effect a partnership agreement regulating all the internal relations of a partnership; but particularly for smaller, less well advised partnerships which seek to become LLPs, it could well be that the internal partnership agreement will not have clauses that deal with every eventuality to be faced by a partnership in business.

In the past, this would not have mattered. The Partnership Act 1890—and the century of case law since—have filled in the gaps regarding almost every conceivable eventuality. Future case law, based on precedent and the principles established in earlier cases, would deal with future eventualities. Those matters may include the right of partners to examine the books and records, the right to take part in the management of the partnership, and questions regarding the expulsion of members.

Those issues may be dealt with adequately in the partnership agreement, but they may not be. Short agreements for smaller partnerships drafted when it was understood that general partnership law would apply may well not include many important provisions.

The amendment would provide that the law with regard to the internal arrangements of an LLP should default to general partnership law. Its wording has simply been lifted from an earlier draft of the Bill. The removal of the provision from the final Bill has aroused widespread concern.

That concern was such that the Government entered into a separate consultation exercise on the specific question of the default provisions. The views of many consultees were summed up in the Government's response document. One paragraph voiced the general concern, stating that

> in the absence of an adequate agreement between the members of a Limited Liability Partnership, the relationship between members would be uncertain; there was a strong desire that partnership law should govern the rights and duties of the members of the Limited Liability Partnership . . . partnership law is well understood by partnerships and practitioners, with the principles established over many years.

That was also the view of the Law Society, which stated:

> The Society was concerned with clause 1(5) which disapplies partnership law from limited liability partnerships unless otherwise provided in the Bill. The Society has always considered there to be the need for some default provisions that would operate in the absence of agreement to the contrary within an LLP and which would cover certain basic matters relating to the mutual rights and duties of the members of an LLP.

The Law Society accepted that the Government had amended the Bill to insert one or two of the partnership law provisions in the regulations. However, it is inevitable that some areas will not be covered by the exhaustive and specific list that the Government have included in the regulations and, as always with this Government, it is small business that will suffer. Big, well advised partnerships will be fine, but yet again the Government are creating a complex regulatory regime that puts a premium on being well advised.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby complained about advisers' incomes, but the pressure for greater regulation is created by him and those who share his philosophy. Someone has to read, understand and remember the regulations for which the hon. Gentleman continually presses. That will lead to greater demand for expert advice, and therefore higher salaries for those prepared to do that work.

The amendment would reduce the premium for expert advice by making the regime simpler.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): My sole reservation about LLPs has to do with negligence on the part of professional firms. For example, the negligence policy of a firm of accountants that becomes an LLP may not deal with any negligence created. That has been the case in certain recent takeovers. In the old days, one could at least sue the partners to make up the shortfall on the negligence cover, but that does not seem to be the case now.

Mr. Gibb: The hon. Gentleman raises a point that goes to the heart of the Bill. The aggrieved person can still sue the partner or partners involved in preparing the negligent work. However, why should the law for people in the accountancy or legal professions be different from that covering people in the medical profession, such as nurses? They work for the health service but are not subject to losing all the assets that they have built up over a lifetime.

It is not a matter of fat cats. There are 120,000 chartered accountants in this country. Most of them could never be described as fat cats, and they live under the constant threat that they will lose their lifetime assets because of the negligence of another partner. The Bill goes a long way towards solving that problem, and it is welcome for that reason.

Mr. Bermingham: There is a world of difference between a partnership in a garage business and one involving accountants, estate agents, solicitors or surveyors. The difference is simple: the first provides a service, whereas the professionals provide advice. If the advice is wrong, the damages can be massive. If the service is wrong, the damages are much smaller.

6.15 pm

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that hon. Members are straying into Second Reading points. The hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) should address his remarks to the amendment.

Mr. Gibb: I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I do not believe that the distinction offered by the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) is valid. Advice and services are very similar, in the sense that one either provides a service or advises someone else about it. That similarity crosses all professional boundaries and is not confined to law and accountancy.

The amendment would reduce the Bill's complexity. Even at this late stage, I hope that the Minister will relent and accept, if not its wording, then at least its principles.

Mr. Burnett: I shall not go over material discussed on Second Reading and in Committee, but I was a senior partner in a large firm for more than 20 years and I know how important it is—for the clients and customers of a partnership, as well as for the members of that partnership—to ensure that the partnership ethos is

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preserved. It is important that a duty of good faith should exist between the partners, as that is in the interests of clients and customers.

I strongly support the amendment. The Partnership Act 1890 is a good Act, as was said earlier. It provides certainty and simplicity, and will provide some continuity. Simplicity is extremely important, especially for small businesses that cannot afford the advice. They will not necessarily know of the existence of regulations passed by the House.

I hope, even at this late stage, that the Government will remember the interests of small firms and think again on this matter. The fall-back position should be provided by the 1890 Act: it has stood the test of time and is supported by a large body of case law.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): Is not one of the limitations of the 1890 Act the fact that it presupposes that ownership, profit sharing and decision making are all in step with each other? In a modern partnership, is it not possible that distinctions may need to be made between who owns, who makes decisions, and who makes profits?

Mr. Burnett: As usual, the hon. Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) is correct and makes a good point. However, he knows that it is open to the parties who create a partnership under the 1890 Act to vary the profit-sharing and ownership proportions. They can do so with remarkable simplicity. Although they will have to consider the tax implications of such an action, it is the Act's simplicity that is so important.

It is vital that small businesses do not have to fall back on the more tortuous and complicated Companies Act 1985. I understand that there must be intricate provisions under that Act relating to disclosure, and that the Insolvency Act 1986 also has a part to play. Even so, for the reasons that I have given, the 1890 Act is an excellent piece of legislation and should not be rashly discarded in the way that the Government propose.

Dr. Howells: I acknowledge the very proper concern expressed in the amendments in the name of the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb), and the support given by the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett). I will try to give the amendments the respect that they deserve, because there is no question but that this is an important point. However, I will explain why I will be resisting the amendments—much to the disappointment, I know, of the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton.

Throughout the Bill's passage, there has been a great deal of debate about partnership law and its application, or non-application, to limited liability partnerships. A general application of partnership law to LLPs, very similar to what is proposed in amendment No. 1, was contained in the draft Bill published in September 1998. Subsequently, we took the decision to remove it. Nothing has yet led us to conclude that we were wrong to do so, and we remain opposed to any attempt to reintroduce it. Let me explain why.

As the hon. Gentleman informed us, the main point is that an LLP is a body corporate, while a partnership is not. That is a fundamental difference. So because a limited liability partnership will be a legal entity separate from its members, its clients will be able to enter into contracts with the LLP itself, not the members. An LLP will also be able to hold property. In addition, because of its separate legal status, an LLP will continue until it is formally wound up, no matter what changes occur in its membership.

A partnership, however, exists only because the partners are carrying on business together, and it has no separate life of its own. Contracts are between third parties and the partners themselves, and changes in partners will cause the partnership to dissolve, although the partners can make specific arrangements to prevent that from happening.

Many of the provisions of the Partnership Act 1890 would be inappropriate for an LLP. Sections 1 to 4 deal with the nature of the partnership. They are of no relevance to limited liability partnerships, because the nature of an LLP is set out in the Bill. Sections 5 to 18 deal with the relations of partners to persons dealing with them. Again, they are of no relevance to limited liability partnerships because clause 6 deals with this for LLPs. Sections 19 to 31 deal with the relations of partners to one another. Only eight of those sections are appropriate to LLPs. The others deal with partnership property, for example, which is inappropriate for an LLP because property can, and is likely to, be held by the LLP, not the members. They deal also with retirement, which is dealt with in clause 4.

Sections 32 to 44 of the 1890 Act deal with the dissolution of a partnership and its consequences. These sections would be inappropriate for an LLP, because it will be a separate body corporate, and winding up will be dealt with by application of insolvency legislation, as the hon. Gentleman hinted. Finally, sections 45 to 50 are supplemental.

So of the 50 sections of the 1890 Act, only eight are relevant or appropriate to LLPs. We intend to apply appropriately modified versions of these eight sections to LLPs by way of regulation to govern the relationship between members where there is no agreement. Yet the amendment suggests that all 50 sections are relevant, when clearly they are not.

The amendment would also apply the general law relating to partnerships. Again, that has been developed with regard to partnerships, not bodies corporate. In particular, over the years the general law has developed the duties owed between partners. We believe that application of these duties to an LLP would be problematic. The existence of the limited liability partnership as a separate legal entity means that members will owe duties to the LLP itself. That is not the case in a partnership. Thus a general application of partnership law could leave members of an LLP facing concurrent duties—duties owed to the LLP, and duties owed to each other. There would be no indication of which duty took priority were there to be a conflict.

The hon. Gentleman helpfully set out in Committee the extent to which the Government have fuelled the debate.

Initially, in response to consultee concerns, we established a small working group of officials and representatives from the profession to consider the options. Discussion ranged over all the points that I have raised, and the conclusion was that the preferred solution was to apply default provisions dealing with the eight relevant sections of the 1890 Act that I have mentioned instead of a blanket application of partnership law.

We went out to consultation on this in February. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman remembers that full well—we said it often enough. The response was in favour of the approach that the Government have adopted. The consultation paper also dealt with the question of whether we should impose a duty of good faith as between members. As I explained in some detail in Committee, we eventually decided against such a duty, although nothing in the legislation would prevent members of a limited liability partnership including such a duty in their membership agreement if they so wished.

Finally, perhaps I might comment on the two main arguments made by those in favour of a general application of partnership law. First, they argue that partnership law is well understood and that the Partnership Act 1890 is a model of simple and elegant legislation. However, as I have said, partnership law is not just the 1890 Act, but an extensive body of general law. This is not simple, even for experts. There are a number of complicated and sometimes vexed issues, which is why the Law Commission is currently reviewing partnership law.

Next, it is argued that it is difficult to see how the expressed intention to create an entity that combines partnership ethos with limited liability can be achieved without applying partnership law. However, the LLP legislation remains silent on the relationship between members, so as to ensure that there is freedom for members in each LLP to develop provisions appropriate to their specific circumstances. It is that flexibility which those partnerships that are planning to convert to a limited liability partnership are keen to see preserved in the new entity, and we believe that that is what will preserve the partnership ethos.

I remain unconvinced that amendment No. 1 is necessary or suitable. I very much hope that the hon. Gentleman will see fit to withdraw it.

Mr. Gibb: That was a useful exchange of arguments that we first rehearsed in Committee. I cannot claim to have heard the four concessions from the Minister which the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) imaginatively construed from the Minister's first response. I had hoped that the Minister might, at the last moment, give small businesses some concessions, so he will not be surprised to hear that I am disappointed, although not surprised, at his response. On that note, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: As the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) does not intend to move several of his amendments, we now proceed to amendment No. 7.

Clause 15

APPLICATION OF COMPANY LAW ETC

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): I beg to move amendment No. 7, in page 10, line 15, after "to", insert—

'bodies corporate recognised by the Law Society under section 9 of the Administration of Justice Act 1985,'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 8, in page 10, line 17, after "to", insert—

'bodies corporate recognised by the Law Society under section 9 of the Administration of Justice Act 1985,'.

No. 4, in page 10, line 22, at end insert—

'(2) For the purposes of this section any law relating to bodies corporate recognised by the Law Society under section 9 of the Administration of Justice Act 1985 shall be deemed to be a law relating to companies or other corporations'.

Mr. Burnett: We discussed in Committee a new clause that contained proposals fairly similar to those in amendments Nos. 7, 8 and 4. Unfortunately, due to a technical hitch, I am now told that solicitors might not be able to set up as LLPs—at least, not as soon as other professions. The Minister was helpful in Committee, and was anxious that solicitors were not discriminated against.

There is a large body of legislation that makes reference to solicitors which will need amending in the light of this Bill. The Law Society was led to believe that this could be achieved by making regulations under clause 15, and that is what I have sought to do. However, I understand that the Law Society has been told that the Minister's Department believes that it may lack the power to make these regulations.

This has led to some confusion, and the Government clearly still intend solicitors to take advantage of this new business entity. Indeed, the Minister assured me in Committee that solicitors would not be penalised or discriminated against in any way. I hope that the Minister can put my concerns at rest.

6.30 pm

However, there is still concern in the Law Society about how the Government will ensure that solicitors are not discriminated against. The Minister suggested in Committee that it might require primary legislation, but what chance is there of a dedicated solicitors Bill before this Bill comes into force in 2001? I understand that another option might be to use orders under the regulatory reform Bill, but that Bill is still in draft. When can we be certain that it will receive Royal Assent in any event? It may be that the necessary changes can be made by using existing powers within the body of legislation affecting solicitors and their practices, such as the Solicitors Act 1974 and the Administration of Justice Act 1985. However, the Law Society is doubtful whether that can be achieved, and I believe that the Department of Trade and Industry also has concerns.

It is surely the neatest solution to use clause 15 to make the necessary changes, in accordance with the three amendments that we are discussing. Even though the DTI recently voiced doubts, the Law Society still believes that the powers in the Bill are adequate, although I understand

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that we are waiting for parliamentary counsel to confirm that. I hope that the Minister will let us have his views on that point. The amendment would simply make the power more explicit.

I know that the Minister is extremely concerned about this problem. He assured me in Committee that no discrimination or prejudice would be suffered by the solicitors' profession as a result of the introduction of this legislation. In other words, all trades and professions should be treated equally and must equally be able to become LLPs in 2001. Many thousands of individuals who make a great contribution to the United Kingdom economy wait to hear from the Minister his response to the group of amendments.

Dr. Howells: I rise with appropriate gravity, knowing that thousands of solicitors out there are hanging on my every word. I restate my determination that solicitors will not be discriminated against when it comes to their ability to form LLPs. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear of the progress that we have made on this issue since we discussed it in Committee. I said then that my Department was working with the Law Society and the Lord Chancellor's Department to examine the detail of the legislation governing solicitors and consider whether primary legislation was unavoidable and, if so, to determine what specific changes needed to be made.

On the basis of the analysis carried out by the Law Society and the Lord Chancellor's Department to date, we believe that the vires contained in the Bill are wide enough to make the amendments that have been so far identified by regulation to ensure that solicitors may make use of LLPs. Assuming that no further amendments are considered necessary that differ in kind to those already identified, the amendments will be included in the regulations to be made under the Limited Liability Partnerships Bill when it receives Royal Assent. I see no advantage in the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett), and I invite him not to press them.

Mr. Burnett: I am much comforted by the Minister's words. I am grateful to him for the attention that he has given to this important matter. I note his comment that his Department, the Lord Chancellor's Department and the Law Society believe that the vires are wide enough in the Bill as drafted, and in the regulation provisions in clause 15. On that basis, I am happy to beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Gibb: I beg to move amendment No. 2, in page 10, line 22, at end insert—

'(2) Section 458 of the Companies Act 1985 (punishment for fraudulent trading) shall apply to limited liability partnerships.'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 3, in page 10, line 22, at end insert—

'(2) No regulations made under subsection (1) above shall enable indictable criminal offences punishable by imprisonment to be made applicable to limited liability partnerships, other than those which are contained in the Companies Act 1985 and Insolvency Act 1986 as at 1st June 2000.'.

No. 11, in clause 17, page 10, leave out lines 31 and 32.

No. 6, in schedule, page 15, line 15, leave out—

'incorporated as a limited liability partnership with that name.'

and insert—

'a limited liability partnership or oversea limited liability partnership.'.

Mr. Gibb: During a debate earlier this afternoon, we heard from the hon. Members for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) and for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) about the vast salaries that some lawyers and accountants are able to command, but I should tell them that they are responsible for those high salaries. The growing body of rules and regulations emanating from this place that have to be obeyed by people in the real world is the cause of those high salaries. The left-wing interventionist philosophy of the hon. Gentlemen and their party creates the pressure for the vast majority of regulations.

When I started work as a tax adviser in 1986 at KPMG, or Peat Marwick Mitchell and Co., as it was then, the tax legislation was contained in one volume of "Butterworths", and it was not a particularly thick volume. Now there are three volumes, each bigger than the 1986 one and printed on thinner paper. The tax practice grew hugely during that period as the volume of tax legislation increased, and the same has happened to company law and no doubt a whole host of other areas of law. I know that most of the increase took place under the Conservative Government, but the pressure for regulation tended to come from the left-wing philosophy in our political regime, although much of the tax legislation was introduced in order to close loopholes.

The consequence is that the demand for people who have read, learned, remembered and understood our legislation is increasing. Although the supply of people prepared to do that kind of work has increased to a degree, the work is painstaking and not terribly exciting. So demand has outstripped supply and the people with experience and ability are now commanding high salaries. The responsibility lies not with the City firms—with KPMG or PricewaterhouseCoopers, which the hon. Member for Great Grimsby kept going on about—but with us in this place.

We pushed through vast volumes of new rules and tried to make it even easier for ourselves by pushing large chunks into secondary legislation, which often are not debated. When they are debated, it is done upstairs in Committee without the possibility of tabling amendments. We are becoming a conveyor belt, mass-producing legislation that we expect people to obey. We deem them to have knowledge of all the laws that we pass. Then some Members of Parliament have the audacity to complain that society is devoting too many resources to reading and applying that legislation.

The Bill is a classic example of how a simple 19-clause Bill can spawn a volume of regulations. Four clauses of the Bill simply empower the Government to create new swathes of regulations contained in a volume the size of the copy that I have here. Clause 16 is a classic Henry VIII clause, and it even provides power to make regulations that themselves can amend primary legislation. There will be no First or Second reading, no tedious Committee stage, Report or Third Reading. The primary legislation will simply be amended by a statutory instrument rubber-stamped by a Committee upstairs.

Throughout the Committee proceedings, when the Opposition have raised concerns—the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) shares our concern—about the quantity of secondary legislation, the answer from the Minister was that it was better to use secondary legislation because it was easier to amend. That is the point. We must make it harder, not easier to amend and create new regulations. Some £10 billion of additional regulatory burdens have been piled on to industry in just the past three years. Small business in particular is drowning under the deluge of paperwork. We are becoming a nation of inspectors and regulators instead of shopkeepers and entrepreneurs.

The House of Lords Select Committee on Delegated Powers and Deregulation carried out its duties well when it examined the Bill. It alerted Parliament to the fact that clause 16 is a Henry VIII provision, and we ought to take notice of that, not simply ignore it, as the Government did in Committee. The Select Committee was set up to highlight Henry VIII provisions.

The report also highlighted the Committee's concerns about the use of secondary legislation to create new serious criminal offences. In paragraph 8, the Committee says:

> The draft regulations create offences punishable on summary conviction by a fine but the power is wide enough to allow the regulations to provide for imprisonment or for trial on indictment. If, as seems likely, the intention is to provide only for summary trial and a fine, the Committee is of the opinion that it would be better for this limitation to appear in the Bill.

In other words, the Committee assumed that the power was intended to create only minor offences. Its members felt that that was acceptable, but they were alarmed that the way in which the clause was drafted could enable the creation of more serious offences. They thus recommended that the Government should change the clause so as to reduce the power and to confine it only to minor criminal offences.

The Government refused to do so, however. They insisted on the need to incorporate all the existing criminal penalties under the Companies Acts and under insolvency legislation in the LLP regime. That may be fair enough, but it should be done through primary legislation, not by statutory instrument. The amendments would do precisely that: they would incorporate in primary legislation the serious criminal provisions that the Government want to include.

In Committee, something more sinister was revealed: clause 17 is not merely about incorporating in the LLP legislation the criminal provisions under existing company and insolvency law; it is also about enabling new criminal offences to be created by secondary legislation. The Minister said that

> it is important to preserve the flexibility to create offences in future and to decide how they should be punished . . . There may be new crimes for which we shall have to formulate new punishments.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee F*, 15 June 2000; c. 63.]

There we have it: new crimes and punishments created by secondary legislation. That is wrong. The Minister knows that it is wrong. The House of Lords Committee on Delegated Powers and Deregulation knows that it is wrong. That Committee was set up in 1992 with a specific responsibility: to point out to Parliament when such matters are wrong. The Minister should take note of the Committee's views and accept our amendments.

Mr. Stuart Bell: I declare an interest as a barrister at law, as an adviser to Ernst and Young and as a contributor to *Accountancy Age*.

Amendment No. 6 is technical; it may seem minor, but it is important for those firms affected by the provisions and by those with whom they do business. It will mean that the British branch of an oversea limited liability partnership will be able to continue to use a name that concludes with the words "limited liability partnership", "LLP" or their Welsh language equivalents. As drafted, the Bill would make it an offence for people to describe themselves as a limited liability partnership or LLP unless they were incorporated in this country.

The pace of change in the global village is such that, sometimes, the drafting of legislation has difficulty keeping up. That is the case for the Bill. Its present wording would cause problems for all those LLPs that are registered in another jurisdiction, but have a place of business in the UK. It is to the credit of the Government, of Ministers and of the Department of Trade and Industry that they realised that such problems would be caused. I hope that they will look benevolently on my amendment.

It is thought that, for example, there are at least 30 United States law firms with LLP status that have an office in London. Their LLP status shows why the Bill is welcome; it allows British firms to compete on the same basis. The presence of such firms in London demonstrates the dynamism of the international market for legal services.

It must be right, however, that all those doing business with firms whose partners have limited liability should be aware of that fact. The thrust of the policy behind the Bill is that a firm's status should be disclosed, together with the fact that its liability is limited. Under clause 14, the Secretary of State will have power to regulate overseas LLPs. Furthermore, the DTI has suggested that, in due course, it will hold consultations on appropriate provisions.

It would be quite inconsistent with such powers and with such an intention to forbid the use of the LLP title from the outset. Fortunately, the solution is simple; it is to be found in the amendment. The amendment ensures that an oversea LLP will not be prohibited from describing itself as such. A definition of "oversea limited liability partnership" is to be found in clause 14(3): it is

> a body incorporate or otherwise established outside Great Britain and having such connection with Great Britain, and such other features, as regulations may prescribe.

The practical effect of that is that regulations will determine precisely which LLPs will be entitled to the benefit of the amendment. I know that those firms with limited liability that have a place of business in the United Kingdom are also subject to regulations under clause 14.

6.45 pm

The amendment reflects the on-the-ground reality of international law practice and recognises the realities of the globalised economy. I am grateful to the Minister and to his Department for acknowledging that. The amendment also serves the public interest by communicating to the public

[Mr. Stuart Bell]

the status of business organisations. In those circumstances, I hope that the Minister and the whole House will welcome the amendment and further its passage onto the statute book.

Mr. Burnett: I speak to amendments Nos. 2, 3 and 11, tabled by the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) and his hon. Friends. As the hon. Gentleman was kind enough to point out during his speech, Liberal Democrat Members deprecate the use of regulation to introduce so many of the provisions under the Bill; such power is utterly unsatisfactory. Most pernicious of all are new regulations that could deny individuals their liberty. They should not be incorporated in law except through primary legislation. That must be clear to all Members of the House.

Dr. Howells: I shall deal with amendments Nos. 2, 3 and 11, before dealing separately with amendment No. 6, proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Mr. Bell).

In Committee, the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) expressed concern: first, that we were intending to apply to members of an LLP existing criminal offences that apply to company directors and are punishable by imprisonment; and, secondly, that those offences were to be imposed by secondary legislation. He expressed further concern that the power in clause 17 was wide enough to allow the creation in regulations of new offences that may also be punishable by imprisonment.

If I understand the hon. Gentleman correctly, amendment No. 2 is intended to probe why we have not included in the Bill all the offences punishable by imprisonment. Any alternative interpretation does not seem feasible. It is our intention to include section 458 of the Companies Act 1985 in regulations alongside other offences, and I cannot imagine that there is anything so special about that section that it should appear in the Bill when other sections—such as section 450, which makes it an imprisonable offence to destroy, mutilate, falsify, or alter documents—remain in regulations. Nor can I imagine that the intention is to place section 458 in the Bill as the only provision punishable by imprisonment. How would we justify providing that, in some circumstances, members of an LLP would face a lesser penalty than directors of a company for the same offence?

Why, then, have we not put imprisonable offences in the Bill? Because we do not consider it appropriate. As I have made clear, our intention is that the members of an LLP should face the same penalties as members of a company; that seems a reasonable policy objective. The offences arise from various provisions throughout the companies and insolvency legislation. We see no reason to place those provisions in the Bill while others are confined to regulations. In considering the legislation, Parliament concluded that the level of penalty was appropriate to a body corporate with limited liability and to its directors. We see nothing about the limited liability partnership to suggest that application of those penalties to members of an LLP is inconsistent with Parliament's intentions.

I shall now discuss amendment No. 3. I realise that the intention is to restrict our powers to imprison members of a LLP to those offences that are contained at present in the Companies Act 1985 and the Insolvency Act 1986. The hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton would prefer it if, every time that the Government wanted to legislate to make an offence punishable by imprisonment, they could do so only by introducing primary legislation. That is a reasonable case to make.

I shall now discuss amendment No. 11. It is clause 17 which provides that regulations may, in particular, make provisions for dealing with non-compliance with any of the regulations, including the creation of criminal offences. However, amendment No. 11 would remove that provision in its entirety.

The House of Lords Select Committee on Delegated Powers, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned, drew the attention of the other place to the powers to create offences by regulations, and invited it to consider whether the Bill should be amended to provide that such offence should be punishable, on summary conviction, by a fine.

We explained in our response that it was our intention to apply to limited liability partnerships the same offences applying to companies. We noted that the creation of new offences would be subject to affirmative resolution, and our intention to apply existing offences for companies in the first set of regulations would mean that these would also be subject to affirmative resolution.

While we have no intentions at this stage to apply to LLPs anything other than the offences applying to companies, the power is wide enough to create new offences, as I think that our response indicated quite clearly. We believe this to be a prudent provision for the future, and consistent with similar provisions in existing legislation.

I cannot agree that amendments Nos. 2, 3 or 11 are either appropriate or necessary. In addition, if we look at their practical effect, we can see that they would be highly problematic. Amendment No. 3 is to clause 15, and to regulations made under subsection (1) of that clause, yet it is the power in clause 14 which provides for the Government to make regulations on the insolvency and winding up of limited liability partnerships or oversea LLPs. Were we to accept these amendments, we would be prevented from making any provision for non-compliance with regulations on the insolvency and winding up of LLPs. That cannot be right.

I shall now discuss amendment No. 6. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough for raising this point. Our attention has been drawn very recently to the inconsistency between the drafting of this paragraph, and our statement to the Select Committee on Trade and Industry in June 1999. We told that Committee that company legislation which requires that oversea companies prominently display the company's name and the country in which it is incorporated will also be applied to oversea-registered LLPs by regulation, and that this includes the requirement to display that information on letterheads and on all notices and other publications of the LLP. That remains our intention.

The question then arises as to why we need additionally to prevent the use of the phrase "limited liability partnership" at the end of the title of an oversea-registered LLP. That would cause particular difficulties for existing oversea LLPs, many of whom will be required by the legislation of the jurisdiction in which they are registered, to include those words.

We have concluded that it is unnecessary both to restrict the use of the words "limited liability partnership" in the title of oversea LLPs and to require that they display their place of registration on all their publications. The latter should prove wholly sufficient to notify clients that they are dealing with an oversea entity.

Therefore, while I ask the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton to withdraw amendment No. 2 and not to press amendments Nos. 3 and 11, I will agree to amendment No. 6, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough—a rare event indeed in the progress of the Bill.

Mr. Gibb: I will accede to the Minister's request that I ask the leave of the House to withdraw amendment No. 2 and refrain from pressing amendments Nos. 3 and 11, but he was slightly disingenuous when he knew very well the purpose of the amendments. It was not intended to restrict the use of prison in dealing with people who commit serious company law or insolvency law offences. The purpose of the amendments is to point out the very real concerns, raised by the House of Lords Select Committee on Delegated Powers, that it is not proper—it is not right—for new serious criminal offences punishable by prison to be introduced into our legal system by means of secondary legislation.

The salient question is not whether the affirmative or negative resolution procedure is used, but whether the new crimes are created by secondary legislation, which cannot be right. Such a measure should go through the full procedures of the House—First Reading, Second Reading, Committee stage, Report stage and Third Reading—and then pass on into the Lords, so that there is a full chance of the whole nation being aware of the creation of those new criminal offences.

The provisions are very wrong. It is a sad day when our House is rubber-stamping and mass-producing this kind of criminal legislation through secondary legislation. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Schedule

NAMES AND REGISTERED OFFICES

Amendment made: No. 6, in page 15, line 15, leave out—

'incorporated as a limited liability partnership with that name,'

and insert—

'a limited liability partnership or oversea limited liability partnership,'.—*[Mr. Stuart Bell.]*

Order for Third Reading read.

6.55 pm

Dr. Howells: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The Bill will introduce, for the first time in nearly a century, a new vehicle for carrying on a business. It is the result of three years of consultation and debate with a wide variety of interested and learned individuals. Detailed legislative proposals have been in the public domain since September 1998, and these were scrutinised shortly afterwards by our own Select Committee on Trade and Industry. Since then, the Bill has received close and thorough scrutiny in the other place and by Members of this House.

The Bill before you today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is in very good shape, and I take the opportunity to thank all those, on both sides of the House, who participated in the many lively and interesting debates that we have had on the detail to ensure that this is the case.

6.56 pm

Mr. Gibb: We have now reached the final stage of the Bill's long journey to the statute book. It is one of the few Bills that the Government have managed to get through both Houses without its becoming logjammed in the congestion that they have created in the other place, so this is quite a novel occasion.

The Bill started life under the Conservative Government, in response to some genuine concerns on the part of the accountancy and legal professions, which were finding it increasingly difficult to retain some of their best people because those people were refusing to accept the risks of becoming a partner.

Listening to some of the members of the Labour party and their deep-rooted prejudices and hostility to accountants has been quite a revelation. There are 114,000 chartered accountants in this country, who work hard for a living, like anyone else. Some are paid well; others are not. But why should that particular line of work expose participants to the risk of losing a lifetime's savings as a result of the negligence of a fellow partner? That approach does not apply to doctors or nurses in the national health service—no one could say that the work of a chartered accountant is more important than that of a doctor or a nurse—or to teachers, or even to bankers in the City of London, so why should it apply to accountants and solicitors?

The Bill simply addresses that historical anomaly and, if anything, it is likely to ease the upward pressure on salaries as firms of solicitors and accountants find it easier to recruit and to retain key staff.

Mr. Fabricant: Is it not also the case that people using those services will also find that their fees are reduced, as was pointed out earlier in our debates this evening, because there will be less need for firms to take out indemnity insurance, which can be so costly nowadays?

Mr. Gibb: My hon. Friend makes a very valid point, and I hope that the hon. Members for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) and for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins), who tabled several amendments, will take it on board.

The Bill was one of the first to undergo the new procedure of being examined by a Select Committee before beginning its passage through Parliament. The Select Committee report was of a very high quality and certainly resulted in the removal from the Bill of a raft of the more unacceptable and unworkable provisions. However, it is disappointing that the Committee has not been given the opportunity to examine in more detail the whole volume of draft regulations which were re-published in almost final form in May 2000. Given that the meat of the Bill is contained in those regulations, I believe that the experiment of having a Bill scrutinised by a Select Committee has not been completed, given that it has not yet looked at those regulations. The Committee requested to look at those regulations. I hope that before

[Mr. Gibb]

those regulations are laid before Parliament, a report will be prepared on the volume of draft regulations that the Government have published.

The new draft Bill that followed the Select Committee report went through a further consultation process. However, the final Bill, which started life in another place, gave rise to a number of concerns. My noble Friend Baroness Buscombe highlighted on Second Reading our concern over the disapplication of partnership law and the absence of a default to that law on issues on which the partnership agreement is silent. The Government have dealt with that matter in part, although not satisfactorily.

The Government took on board and dealt satisfactorily with our concern about the absence of provisions to deal with a member wishing to retire from a limited liability partnership. We were also concerned about an ambiguity in the Bill: whether members of an LLP could be construed as employees. That would have significant tax and employment law consequences for that member. Again, Lord McIntosh took on board Opposition concerns and amended the Bill to make it clear that members of an LLP were not to be employees.

We were concerned about the taxation provisions in the Bill and whether converting from a partnership to an LLP would trigger a capital gains and a stamp duty charge. We secured assurances and amendments on that matter in another place. Other issues, such as insolvency and acquisition accounting were also raised and dealt with. Indeed, if Ministers were as responsive to Opposition concerns in this House as they seem to have been, on occasion, in another place, they might not now be developing a reputation for being out of touch and arrogant.

Having said that, the Opposition are pleased that we have ensured that this legislation, which is important for commerce, will go on to the statute book in a better form than it would otherwise have done. We remain concerned about the absence of a general default clause and alarmed at the extensive regulatory powers contained in the Bill, in particular clause 16—the Henry VIII clause—and the power to create new serious crimes and punishments by secondary legislation, which is contained in clause 17.

Those important reservations aside, the Bill is welcome. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) just intimated, it will do much to ease concerns among professional firms and we can only hope that that may lead to industry facing smaller increases, or even reductions, in professional fees.

7.2 pm

Mr. Burnett: We support the Bill, although some other improvements should have been made. I am encouraged by what the Minister said about its applicability to solicitors.

We discussed clause 7 at length in Committee—the provisions that relate to ex-members. The Minister criticised that clause in Committee, at least by implication, because he considered it inflexible. On report, I tabled amendment No. 5, but it was not selected. I hope that the Minister will think again about that matter. The amendment would have made it clear that clause 7(2) was intended to have a similar effect to section 31 of the Partnership Act 1890, which the Minister conceded was important and prayed in aid for flexibility. Such an amendment would preserve flexibility with regard to the arrangements for the internal management of a limited liability partnership, which is important.

There are to be further consultations and regulations in respect of taxation. I draw the Minister's attention to the roll-over relief provisions that impact unsatisfactorily on LLPs. Roll-over relief has been an aspect of capital gains tax since the inception of that tax in 1965, I believe. At present, gains on the sale of an asset used in a trade can be rolled over into partnership property—that is, an existing 1890 Act partnership. There are special rules if the property is a wasting asset. Where that roll-over has taken place, the gain is not recaptured if that 1890 partnership comes to an end, provided that the assets are not disposed of. One pays the tax, including the tax on the rolled-over gain, when the asset is sold. If one partner leaves and sells his interest, the gain crystallises at that point and only in relation to that proportion of the asset that is sold. If an 1890 partnership ceases trading and the asset is owned in the same proportions as it was owned in the partnership when it was functioning, the rolled-over gain does not crystallise—it does not do so until the asset is sold.

I hope that the Minister will confirm that that capital gains tax treatment should apply to LLPs as it does to existing partnerships. It is important because there will be no cash to pay the tax until the asset is sold and that will affect small businesses in particular. We talked about that in our debates on report. Small businesses do not have the benefit of high-powered and expensive lawyers and accountants to advise them—we must remember that any trade or profession can become an LLP. First, the small business will not have the cash to pay the capital gains tax. Secondly, small businesses require simplicity. If they cease trading as an LLP, they do not know that rolled-over gains will necessarily have to be payable in those circumstances.

Roll-over relief is important for small businesses—it is important for all businesses—and that is reflected in the fact that the relief for assets used in a trade which has not altered since the inception of capital gains tax in 1965. It is important because it encourages investment, which will encourage jobs. I hope that the Minister will think again about those two matters: clause 7 and the roll-over relief.

Finally, we support the Bill and we wish it a swift Royal Assent so that it can become the law of the land in short order. No body of individuals, no profession and no individual trade should be excluded or prejudiced because they cannot become an LLP at the same time as all the other organisations, trades or professions.

7.7 pm

Mr. Mitchell: I had not intended to take part in this debate, but the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) provoked me to do so by arguing that Labour Members were attacking accountants. We were not attacking accountants; we were primarily attacking the power of the big five accountancy houses, which inflict damage on the rest of the profession by their failures, by the sort of cases that come up against them and by stealing business from smaller accountants. We should protect the smaller accountants. We should use the power of Government and Parliament as a countervailing power against the over-weaning dominance of the big accountancy houses, which are now such a power in the land.

In the United States, the Securities and Exchange Commission is attacking such power assiduously. The difference between the two countries is that the Bill is another milestone on the rise to power of such companies. In that situation, it is right to insist on concessions in return for the privilege of limited liability partnership that is being given—concessions on consumer protection, protection for stakeholders and more effective regulation. In this country, those concessions come later, and I hope that they will do so.

The Bill does not show the House at its best. All the speeches, apart from those of my hon. Friends the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs and the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) and myself, were a defence of professional privilege and attitudes, even those of the Liberal Democrats—that party should be speaking for the people, but its members concentrated on the purpose and privileges of solicitors and the professions, not on countervailing their power. That does not show scrutiny at its best.

In conclusion, to recoin an old Irish joke, like the man in Little Grimsby who asked the way to Great Grimsby and was told, "I wouldn't start from here," I would not start from here. Unfortunately, we are doing so. It is right now that we should ensure the proper regulation of the powerful accountancy houses and of the profession. It is right now to enhance the power of stakeholders in response to the privileges that are being conferred on the accountancy profession. It is also right to argue that audit work should be split from the sale of other services. That is the next agenda on reform, and I hope that we go on to undertake it. In conclusion, I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for a sterling performance: he has listened, responded and treated all the arguments with respect, intelligence and courtesy, and I congratulate him on that.

7.10 pm

Mr. Fabricant: I support the Bill and, as the Minister knows, I served on the Committee that considered it. The Bill had its genesis in the last Parliament, and it is right and proper that the present Government should continue with the measure.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) gave a long catalogue of complaints against the larger accountancy firms. Even if he were right, I can see no reason why that should inhibit the Bill's passage, as the Bill relates to a very different issue. Certain concerns were raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb). I am especially concerned that, in this Bill, as in other Government Bills, there is yet again, a blank cheque in relation to secondary legislation. Something that is important and ought to be included in the Bill is going to be left to delegated legislation.

On this occasion, the issue is the level of offences and the penalties that will accrue to them. That is particularly strange, as I pointed out in Committee, because clause 9(6) deals with the level of offence. It states:

> A person guilty of an offence under subsection (4) is liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale.

The Government are therefore able to state what the level of offence should be. It is inconsistent and wrong that they choose not to do so with other offences which are named, quite rightly, in the Bill.

Government Members have expressed concern about the principle of the Bill, which is the removal of joint and several liability of partners. However, as the Liberal spokesman, the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett), pointed out, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton, nothing under the law on civil torts prevents a prosecution against a particular partner for duties that are not carried out in accordance with the law. That is right and proper, and that facility will not be removed by the Bill's enactment.

The Bill is needed. The movement since 1890 towards a global economy means that a partnership alone is not enough in this day and age. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby highlighted the growth of the larger accountancy firms. I agree that that has happened in the United States of America, which has protection similar to that proposed in the Bill. We need that protection here in the United Kingdom. As I said in Committee and earlier today, there must be equity between the protection afforded in overseas countries and that offered in the UK.

With those reservations, I join my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton in wishing the Bill a fair passage. Despite our reservations about it, it will be good for business and, more important, good for British jobs.

7.14 pm

Mr. Stuart Bell: I shall briefly commend the Bill and add to the comments of the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb). It is perfectly right to say that the Bill owes its origins to Lord Freeman, who was Minister at the time. It was quickly taken up by the Labour party in opposition, and in our manifesto we said that we would introduce a Bill on limited liability partnerships. We also made a commitment to independent regulation, to which I shall return in a moment.

I commend the hon. Members for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton and for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) and Opposition Back Benchers. I have forgotten which queen said that when she went to her grave and they opened her heart, they would see Calais written upon it. [HON. MEMBERS: "Mary Stuart."] I thought it was, but I did not dare say so on the spur of the moment, in case I would stand corrected later. I commend my hon. Friends the Members for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) and for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins), as I have a feeling that, when the LLP graves of the accountants and solicitors are opened up, they will see "Great Grimsby" and "Newcastle, Central" engraved inside. Anyone wishing to know what my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby will do for an encore on independent regulation was given a reasonable impression tonight.

Finally, I commend with the utmost sincerity my hon. Friend the Minister and his staff at the Department of Trade and Industry, who have lived with the substance of the Bill for four years—one year in opposition and three in government. The Bill has followed the new parliamentary procedures introduced by the new Labour Government, has gone through a Select Committee and pre-legislation Committees and, after three years, has emerged as better legislation. This is a great day for parliamentary procedure, the Ministry, the Government and the House of Commons. I commend the Bill to the House and, as the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) said, I wish it a safe passage.

7.16 pm

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: As I did at the beginning of Second Reading and in Committee, I declare an interest as a fellow of the Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators and as a parliamentary adviser to that body. I have been a non-practising solicitor since 1988.

I welcome the Bill and I pay particular tribute to the way in which it was handled in the other place before it came here. I pay special tribute to my colleague Baroness Buscombe who made a number of points that helpfully illuminated ways in which the Bill could be improved and in which the Houses of Parliament could introduce legislation that would be welcome and, we hoped, would improve company competitiveness and international location, so that companies that need to compete can make sure that they reside appropriately in this country.

I made a number of points on Second Reading and in Committee, many of them born out of my personal business experience, in so far as I have dealt with—indeed, I have established—an LLP in overseas territories and was responsible for it. I therefore have some experience which I have tried to bring to the attention of the House. I certainly wish to support fully all the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) and to back his careful, well-judged scrutiny of the Bill, especially the default provisions and, indeed, the Henry VIII clause.

It is disappointing, however, that the Government's approach to retaining that clause in the Bill has left a residual doubt about whether there will be proper scrutiny of potentially serious provisions that could be added later and which would have a direct effect on the competitiveness and effectiveness of this form of corporate entity. Above all, there is a need to take account of what the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) said and to ensure that there is total transparency and disclosure, which is the price to be paid for conferring limited liability on what were unlimited corporate entities.

I fully acknowledge that the Government have acknowledged the matters that I have raised, but it is disappointing that they have not acted on a couple of important points that highlight the concerns of those with experience of these issues. I shall re-emphasise a couple of those points, and I crave the indulgence of the House to place them on the record. First, the Bill has focused, quite understandably, on large professional partnerships, and I fear that implications about the way in which the new corporate entity will be used have been missed.

Again, from my experience, I think that it is clear that the LLP will be a very attractive vehicle for overseas partnering and joint ventures in this country. Certainly that is the way in which a similar measure was applied in California and other states in America. It carries certain tax advantages and also rightly reflects the business relationship in manufacturing companies, with which I am familiar.

Despite raising those issues in earlier debates, I have not heard a reply from the Minister, and I note that he has been well supported by a raft of advisers here—they are sitting in the box—and in Committee. I asked whether advice had been fully taken on the experience of those overseas territories in which there are joint ventures for manufacturing companies, and it would have been helpful to have heard a reply.

Dr. Howells: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we took advice. I understand the point that he makes, and I hope that a wide range of LLPs will be formed.

Mr. O'Brien: That is somewhat reassuring, and I thank the Minister for letting me know that that advice has been taken. It would be helpful to share it a little more fully later.

Such entities will be attractive to property companies, which, as we know, have particular risks and liabilities. The contractual and relationship issues in business are often represented by those concerned with property valuations and the title to ownership, and LLPs will hold a significant attraction to property ventures. There is a demand in property companies to examine—again, reflecting experience abroad—whether it would be appropriate and sensible for their competitiveness to create a mechanism by which a particular partner in such a property LLP could opt out of being bound. At the moment, all LLP members will be entitled to buy because of the way in which LLPs are structured. That is a matter of serious debate because of the nature of accountability and transparency, but is also goes to the heart of the way in which property risk is assessed and represented. Although I mentioned that in Committee, I wanted to place it on the record again now.

The Minister generously suggested that I had made some constructive points during the consideration of the Bill. I am not flattered, because I realise that that is part of the hon. Gentleman's customary generosity. But I am concerned that the points that I made on clause 8 were not taken up. The concern is that there has been an attempt to retain the partnership ethic, by which all members take responsibility, under the requirements of clause 8, unless at least two designated members have been appointed.

Although I can understand the mindset that has driven that provision, I am concerned especially about those LLPs that will not have the appropriate expertise, such as firms that are not accountants or solicitors, which, again, have driven the thinking on the provision. Given the importance of the compliance and governance needed to deliver the very transparency and accountability that is at the heart of the Bill, it would have been appropriate to examine more closely the possibility of having a partnership secretary, company secretary, or a designated person.

There is a distinction to be drawn between members, who clearly carry the overall business responsibility and accountability, and those who are required to deliver compliance and governance. As the Minister has said, nothing precludes an LLP appointing such a person as an employee. However, it would have been better to state that in the Bill, if for no other reason than that similar provisions exist under the Companies Acts for company secretaries in plcs. That confers the necessary status and authority in the corporate entity to command the necessary respect around the board table—or, in this case, around the LLP members table—where advice, high technical competence or a degree of conscience are required of the corporate entity to ensure governance. That is the case not least because things are not always

rosy in partnerships; there will be disputes and factions. At times, it is helpful if such a person sits at the high table with the status and professional expertise to take the necessary action. It is disappointing that that point has not been taken more seriously.

That said, I have thought carefully about the Bill and whether I should have tabled amendments in Committee and on Report. I chose not to do so because the Bill is part of a wider issue; a major consultation exercise is being undertaken on company law reform. That consultation has run somewhat parallel to the Bill, but the latter preceded it because of the way in which the legislation has come about. In that context, I hope and request that the Minister and his officials in the Department will carefully consider the points that I made about clause 8; they are even more important in the context of that company law reform.

We should take advantage of all that has been learned about governance during the past 10 years, not least from the Cadbury report and the ensuing developments. We should at last put the genuine expectations about what is required of companies on a much more sound footing, and perhaps frame them in statute. We should ensure that they have the requisite person in place to ensure good governance. I shall defer pressing that point until we debate company law reform. I thank the Minister for the courtesy with which he has treated the points that I have made. I, too, agree that the process has been worth while.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed, with amendments.

Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill

Not amended in the Standing Committee, considered.

Clause 2

FORFEITURE ORDERS

7.26 pm

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): I beg to move amendment No. 2, in page 2, line 2, leave out 'or other disposal'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 3, in clause 3, page 2, line 22, leave out 'or other disposal'.

No. 4, in page 2, line 26, leave out 'or other disposal'.

Mr. Moss: These amendments, which my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton–Brown) and I have tabled, relate to clauses 2 and 3. Clause 2 deals with forfeiture orders that a court may make if a person has been convicted of an offence of keeping an animal for fur under clause 1. Clause 2(3) states:

a forfeiture order is an order for the forfeiture and destruction or other disposal—

those are the key words—

of the animals.

A similar provision is contained in clause 3(3)(b) and (c), where the words "or other disposal" are used.

The purpose of the amendments is to discover what disposal will be possible, other than the destruction of the animals subject to the forfeiture order. After all, by definition, those provisions will not come into play until fur farming becomes a criminal offence, so there can be no question that the animals will continue to be farmed. Although the Bill refers to animals raised for fur, we know that its thrust is against the 13 mink farms that currently exist in this country. Mink are the only animals likely to come within the ambit of the Bill. Mink are not likely to be regarded as ideal pets for anyone.

We want the Minister to explain why an alternative provision exists, other than for the destruction of those animals. Mink are not only unsuitable to be kept as pets, but they are extremely damaging and dangerous animals in the wild, and significant costs have been involved—

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): Has the hon. Gentleman had an opportunity to read the *Hansard* reports of the Standing Committee that considered a similar Bill in the previous Session? If he has, he will have found that his questions are answered there.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): So what?

Mr. Moss: We want the Minister to tell us why the Bill still contains those words, despite comments made recently in Committee. We recognise that the Bill relates primarily to mink. We know that they cannot be kept as pets and that they create huge damage if they are released or escape into the environment. The only sensible action to take under a forfeiture order will be to destroy those animals.

7.30 pm

Mr. Andrew Hunter (Basingstoke): I speak in support of the amendments, and I immediately assure the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) that not only have I read the *Official Report* of our Committee proceedings this year, but I can vaguely recall the Committee proceedings of the previous year.

I support the amendments, because we have still not received an adequate answer to a point that we have raised time and again. The hon. Lady and the Minister might recall that when I moved a similar amendment last year to a similar Bill, I advanced the argument that my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss) has just made. In reality, we all know that there is no alternative to destruction for the overwhelming majority of animals currently farmed for their fur. Because of that, we are entitled to ask why the Bill contains the words "or other disposal".

On previous occasions, hon. Members who support the Bill, and the cause of which it is an expression, have sometimes intervened with the telling word "chinchilla". I would not claim to be an expert on the habitat and the natural habits of the chinchilla, but it has been offered to us as the reason for the three words "or other disposal" appearing in the Bill. It has been explained that in some circumstances chinchilla can become domestic pets.

That proposition is particularly intriguing. Perhaps chinchilla are capable of becoming domestic pets, but what is the welfare ground for objecting to their being farmed? It would seem that an animal that can adapt itself to domestic circumstances can also adapt to being farmed, if that takes place with the due regulations for its welfare in place. The defence of the words "or other disposal" opens another weakness in the Bill. What are the welfare grounds for the criminalisation of the farming of a particular species of fur-bearing animal?

There is another dimension to the amendments and to the inclusion of the words "or other disposal" that puzzles me. As the House will know, the words stem from a forfeiture order made under clause 2(1), which states that a

> court may make a forfeiture order in respect of any animals of that description.

That provision applies to animals that are farmed primarily for their fur, and it refers to those that

> are kept by that person when the order is made or which come into his keeping during the relevant period.

I am concerned by a court's ability to make a decision as to whether the forfeiture order should be for destruction or for "other disposal". What mechanisms are being created or exist whereby the court will have the information that, let us say, 3,000 chinchilla are kept on a farm in England or Wales and are nurtured for their fur? How can a court know with any degree of certainty whether those 3,000 chinchilla can be forfeited for a purpose other than destruction, and if so, what proportion of them does that apply to? That argument may seem reductio ad absurdum, but much in the Bill is capable of such an interpretation. Lawyers will have a field day when, as is inevitable, the Bill becomes law.

The amendments point to a weakness in clauses 2 and 3. The court will not be able to make a sound or reasonable judgment under the existing mechanisms as to whether another form of disposal is possible. That brings us back to a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North–East Cambridgeshire. We know perfectly well that when a forfeiture order is made, the animals will be destroyed. It follows logically that the Bill should contain provision only for destruction and that the words "or other disposal", which appear in clause 2(3) and 3(3)(b) and (c), should be omitted. That would make the Bill tidier, and it would be common sense.

Mr. Gray: I wish to add a few words in support of the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for North–East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss), to which my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mr. Hunter) so ably spoke. I did not have the good fortune to serve on the Standing Committee considering this Bill, or on that considering the private Member's Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle). Despite the fact that I have read the *Hansard* reports of both Standing Committees with care, I was not quite as up to date with the arguments as she thought I should have been.

The hon. Lady made an odd intervention that seemed to suggest that if this or any other Bill has been discussed anywhere in Parliament, it is in some way improper to discuss it again on Report.

Maria Eagle: I was not suggesting that it was improper to discuss anything that is in order on Report. I merely pointed out that hon. Members had already been given an answer.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): It was not a satisfactory answer.

Mr. Gray: As my right hon. and learned Friend says, it was not a satisfactory answer. However, the Minister will have an opportunity to remind us of the answer, and we shall have the opportunity to scrutinise his remarks. The hon. Lady intervened on my hon. Friend the Member for North–East Cambridgeshire and suggested that his speech was a waste of time because his question was answered during consideration of an obscure private Member's Bill a year or so ago. That is a fundamental misunderstanding of the way in which the House operates.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will not labour that point, because I called him to speak to the amendment.

Mr. Gray: I am happy to do that, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The provisions are important because they appear to have a sinister undertone. If the Bill brings about the end of fur farming, we must be clear what will happen to the 100,000 mink that are farmed in this nation. If we are not, a Bill that purports to be about animal welfare may turn into one that creates a nightmare for those animals. The House must be clear what will happen if we put mink farmers out of business. What will happen to the mink on their farms? The Bill uses the phrase "or other disposal" and that leaves open the possibility that the animals will be disposed of inappropriately.

I am not convinced that the Bill applies only to mink, although they will form by far the largest category of animals affected. On Second Reading, I asked whether a flock of sheep farmed exclusively to produce sheepskins

would be covered by the Bill. The Minister may correct me later, but my understanding is that the conclusion was that it would be illegal to keep a flock of sheep purely for the purpose of producing sheepskin rugs. Indeed, under the Bill it would be equally illegal to keep rabbits solely for their fur.

Given the state of market for mutton, if not for lamb, I understand why it might be possible for a farmer to decide that a flock of sheep should be kept specifically for the purpose of selling their skins. We do not want to get into an argument about the precise price of mutton, but that must be theoretically possible. If I were a farmer with a flock of sheep on the uplands that I knew would be worthless on the livestock market and I saw the Bill going through Parliament, I might declare today that my flock were being kept purely for their fur. The compensation that we hope will be available under the Bill may turn out to be a great deal more generous than the price that the unfortunate farmer would earn for his flock of sheep in the market.

Mr. Hogg: I am listening to my hon. Friend's argument, and I have heard something of the kind before. He faces one problem, of course: the word used in subsection (1)(a) is "fur". Whatever else is true of sheep, they do not produce fur. Does my hon. Friend agree, nevertheless, that that argument demonstrates the nonsense? It probably would be lawful to breed sheep exclusively for wool, but not lawful to breed mink exclusively for fur?

Mr. Gray: My right hon. and learned Friend makes a good point, but he slips up at the end. It is legal to breed sheep exclusively for the purpose of their wool, which is shorn, and the animal remains alive. If sheep are bred exclusively for the purpose of producing sheepskins, the animals have to be slaughtered in order for the sheepskins to be obtained.

Mr. Hogg: The last thing I want to do is to fall out with my hon. Friend, because basically we are in the same camp. However, the word in the Bill is "fur". Whatever else is the case, sheep do not produce fur. They may produce skins and they may produce wool, but fur they do not produce.

Mr. Gray: That is an interesting point of definition, which is at odds with what the Minister made clear on Second Reading, when he said specifically that in the unlikely event of a flock of sheep being bred for sheepskins, which would require their slaughter, that would come under the terms of the Bill. However, my right hon. and learned Friend may well be right. He speaks as a barrister and charges hundreds of thousands of pounds an hour for just such advice. He may be right that the word "fur" cannot be construed as applying to sheep.

Mr. Hunter: Pursuing my hon. Friend's recollection of the Minister's reply on Second Reading, I suppose that that could also apply to ostrich farming. The bottom has fallen out of the ostrich meat market. Now the birds are farmed for their feathers and, for tourist reasons, for their eggs. If the Minister's answer on Second Reading was correct, the Bill has ominous implications.

Mr. Gray: My hon. Friend makes a useful point. When the Minister responds, perhaps he will tell us what the Bill intends. If it applies purely to mink, he must say so. If there is the possibility that ostrich, deer, sheep or rabbits may come under the terms of the Bill, the precise means of disposal of the animals becomes a matter of key interest to those of us who are fundamentally concerned with animal welfare.

We need to know precisely what will happen to the animals. There are 130,000 mink and they are breeding all the time. People tend to forget that the animals breed like mink, and presumably the population will increase. Other kinds of animals, such as ostriches and sheep, may come within the purview of the Bill, and it is only reasonable that before we send it on its way from this place, we should know with great precision and clarity the means by which the animals are to be disposed of. It is worrying that that should be left to an open expression such as "or other disposal".

For the purpose of the amendments, it is reasonable to assume that we are dealing primarily with mink, although I look forward to the Minister commenting on other animals. Let us focus on what will happen to the mink. We must be clear whether the compensation terms that are the subject of the second group of amendments are dependent on the mink being slaughtered, or on a forfeiture order being issued against the farmer.

The winding down of the mink farms over a number of years, which seems to be the intention behind the Bill, may be sensible, but the mechanism by which that will happen has not been spelled out in the Bill or in the explanatory notes to it. The Minister may want to explain how that winding-down process will happen.

If we are to presume that the end of mink farming will mean the slaughter of the 130,000 existing mink in the UK, it is important that we should know precisely what the means of slaughter will be. Various ways of killing mink are used. The most common are gassing by carbon monoxide or carbon dioxide. Hon. Members will know that many people commit suicide by carbon monoxide gassing, directing fumes from the exhaust through the car windows. It is said to be a painless way of committing suicide. Carbon dioxide, I believe, is less attractive, but none the less can be used in some circumstances. Another method is by lethal injection, which may occur in some mink farms, although it is difficult to imagine catching the mink in order to administer a lethal injection.

7.45 pm

The reason for those methods of killing is that the perfection of the pelt is important. The only value of the animal is the pelt. If mink were slaughtered by the conventional means used for other animals, the pelts would be damaged. It is important that those of us who care about animal welfare should know whether the farmers will be required to carry out the slaughtering themselves. At present, most slaughtering of mink takes place on the farm, because the transportation of the mink to a slaughterhouse is considered to be a great deal more harmful to them than being slaughtered on the farm. The first question, then, is whether the slaughter will be carried out on the farm.

Secondly, will the farmers be allowed to sell the pelts produced from that slaughtering? I assume so. If that is the case, presumably the slaughtering must occur by means of CO_2, CO or lethal injection. Will the Minister tell us which method of slaughtering he thinks will be

[Mr. Gray]

most appropriate? Will he consider not just adult animals, but the newly born? Will the newly born be killed by the same means? Will MAFF vets be present to supervise the process? What will happen to the carcases? Will there be proper disposal?

What will happen to the pelts? Will they be sold to British fur dealers, or will that be considered immoral? It is the Minister who changed the thrust of the Bill from animal welfare to morality. If the pelts are not sold to British fur dealers, perhaps there is the strange prospect that they will be sold to foreign fur dealers. Once fur farming is abandoned in this country, foreign fur dealers will make all the money out of it.

The Minister must be specific about what he expects to happen in the process of killing and disposing of the animals. He must also be specific about whether the agreed compensation will be paid if farmers carry out the slaughter voluntarily, or only if they are required to do so under the forfeiture orders. In the latter case, presumably, the farmers will do nothing until the forfeiture orders are served on them. That will not necessarily produce the most orderly or humane way of carrying out the slaughter.

We need answers to various questions about how the animals will be killed, the means by which they will be disposed of, and what will happen to the pelts thereafter. Those are the large questions about the slaughtering process which we believe, unwelcome though it is, will be the result of the Bill. If not, the words "or other disposal" become relevant.

What else could be the fate of those 130,000 mink? We are not sure whether they will be killed by CO_2, by carbon monoxide poisoning, by having their little throats slit or by being chucked into a ditch. We are not sure what will happen to them. We must be clear about that. If the Minister makes use of the expression "or other disposal", what does he have in mind?

When Lord Burns considers what will happen to foxhounds if, unfortunately, there were a ban on fox hunting in this country, he suggests that the redundant foxhounds could be re-homed, as he calls it. I am not sure whether that is a word. Is the Minister considering the possible re-homing of mink? I hope not. Perhaps he will require the farmers to keep the mink until they grow old and die, in which case what does he propose to do about all the breeding that the mink will do in the meantime? Maybe he is considering releasing them into the wild. That is a solution that has been put forward by a number of his friends—his past leads me to think that they are his friends—in the more extreme animal welfare lobby. They have released mink into the wild with catastrophic consequences. We see on rivers throughout the country what happens when that happens.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gray: As I have named the Minister, perhaps unfairly, I shall give way to him.

Mr. Morley: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will withdraw. I have spoken out on many occasions against illegal activities, including the deliberate release of mink into the wild. That has been my long-standing position, and I have been robust about it.

Mr. Gray: If that is what the Minister understood by my remarks, I withdraw. I would not for a moment suggest that he condoned such illegal activities. I know that he has been robust in saying that they must not happen. I also know that he has a long and distinguished record and career in the animal welfare and rights lobby. My precise words were that his friends in the animal rights lobby do the things that I have described. I was not suggesting that he did. If that was his interpretation of my remarks, I apologise. I know perfectly well that he would not take such action.

Perhaps the Minister would not suggest that mink should be released into the wild, but there are certainly those on the more extreme wing of the animal rights movement who would. If that were to happen, I think that hon. Members on both sides of the House, and those on both sides of the argument, know how catastrophic the results would be for native wildlife. I hope that the more extreme voices will not be heard.

Perhaps mink could be sold alive. There are those, perhaps the farmers themselves, who would say, "There are perfectly good fur farmers 20 miles away across the channel in Calais. I shall transport my 100,000 live mink in cages to Calais." Will that be allowed? We no longer allow the export of live calves. Are we to allow the live export of mink? I do not think that we should. The carrying around of mink in cages on lorries is probably less humane than slaughtering them on the farm. That is the view that has been taken by slaughterhouses. I do not think that mink should be exported, and certainly not to Calais. Even less should they be exported to Russia, where much mink farming continues. Similarly, they should not be exported to Canada.

The words "or other disposal" presumably allow the possibility of live export of mink. I suspect that the Minister should ensure that the wording of the clause is made much more precise so that we know exactly what is intended to happen to mink. On Third Reading, I shall talk about the more general principle, but I am not convinced that there is a moral argument in favour of banning fur farming. There may be an animal welfare argument in favour of it, but I suspect that that can better be answered by laying down regulations for the better protection of the animals in their cages, as we did for pigs, for example, than by the enactment of the Bill.

If the Bill is to become law and if we are to see the 130,000 mink now alive disposed of, it is extremely important that we and others who care about animal welfare should know precisely what the Government have in mind for their disposal. Are they to be carried overseas in ships or aeroplanes? Are they to be slaughtered by humane means or by less than humane means on the farm? Are they to be transported to slaughterhouses to be disposed of? What is to happen to the pelts and the carcases?

These are issues that may be dismissed by those who are interested only in the so-called moral issues, but they are important to farmers and to those of us who truly care about animal welfare. That is why these amendments are more probing than anything else. What does "or other disposal" mean? What lies behind the phrase? What is in

the Minister's mind? What other means of disposal could there be? Are those other means of disposal acceptable to a humane society? I suspect that they may not be.

I suspect that the Bill would be a great deal better drafted, clearer, and better from the point of view of the welfare of the unfortunate mink, if the words "or other disposal" were struck out in the three places where they currently appear.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Returning to this subject is rather like the end of term. Several Members now in their places considered the earlier private Member's Bill, served on the Committee considering this Bill, and have also considered it at other stages. It has been rather like a dialogue of the deaf, and now we are all reassembled. My hon. Friends and I are making same old points, which, sadly, have not sunk in with the Government draftsmen, and the Bill is as bad as it ever was.

I shall begin by considering what will be caught by the forfeiture order, and perhaps clarify the matter for my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) and for my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg). I suggest that we consider the problems with which magistrates will be faced if the Bill becomes an Act. The starting point is the definition of fur when deciding where the forfeiture order comes from.

Clause 1(1) states:

> A person is guilty of an offence if he keeps animals solely or primarily . . . for slaughter . . . for the value of their fur.

I would go to the definition in the *Official Journal* of the European Communities.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman cannot discuss that matter under the amendments, which relate just to the words "or other disposal". They are narrow amendments.

Mr. Paterson: I am trying to define which animals will be caught by the requirement in clause 2(3), Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We are discussing an amendment, not a clause. As I have said, the amendment is narrow. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will have a glance at the amendment and then speak to it.

Mr. Paterson: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The amendments are clear in that they remove the words "or other disposal" from one place in clause 2 and two in clause 3. Surely it is important to define which animals will be caught by the Bill. There is some misunderstanding about what counts as fur. We must consider the problem of a magistrate who has to interpret this measure once it becomes law. When faced with a possible prosecution, how will the magistrate define which animals will be caught by the Act?

Is it sensible to let the clause stand as it is, and provide for either destruction or other means of disposal? Or, as we suggest in the amendment, should destruction be the only solution? I can refer to a lengthier definition, possibly on Third Reading. The definition of "raw fur skins" means not only the skins of mink and rabbit but those of various types of lamb. Following your instruction, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall go into these matters at greater length later in our consideration of the Bill.

There is no problem in disposing of some sorts of lamb by other means. I do not see a problem in selling astrakhans, broadtails or caracals. We can go into that later. A hole in the Bill is that it would be possible to raise a bovine animal for the value of its hide if it had fur on it. The Minister shakes his head. I accept that we have had these disputes in previous discussions. However, as the Bill is drafted, it would be possible to raise a bovine animal such as the belted Galloway, which would possibly have a very valuable hide. That would come under the definition in chapter 43 of the *Official Journal* of the European Communities. Again, the Minister shakes his head. However, he is wrong. It is an unlikely event, but such an animal could be covered by the Bill.

In any event, I would let the clause stand for the disposal of bovine animals or ovine animals—sheep or goats. I do not see a problem in moving them on. However, we cannot allow mink or smaller farmed animals to be disposed of elsewhere. There is great skill in looking after mink. As we know, there is a huge raft of legislation that binds current farmers. We know that there are only 11 of them. They do their job with great diligence and skill, and there have been very few escapes, apart from unnecessary releases caused by animal activists. It is incumbent upon the farmers to ensure that the animals do not escape. If anyone else is involved, an escape is possible. I have seen horrendous damage done by escaped mink in the borders of Wales where I live. The water rat population has been virtually eliminated and ground nesting birds have been destroyed. This has probably been done by mink which at some stage have escaped from fur farms.

I have great confidence that the 11 fur farmers who remain are highly competent and skilled at their job and well qualified to organise the destruction of the mink. My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire discussed various methods of destruction. As I understand it, every mink farmer in this country gases the mink. The process is extremely swift, and dramatically more humane than what we put cattle through, transporting them long distances under the Government's over-30-months scheme, for example. The mink is transferred from its cage to a small box a few feet away and rendered unconscious within seconds. I think that it dies in under a minute. It is a very swift process.

8 pm

Mr. Gray: For the sake of accuracy, may I say that I think that three methods are permitted under the law: carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide and lethal injection, although I am not sure that any of the farmers use that last method?

Mr. Paterson: My hon. Friend is correct, as always. Those methods are permitted, but all the fur farmers to whom I have talked have said that a carbon dioxide gas box is their preferred method. They are experts and the job is done properly and humanely. The mink hardly know what is happening to them. The farmers have all the facilities for skinning the carcases, retaining the pelts and disposing of the offal and the bodies.

[Mr. Paterson]

It is most important that those people should be responsible for the disposal of the mink, as transporting them elsewhere and letting less skilled people get involved, however well-meaning they may be, would not be right, because they would not have the necessary experience or equipment.

It is vital for the smaller animals—mink and fox, in particular, although no foxes are farmed here at present—to be destroyed on the spot by those who have looked after them in the preceding years. No one else is qualified, and any other solution could lead to escapes, which can have devastating consequences for the environment, as we have seen.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I want to raise two points that I raised in Committee—people feeling so desperate that they release the animals into the wild, and the sale of animals into Europe where there is no protection and from where the pelts could be reimported into this country. That would be an act of folly involving a great deal of taxpayers' money.

I want to remind the House of what the Bill provides for, as that will set the scene and explain why the people to whom the provisions apply may be in a pretty desperate state. They will have committed an offence, as provided in clause 1(1) and (2); they will have been fined by the court; the court will have issued a forfeiture order, as provided in clause 3; and an appeal may have taken place. The poor mink farmer will have had considerable legal procedures deployed against him by the time that the destruction of the animals is ordered. We need to be sure when we pass legislation that it is crystal clear and nothing is left to chance. The words "or other disposal", which the amendments would delete, leave matters to chance.

When the courts have acted as I have described and the farmer has been fined up to £20,000, as provided in clause 1, he will then, under clause 3, have lost all his rights to the animals, which I assume means that he will get no compensation, yet he will be faced with the costs of disposal. I am very concerned that, under such circumstances, a desperate farmer or his friends may simply say, "Well, we've gone through all this, so let's just let them out."

When some animal rights activists released some mink, the effects on the local wildlife were absolutely devastating. Mink are some of the most vicious animals in this country. I may be one of the few people in the House who has been close to them, and I can tell hon. Members that they are absolutely vicious. When they are cornered, they take no hostages and can do very considerable damage to a human being.

Mr. Gray: I have enjoyed listening to my hon. Friend, but I must take issue with him. I can imagine no circumstances under which mink farmers, who are responsible and sensible people, would release their mink into the wild. He is wide of the mark in suggesting that. The people who would do that are the animal rights activists, who have no conscience and no control.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I hear what my hon. Friend says, but a mink farmer who has lost all his rights to compensation, has been fined and issued with a forfeiture order, and will be involved in considerable expense, may well be tempted to let the animals out rather than foot the bill for their destruction.

I was describing the effects on wildlife and the danger to human life that would follow.

Mr. Hunter: I want, with a constituency point, to encourage my hon. Friend to pursue that line. Mink released in the south of Hampshire have made their way north to the Basingstoke canal in the vicinity of the village of Greywell, and the devastation being caused to wildlife there is quite horrific. I was especially disturbed when a well-known animal welfare supporter in the area wrote to my local paper extolling the virtues of mink living in the wild. Some people's attitude on the issue is incomprehensible.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I totally agree. Any animal lover who wants to see mink living uncontrolled in the wild really does not understand them. They are absolutely vicious creatures and will kill other wild animals and pose a distinct threat to any human being who gets near them.

I take the point of my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray), but if there is the remotest chance of the Bill encouraging the release of mink, we should be extremely careful about it. I accept that the Bill's main purpose is to ensure that the farming of mink ceases, so the danger will also cease over a period.

My other fear is that the words "or other disposal" could allow the animals to be sold into Europe, where mink farms exist perfectly legally. The Minister said:

> I might add that there is nothing to stop farmers winding down their businesses immediately if they so choose. Disposing of their stock will not preclude them from the compensation scheme.

He was talking about a time before the forfeiture order is issued. I assume that once the order is issued, farmers will not be entitled to any compensation, but perhaps he will clarify that when he winds up.

The important part of the Minister's comments is:

> It would certainly be legal to sell breeding animals—abroad, for example—in the winding-down period, although farmers would not be able to claim compensation for the livestock because they would have received money for it.

Of course that is right.

> After the winding-down period, of course, it would be illegal to have those animals.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee E*, 6 June 2000; c. 82.]

Although it would be illegal to have the animals, farmers would have them—otherwise, the court would not have issued a forfeiture order. The court would have to consider how best to sell the animals and might well decide that it would be perfectly legal to export them to be kept in Europe. It would be totally unacceptable if we used taxpayers' money to compensate for the cessation of such businesses only to find that they were carried on in Europe and that the pelts, either raw or in clothing, were exported to this country.

Mr. Hogg: In fact, the animals would not need to be exported so far. Under the "other disposal" provision, the animals could be exported to elsewhere in the United Kingdom to which the provisions of the Bill do not apply, such as Northern Ireland.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for raising that point, too. Such action is a distinct possibility as the Bill covers only England and Wales.

When I raised the point in Committee, the Minister replied that it would be up to the Scottish Parliament to make provision in Scotland and the Northern Ireland Assembly to make provision in Northern Ireland. There is a distinct danger that unless we get this legislation right tonight, farmers who wish to remain in business will relocate their operations in those provinces. I cannot see any reason why they would not be compensated for going out of business, but could then set up another organisation in Scotland or Northern Ireland for the same animals. A little nonsense is creeping into the Bill and the Minister must say what steps he will take to stop the exploitation of such lacunae.

Mr. Gray: I am sorry to interrupt my hon. Friend's flow for a second time and shall try not to do so again. He has brought to mind a peculiar thing. Hon. Members who represent Scottish constituencies will vote to close mink farms in England, yet, as my hon. Friend describes, it is perfectly possible for the same mink to be exported to their Scottish constituencies, where fur farming will continue unless the Scottish Parliament decides otherwise. Is not that absurd?

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am sure, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that you would rule me out of order if I followed my hon. Friend down that path, but devolution creates all sorts of problems and anomalies. I have described the possible lacunae. Somebody could move their operations, perhaps under another guise, to Scotland or Northern Ireland, and perhaps not claim compensation for the animals because they retained, sold or were deemed to have sold the animals, and nevertheless claim compensation for clearing land, loss of business, good will, loss of earnings and all the things that we shall discuss in the next debate on compensation provisions.

Amendment No. 2 is interesting. The Minister will have to tell us very clearly what he has in mind in including the words "or other disposal". There will be circumstances that none of my hon. Friends or myself has thought of in which animals could be disposed of. I have no doubt that people in desperate circumstances will think of all sorts of ways. They may take advice from expensive learned friends, such as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), and find ways to exploit the Bill. Therefore, it is ever more important that we save them the trouble of doing so and make the Bill clear.

Mr. Paterson: On my hon. Friend's comment that the chances are that farmers will move elsewhere, the only known case is in Austria, where Mr. Pfeiffer moved from lower Austria 30 miles over the border to the Czech Republic.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that information. It is interesting, if not directly related to the amendments.

The point at issue is that we are depriving people of their livelihood and therefore need a Bill that is utterly fair and clear. Unless it is, there will rapidly be a challenge in the European Court of Human Rights. That is all the more likely if, having drawn attention to the point, the Minister is not crystal clear in his answer. I have no doubt that when the European Court considers whether such a case should be brought before it, it will look carefully at the account of this debate, how the matter was raised, precisely what was said, and the Minister's reply. I look forward with interest to the Minister's reply, and to his response to the amendments on compensation.

8.15 pm

Mr. Hogg: I begin with an apology for arriving late. I was attending the puppy show of the Blankney foxhounds. I wanted to do so in order to show my support for fox hunting. When I saw the puppies and reflected that, if a Bill on fox hunting is ever passed, they will not live their natural lives, I felt absolute outrage.

It is entirely right that the House should press the Minister on exactly what is meant in the Bill. My approach is a somewhat narrow one. I begin by asking myself what we are discussing—it is the forfeiture and disposal order. That relates exclusively to the order that will be made by a court on conviction. Therefore, the question that we need to address is what meaning the court will attach to the phrase "other disposal"? The fact that mink farmers might or might not release their animals into the wild is nothing to do with the clause. The only question is what it means for the court.

The principal forfeiture and destruction order is fairly clear. It is the ability to order the death of the animals. That is not very obviously in the interests of animal welfare. Indeed, hundreds of thousands of mink will no doubt be put down as a result of the Bill if it is enacted. I do not understand how that can be justified in animal welfare terms, but I shall address that matter on Third Reading.

What does the phrase "other disposal" mean? Clause 1(1) determines that the offence is keeping animals for certain specified purposes. It follows that, if a person is keeping an animal of the kind in question other than for those specified purposes, he or she is not committing an offence. Therefore, the phrase "other disposal" is put there to enable the court to make an order disposing of the animals by entrusting them to a person or groups of persons who can hold them otherwise than in breach of clause 1.

I suppose that what is being contemplated is that a court might wish to make an order directing that the animals be held by a zoo, or that somebody might apply for the animals to be entrusted to them to hold them as pets, and in those circumstances an offence would not be committed. Or, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) said, they might be exported to some country outside the United Kingdom. Those are theoretical options.

We are entitled to say to the Minister that we want to know what is envisaged by the phrase "other disposal". There is a theoretical justification for giving courts such latitude. It may well be that it is sensible to give the animals to a zoo, but it would be helpful for us to be told what is contemplated by the phrase "other disposal". At the moment, other than exporting the animals, giving them away as pets, entrusting them to a zoo or using them for animal experimentation—another possibility on which I should like to hear the Minister—it is difficult to see what is the scope of the phrase, so let us have some guidance.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: My right hon. and learned Friend has thought of another possibility—that the animals might

[Mr. Clifton-Brown]

be given away as pets. Given what I have said about their viciousness, would not a court be acting somewhat irresponsibly if it were to consider that, because mink are wholly unsuitable for that purpose?

Mr. Hogg: I agree with my hon. Friend, but the Bill does not preclude that happening. The Bill is thoroughly bad and I shall say so on Third Reading, but if we are to have it, it is difficult to see why anything other than a destruction order is available to the court. The phrase "other disposal" admits of too much uncertainty and does not give sufficient clarity to the courts. I hope that the amendments will be accepted and that the phrase will be removed. I doubt that it has an effective purpose and I suspect that it produces a lack of clarity, which we would regret.

My hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mr. Hunter) referred to the dangers of the escape of such animals into the wild. As anyone who knows anything about the countryside knows full well, that is a serious point. If the court makes an order for "other disposal"—not a destruction order but another disposal order—that increases the prospect of the animals escaping into the wild. If, for example, the court makes an order enabling a third party to keep the animals otherwise than for the purposes in clause 1, which is perfectly lawful, who is to say that the animals will be safely contained in their new home? They might escape. Or if, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold said, the order is for export elsewhere, the animals might do a bunk on route, so we will find ourselves faced with escaped animals.

If I am honest, I am bound to say that this is an odious little Bill. It is political correctness run mad, and I hope that the other place kicks it out. Despite its being an odious little Bill, we must give it serious consideration because it is before the House, but the points made by my hon. Friends on the amendment are sound.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Would my right hon. and learned Friend, who is much more qualified than I am in this respect, care to comment on the last point that I made in my speech—that we need to pass clear legislation in the House, otherwise the challenge in the European Court of Human Rights will be all the greater?

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend has a point, but I am rather surprised that the Bill is compatible with the European convention on human rights. I observe that there is a declaration of compatibility, but the Parliamentary Secretary will know full well that article 1 of the first protocol—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We are considering the amendments to the Bill, not the Bill in its entirety. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is now dealing with the merits of the Bill.

Mr. Hogg: I was responding to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I should have stopped the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) then.

Mr. Hogg: I should not have given way to my hon. Friend, but it was an enticing question.

I can understand the theoretical purpose for the other disposal order. There may be a theoretical cause for it. The Minister must amplify the theoretical cause with illustrations. Giving the animals to a zoo, transporting them abroad or allowing people to hold them as pets in circumstances not in breach of clause 1(1) are theoretical possibilities, but they are pretty bad ones. In truth, the only appropriate order is a destruction order. If I have the good fortune to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall speak on the matter on Third Reading, but I am bound to say that this is a pretty awful Bill.

Mr. Morley: The debate was not entirely illuminating. The provisions are simple, and the answers to some of the questions are straightforward. The intention is to give the courts the discretion to deal with the disposal of animals, depending on the circumstances of each case.

Most hon. Members have focused on mink, and they are right that humane destruction would be the most appropriate way of dealing with mink in the circumstances that we have considered. In answer to the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson), any destruction would be carried out in accordance with current regulations, which already govern the humane destruction of mink. There will be no change to that.

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) was a little confused. We are considering the time when the Bill is in force, and people who deliberately break the law by keeping animals to farm their fur. We are not discussing existing fur farmers, who have a period in which to wind down their business, and will carry on in the usual way under current regulations, which safeguard the welfare of mink.

The only realistic option for mink is probably humane destruction, but other species may be caught by the provisions, and other options may exist for them. It is therefore appropriate to give the courts some discretion to deal with each case on its merits. They will be advised by Ministry officials from the state veterinary service or the Farming and Rural Conservation Agency about the most suitable option. Some organisations or groups might wish to take the animals.

Hon. Members asked about chinchilla, which could possibly be farmed for fur. Chinchilla can make suitable pets. Their case would depend on the number of animals and the availability of disposal. It is appropriate that the courts should be able to exercise their discretion so that the individual merits of each case are considered.

I remind Conservative Members that one of the problems with the Dangerous Dogs Act 1989, which the previous Administration introduced, was that it was too narrow. That Act gave the courts no discretion, or any way of taking individual circumstances into account. Destruction of the animal was the only option available under the Dangerous Dogs Act. We all know the problems that that caused, and why the legislation had to be amended to include the sort of discretion for which the Bill provides. Under the Bill, courts can consider each case on its merits and determine the most appropriate course of action.

It would not be appropriate to export mink that were seized under a forfeiture order. Humane destruction is clearly the most appropriate option in such circumstances.

Mr. Hogg: The Under-Secretary used the words, "would not be appropriate". Does he claim that such action would be unlawful?

Mr. Morley: As the right hon. and learned Gentleman knows, that is a matter for the courts. However, I cannot envisage circumstances in which the courts would deem the export of live mink to be appropriate disposal. That does not seem rational, and I do not believe that the courts would consider that option.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: The Under-Secretary was courteous in Committee, and he has been courteous now. I cited Committee *Hansard*, because the Under-Secretary said that it was perfectly legal to sell the breeding animals in the winding-down period. No regulations would prevent their export to Europe in that time. Why, therefore, should it not be legal for the court to make a forfeiture order and have the animals exported?

Mr. Morley: There is a clear difference. It is theoretically legal to export to Europe now—I cannot envisage circumstances in which fur farmers would want to do that—because until the Bill is enacted, there is a winding-down period for existing fur farmers. In that period, the farmers will continue with a lawful business, and in such a business there are no restraints on trade. If fur farmers chose to sell animals abroad in that winding-down period, they would be free to do that. When the Bill becomes law, the keeping of animals for fur will be illegal and it would be illogical to allow the animals to be exported. It would undermine the whole point and thrust of the legislation.

8.30 pm

Mr. Gray: Let us imagine a fur farm in Northumberland with a forfeiture order against it and, across the border in Scotland, the Scottish Parliament have decided not to make the practice illegal. Surely it would be sensible for the English court to decide that the animals should be exported 10 miles up the road to Scotland where they could still be legally farmed.

Mr. Morley: No, it would not be sensible, not least because the Scottish Parliament is introducing parallel legislation to deal with the matter. I understand some of the points made by the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss), and one or two were sensible. However, some of the points made in the debate drifted into realms of hypothetical fantasy. I want to reassure the hon. Gentleman that, because of the fair points that have been made about the nature of mink, the only option for the court would be humane destruction. However, we should give the court some flexibility to deal with each case on individual merits.

Mr. Moss: The Minister has mentioned only one other species so far—the chinchilla. It was also the only other species he came up with in Committee.

Mr. Morley: Hamsters.

Mr. Moss: The Minister is right—he also mentioned hamsters in Committee, but I have not come across anyone raising hamsters for their fur and nor am I likely to do so. I am surprised that the Minister has dragged out the hamster illustration again. Let us be honest about the Bill and admit that it is aimed directly at mink farming.

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend seeks other examples, but he will know that the Prime Minister has created many peers who wear robes trimmed with ermine. I suggest that one other animal likely to be affected by the Bill—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order.

Mr. Hogg: The animal used for ermine—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. and learned Gentleman will sit down when I am on my feet and will not ignore the Chair. He has already been spoken to by the Chair for roaming outside the scope of the amendment, and his latest attempt is a gross abuse.

Mr. Moss: We rule out the hamster illustration, so the only other example cited by the Minister is the chinchilla. As far as I know, there are no fur farms for ermine in this country. The Bill is aimed directly at mink and, with the Minister's assurance that his advisers will always recommend destruction of the mink in the right circumstances, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 5

COMPENSATION FOR EXISTING BUSINESSES

Mr. Moss: I beg to move amendment No. 5, in page 3, line 14, leave out from "authority" to "by" in line 15 and insert "shall".

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 6, in page 3, line 20, leave out from beginning to "in" and insert "The scheme shall".

No. 7, in page 3, line 20, after "particular", insert—

'set up an independent advisory body in accordance with Schedule (*Independent Advisory Body*) to advise the appropriate authority on all aspects of the scheme.

(2A) The independent advisory body shall in particular—'.

No. 8, in page 3, line 29, after "claims", insert—

'(2B) In determining its recommendations on compensation to the appropriate authority the independent advisory body shall include provision for

(a) the payment of reasonable professional fees for advice for persons making claims,

(b) the payment of interest to be calculated on a compound basis on the total of agreed final settlement payments, or as may be determined by arbitration, payable from the date of the settlement or of any other time limit imposed for compensation payments, whichever is the earlier,

(c) the payment on account where requested by the claimant of 60 per cent. of the amount of compensation agreed between the claimant and the appropriate authority, or in any other case of the amount of compensation that the appropriate authority estimates the claimant is entitled to under the scheme, within three months of the submission

of the scheme, or on the expiry of any time limit imposed for the payment of compensation, whichever is earlier,

(d) consideration to be given for a payment to be made in appropriate cases to meet the costs of clearing the land in question of buildings or other fixed equipment utilised by the business,

(e) the payment of expenses incurred by the claimant as a result of the coming into force of section 1 including forced sales, premature termination of contracts, and any other reasonable disturbance costs.'.

No. 10, in page 3, line 39, at end insert—

'(4A) The agreement of the appropriate authority to refer a dispute as to a person's entitlement to arbitration under subsection (4) shall not be unreasonably withheld.'.

No. 11, in clause 7, page 4, line 9, leave out from "force" to end of line 10 and insert—

'on the day on which this Act is passed.'.

New schedule 1—*Independent Advisory Body*—

1. The independent advisory body shall be made up of no less than three and no more than seven members.

2. The members shall possess such professional qualifications as the appropriate authority shall specify in order to provide an independent and comprehensive assessment of all those criteria necessary to arrive at an independent and fair market valuation of the businesses affected by the coming into force of section 1.

3. The independent advisory body shall be set up no later than the day after the day on which this Act is passed.

4. The independent advisory body shall be free to seek guidance on valuations from professional and political associations involved with fur farming in any country of the European Union.

5. The independent advisory body shall be recompensed for reasonable expenses incurred in the course of its duties.

6. The independent advisory body shall report back to the appropriate authority no later than 6 months prior to the date on which Sections 1 to 4 shall come into force.'.

Mr. Moss: Amendments Nos. 5, 6, 7, 8 and 10 relate to clause 5, which deals with compensation, and amendment No. 11 relates to clause 7. Clause 5 is, after clause 1 which creates the offence, the most critical clause in the Bill because it addresses the issue of compensation. The private Member's Biff showed little sign of any real compensation, but this Bill has beefed it up. We welcome the fact that the Government have moved to address the issue of compensation more meaningfully.

As the Minister has said on many occasions, clause 5 is an enabling clause. Amendment No. 5 would change the word "may" to "shall" because we want to be sure that the Government are totally committed to introducing a compensation scheme. They have promised it and they have given assurances, but it is not in the Bill in a strong enough way to give us the reassurance that we seek on behalf of the 11 fur farmers who are looking for sensible, fair and proper compensation.

Amendment No. 6 follows on from amendment No. 5. It would insert the words, "The scheme shall". It would require the appropriate authority—which of course is the Minister—to set up a scheme.

Mr. Hogg: I am trying to relate my hon. Friend's amendments to the clause. My understanding of the practical effect of the amendment is that it would require compensation in Wales, as the Bill already requires a scheme in England, but not in Wales. Am I right?

Mr. Moss: That certainly was not the intention of the amendment and I am puzzled by my right hon. and learned Friend's interpretation. According to the present wording of the Bill in subsection (1),

The appropriate authority may (and in the case of the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, shall) by order make a scheme for the making of payments by that authority.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): My interpretation of the amendment is exactly the same as that of the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg). The appropriate authority can mean only two bodies: either the National Assembly for Wales or the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is required to introduce a scheme in England, so the amendments can affect only the position in Wales.

Mr. Moss: I am slightly puzzled by that conclusion. The amendment is an attempt to impose on the Minister, who is the appropriate authority in England, and the appropriate Welsh Minister, a requirement to introduce the scheme. Amendment No. 6 provides that that scheme shall—not may—fulfil certain functions.

Amendment No. 7 would require the setting up of an independent advisory body in accordance with new schedule 1 to advise the appropriate authority on all aspects of the scheme. It then places further requirements on that independent advisory body.

Amendments Nos. 6 and 7 are crucial in that they would establish a group of independent experts to investigate and assess the compensation requirements of fur farmers who were caught by the legislation. It would make the independent aspect of the compensation scheme completely transparent and would honour the commitment that the Minister repeatedly gave in Committee.

During our third sitting, the Minister promised:

Independent valuations will be conducted not by Ministry staff, but by independent valuers who will talk with farmers about capital and income streams before reporting back to the Ministry. Those professionals can be sent out to farms as quickly as possible, and almost immediately after Royal Assent.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee E*, 6 June 2000; c. 83.]

We have taken the Minister's words at face value. Indeed, we interpreted them as a commitment or even a promise. The new schedule, which we will come to later, sets out the role and composition of the advisory body. It refers to issues identical to those raised by the Minister—namely, the need to use professionals, and when the advisers should go out to talk to the fur farmers about compensation. We are talking about that taking place as soon as the Bill receives Royal Assent.

Under the Government's proposals, the scheme to be set up by the appropriate authority will have responsibility for implementing clause 5(2). We believe that the Bill therefore gives great control to the Minister and the Ministry. Clause 5(2)(a) requires the authority to specify

the descriptions of losses and businesses to receive payment . . . and the basis of valuation for determining losses.

Clause 5(2)(b) requires it to specify

the amounts of the payments to be made and the basis on which they are to be calculated.

Clause 5(2)(c) requires the authority to

provide for the procedure to be followed in respect of claims.

Amendment No. 7 would give that role to the independent advisory body. It tasks that body with advising the Minister

on all aspects of the scheme,

and the emphasis is on the words "all aspects". Any independent assessment of a compensation scheme should start from the premise of fairness and proper value. Appointing independent assessors would rescue the Minister from any accusations of organising a stitch-up or of having preconceived notions of valuation that are circumscribed by Treasury-driven financial limits.

The phrase "all aspects" means that all the facets, components, considerations and calculations that must be taken into account when arriving at a fair and accurate valuation shall be part of the assessment. To achieve that, the independent body must be made up of people with a range of professional skills—a point that the Minister has already conceded in Committee.

The independent advisory body must be free to start from basics. There should be a clean sheet of paper, with no preconceived notions as to what is ruled in or out. A lengthy discussion took place in Committee about the financial guidelines set out in the explanatory notes to the Bill. Paragraph 26 of those notes is headed "Financial Effects of the Bill", and states:

It is estimated that the cost of compensation under the Bill for the . . . 13 mink farms could, in respect of assets, be up to £400,000 and perhaps four times that amount if income were to be compensated.

We pressed the Minister about the upper limit of £1.6 million. Time and again, we asked if it was a predetermined upper limit that effectively set a ceiling on the negotiations on the value of fur farming business. The Minister was helpful in confirming that the figure was not carved in stone:

We will consider carefully whether the figure might have to be varied . . . We feel that our figure is broadly right, but if some adjustment is required, we shall consider it carefully following the valuations.

Finally, he said:

The valuers certainly will not be instructed to draw up a scheme within the maximum of £1.6 million.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee E*, 6 June 2000; c. 83-5.]

We feel that the best way to secure that clearly stated commitment from the Minister is to give powers for determining the compensation scheme to an independent body, with no strings attached.

Another vexed issue was whether income would be considered in a compensation scheme. That question was put to the Minister in Committee by my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown). The Minister replied:

I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the provision of compensation for income will certainly be considered in the compensation scheme. The Bill makes provision for that.

A little later, the Minister stated:

I have already said that there will be an independent valuation of the businesses, including their income.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee E*, 6 June 2000; c. 62-5.]

That clear steer from the Minister would help any independent valuers tasked with working up a scheme. It would be an integral part of their deliberations to consider the importance of income under clause 5(2)(a), which requires them to

specify . . . the basis of valuation for determining losses.

Amendment No. 8 would give a specific responsibility to the independent advisory body to take certain stated considerations into account in determining its recommendations on compensation to the Minister. Such considerations can be summarised as follows—provision for reasonable professional fees, the payment of interest on outstanding settlement payments, a payment on account of 60 per cent. of the agreed amount of compensation, a payment for the cost of clearing land of buildings and fixed equipment, and payment of reasonable expenses in winding up the fur farming businesses.

8.45 pm

Let us look first at proposed subsection (2B)(a), which deals with the payment of legal fees for the advice that fur farmers will need. A similar amendment was tabled when the private Member's Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) was considered in Committee. It was rejected because it was too loosely worded, referring as it did to "advisers" in the plural. Those in favour of the Bill argued that that placed no limit on the number of people whom fur farmers could consult, thus creating the need for a blank cheque. Amendment No. 8 is specific, in that it refers to the payment of reasonable professional fees for advice—in the singular. That would, we hope, rule out payments to a long list of advisers.

To my knowledge, no other Government have introduced legislation to ban an entire sector of farming. That places even greater emphasis on the unbiased and independent advice that the fur farming community will require.

It has been standard practice for many years that claimants under the land compensation code are entitled to have their professional advisers' reasonable fees paid for by the acquiring authority. The Bill will impose a compulsory ban on fur farming, which we argue is similar to a compulsory purchase order under the land compensation code. The effect would be pretty much the same in each case—the state uses compulsory purchase powers to confiscate an individual's property.

Fur farming is a very specialised form of farming. We believe that it is essential for the farmers involved to have access to good professional advice, in the consultation period and during negotiations, on the level of compensation to which they feel that they are entitled. The amendment would help to ensure not only that such professional advice was available but that the fees for it would be allowable in reaching a figure for compensation.

Proposed subsection (2B)(d) in amendment No. 8 would provide for the cost of land clearance to be included in any appropriate compensation scheme. In Committee, the Government gave an assurance that, as a general principle, they would consider the cost of demolition in relation to a claim in particular cases. However, they were adamant that such consideration would be given only on a case-by-case basis and on a case's individual merits, rather than blanket coverage. We accept that, and believe that the amendment conforms to that requirement.

Because the Government are proposing a unique measure, and because fur farming is so specialised, there is very little professional opinion available on what effect the ban will have on the future use of these specialised buildings and the equipment that is associated with

[Mr. Moss]

fur farming businesses. An example was given in Committee—a farmer in Northumberland had turned some of his sheds over to the growing of strawberries. Other people commented that he had gone out of business, for whatever reason. There are limited other uses to which the buildings can be put. It is important that the cost of demolishing and clearing the land be included in any scheme.

We know that land clearance, especially if someone wants to return the site to a greenfield site that can be farmed in more conventional ways, can be extremely expensive. Figures have been quoted of about £100,000 for a substantial farm of, say, 600 breeding females. Pro rata, that would come out at £17,000 per hundred breeding females. Those are substantial sums in anyone's book, and we feel that it would not be unreasonable that they should be included in the calculations in the compensation scheme.

Proposed subsection (2B)(e) would provide for compensation to cover costs associated with the winding up of a fur farming business. As a general rule, claimants in any scheme of compensation should mitigate their losses wherever possible, but there will inevitably be costs associated with winding up businesses as a result of the coming into force of the offence in clause 1. There may have to be forced sales of capital equipment, land and the property that goes with it. If a farmer was leasing land, there might be costs for early termination of the lease. There is always a cost when people wish to terminate a lease in advance of the appropriate date. Contracts may have been entered into with subcontractors to do work on the farm; they, too, may require compensation.

Proposed subsection (2B)(b) in amendment No. 8 would allow for interest to be claimed on any outstanding compensation and to be payable in the period from the date of the final settlement to that of payment. We hope that whatever scheme the Minister puts in place as a result of the advice that he receives from the independent advisory body will be regarded by all parties as fair and honourable, and that it will not take a great deal of time to reach agreements on the level of compensation. However, in the real world, things rarely go so smoothly.

Negotiation and settlement of claims could take considerably longer than a few months. If negotiations turn out to be lengthy because there are disputes about the scale and the amount of compensation, that may involve the matter going to arbitration, as we know from other parts of the Bill. It may well go to the Lands Tribunal, under clause 5(5). If it does, settlement could take years rather than months. In those circumstances, it would be appropriate for compound interest to be payable on the amount that is finally agreed. The advice to the Government from their working party on compulsory acquisition was that such interest was payable.

Proposed subsection (2B)(c) relates to what we call payment on account. It would allow for interim compensation payments to be paid when the final payment was unreasonably delayed. Since 1973, claimants under the land compensation code have been entitled to request advance payment of 90 per cent. of either the agreed compensation or, more usually, the acquiring authority's initial estimate of their entitlement. As I have said, it can take months or years to reach a final settlement in practice, especially if the Lands Tribunal route is entered into.

The amendment sets a lower figure than the 90 per cent. under the code; 60 per cent. is fair and reasonable. That would extend to the fur farming industry rights similar to those applicable to land compensation. It would be unreasonable of the Government to reject that proposal. It is in their interest to accept the amendment, because it is likely to enable fur farmers sooner to establish other businesses and sources of income.

Amendment No. 10 provides

> That the agreement of the appropriate authority to refer a dispute as to a person's entitlement to arbitration under subsection (4) shall not be unreasonably withheld.

In Committee, the Minister agreed that the Lands Tribunal was a poor long stop for settling disputes. Indeed, the process is notoriously slow and expensive and invariably extremely unfriendly towards claimants.

The inclusion of an arbitration procedure under the Bill is welcome. In the absence of agreement, we would support the selection of an arbitrator by the president of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. However, under the measure, there is a risk that the Minister could refuse to go to arbitration; or he could wait until the full nine months had elapsed before making his offer and force the claimant to settle at that late hour or face the unattractive option of taking the case to the Lands Tribunal. That would give the Minister unfair leverage in the negotiations. We should like him to accept our amendment, because it would give an assurance to all involved that he would not withhold unreasonable agreement to arbitration if the parties had not reached an earlier settlement.

Amendment No. 11 relates to clause 7. In Committee, the Minister said:

> I take the point that some fur farmers may want to get out of the business as quickly as possible; I understand that point . . . I want the scheme—

for compensation—

> to be introduced as quickly as possible in order to assist people.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee E*, 6 June 2000; c. 81-2.]

He said that it would take a couple of months to get a draft consultation scheme up and running. There would be a two-month consultation period followed by about a month of internal discussions. In the light of those comments and given the desire of the farmers to get the scheme under way as soon as possible, there is no reason why clause 7(3) should delay the implementation of the compensation clause until two months after the Bill receives Royal Assent.

New schedule 1 relates to the independent advisory body. The body should comprise no fewer than three and no more than seven members. The numbers are fairly arbitrary; we want a workable number of people—more than seven would be unwieldy and three is probably the minimum. Our proposal offers the Minister plenty of scope to act as he sees fit.

Paragraph 2 would require members of the body to possess such professional qualifications as the Minister deems appropriate to the job in hand. The RICS should be involved—because of the auctioneers and valuers. An accountant should be included. Someone from the legal side—a solicitor or barrister—should be involved;

also perhaps a National Farmers Union representative, and perhaps an expert in fur farming from the European Union. After all, there is a huge fur farming industry in the other member countries of the European Union, and some of those have already considered compensation schemes, so their expertise might be helpful.

9 pm

Paragraph 3 of the new schedule requires that

The independent advisory body shall be set up no later than the day after the day on which this Act is passed.

The Minister has suggested that he wants to get this scheme up and running on the day the Bill receives Royal Assent; we would give him an extra day. If the scheme can be set up before Royal Assent, for earlier consultation, we would welcome that.

In paragraph 4 of the new schedule we have suggested that the independent advisory body should be free to have discussions with people involved in fur farming in the rest of the European Union. Although members of the advisory body may not seek that guidance and advice or help, we feel that there should be such a provision because the scale of the fur farming operation elsewhere in the European Union is immense compared with our own. We have 11 farmers; I believe that there are about 8,000 fur farmers in the rest of the EU, so we would argue that the expertise in that business is far greater than in this country, and it would be very helpful if the independent advisory body were allowed, within its articles of association, if I may call them that, to consult in that way.

Finally, paragraph 6 of the new schedule says that

The . . . advisory body shall report back

to the Minister

no later than 6 months prior to the date on which Sections 1 to 4 shall come into force.

Clause 7 speaks of

no day before 1st January 2003.

We would say that this advice from the advisory body needs to be on the Minister's desk six months before whatever date he has decided the Bill will come into force. That, on the face of the Bill, is not before 1 January; so if that were to be the date in question, we would be talking about six months before then—the middle of 2002.

I have explained the long list of amendments dealing with compensation. As I said in my opening remarks, the provisions relating to compensation are the most critical part of the Bill as it stands. Only a small number of people are involved, but their businesses are extremely important to them. They are, in the present context, in the main lucrative businesses, and it is important that the processes that deal with compensation should be independent and transparent, and that there should be recourse to all the professional help that is available in order to arrive at fair, proper and adequate compensation.

Mr. Hogg: This is a terribly important group of amendments. I support not the exact wording of the amendments that my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss) has spoken to, for reasons that I shall explain, but their underlying purpose.

First, let me say where my hon. Friend and I are not at one, because I think that my understanding of the group of amendments is slightly different from his. My understanding of the Bill as it is currently formulated is that the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is obliged to bring forward a scheme for England but in the case of Wales it is a matter of discretion. Therefore the effect of amendment No. 5 impacts only on the Welsh dimension; it makes it mandatory for Wales to bring forward a scheme. In principle, that of course is right, although I would have to accept the principles of devolution. It may well be right for the Welsh Assembly to determine whether there should be a compensation scheme within Wales. None the less, in principle, I feel sure that there should be a compensation scheme.

The Bill, as it is formulated, places a duty on the Minister to produce a scheme. The Bill is defective in that there is no requirement—I emphasise that word—as to what should be in the scheme. There is a permissive power to include within it a range of heads of compensation, which are set out in clause 5(2)(a)(b) and (c). They may be included, but do not have to be.

The advantage of the approach of my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Cambridgeshire is that it provides for an independent body to make a recommendation, which has to provide for various forms of compensation. Why is it important that there should be an independent body of the sort recommended by my hon. Friend? In part, the argument is as he has stated it, namely, that we need transparency and independence, because—I now speak with some experience of the matter, if you will forgive my saying so, Mr. Deputy Speaker—all Government Departments are mean. They have to be mean because they are acting within a budget. One can be certain that if the Minister is the sole person or body to set up the compensation scheme, as the Bill provides, it will be done extremely meanly because of the budgetary constraints under which the Department is operating.

Furthermore, a challenge can be made under the Bill only within the framework of the scheme that the Minister has produced. The Minister is not only responsible for the scheme, he is the payer. A successful challenge would have to be within the scope of the scheme that the Minister has produced and that constrains the right of appeal in a way that is wrong.

Another argument is that the European convention on human rights will be in operation from 2 October. One of the consequences of article 1 of the first protocol, and of other articles, is the obligation to pay compensation. Governments may well be moving towards compensation requirements because of that convention and its impact on the compensation duties of Departments.

I point out to the Minister that, as my hon. Friend said, if there is a duty under the European convention to pay compensation, it is pretty certain that the European Court of Human Rights will require that the criteria for compensation should be set out and determined either by statute on the face of the Bill or by some independent body. Otherwise, to return to the argument that I was making a few moments ago, the payer will set up the scheme and will limit the ability of the claimant to challenge it. I very much doubt whether that will be held to be consistent with the convention. Therefore, my hon. Friend is trying to give the Government some reinforcement, although I do not suppose that the Minister will welcome it.

I deplore the measure. It is an odious little Bill. That said, however, we must deal with it as it is. In its present form I suspect that it is not compatible with the European

[Mr. Hogg]

convention because the compensation provisions do not appear in it in an explicit form and there is no independent body to set out the criteria. Therefore, there is a real danger of a declaration of incompatibility down the track, or an application to Strasbourg.

My hon. Friend the Member for North-East Cambridgeshire is giving the Parliamentary Secretary an opportunity to reinforce the Bill. I told my hon. Friend that I welcomed the purpose of his amendment, but one or two adjustments need to be made if its principle is to be accepted. Neither the scheme in the Bill nor the scheme in my hon. Friend's amendment make a requirement—I underline that word—to pay compensation for loss of profit. It may be addressed in the scheme proposed by the Minister, but it does not have to be.

Why on earth are we not providing for loss of profit to be a mandatory element in the compensation scheme? My hon. Friend's approach, if adopted, would need adjustment in another place to make the provision of a loss-of-profit element mandatory. I also wish to draw attention to the fact that compensation is simply for the value of the animals. The animals themselves have a value, which is different from the loss of profit, although they overlap. The Parliamentary Secretary looks pensive, but I assure him that that is the case. There are two elements: the value of the beast and the damage to the business. When people go out and buy a lot of beasts, they incur costs in acquiring them. Those beasts have a value. Down the track, however, there is a continuing profit for the business. Obviously there is an overlap, but those heads of loss are different.

The Bill or my Friend's scheme, when adjusted, should make provision for mandatory compensation to be paid for the loss of the beasts themselves. My hon. Friend has enabled the House to raise the question of compensation. I welcome his approach, which would impose yet more mandatory duties on the Government. I also welcome it because my hon. Friend suggests that the scheme should include various heads of loss that are not currently included. Personally, I think that he has not gone quite far enough and that the matter should be examined further in another place. However, I have no doubt that he has moved in the correct direction and I support the purpose of his amendment even though, if he will forgive me, I have one or two misgivings about some of its language.

Mr. Hunter: I shall be brief, as the points relevant to the amendments have been expressed clearly by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg).

I wish to pick up one aspect of what my right hon. and learned Friend has just said about the European dimension, which is so relevant to the compensation issue. The Minister will correct me if I am wrong or mistaken, but I have received briefing material which states that the European Commission has advised member states not to proceed with legislation on a national basis prior to the introduction of a directive which is currently being worked on. I have been given a facsimile of a document that purports to be to that effect.

No doubt the Minister will be able to advise me whether that is right or wrong. He will acknowledge that the European Union is beginning to move on that front, that growing attention is being paid to the issue of fur farming and that, in the course of time, movement is likely. In advancing down the way of national legislation on compensation, I am concerned that, while one or two cases of compensation are perhaps fully sorted out and others are in the pipeline, an entirely different regime will be imposed by the European Union.

I should like the Minister to contemplate that scenario, which is not impossible, and could arise and present enormous difficulties. That possible scenario makes it all the more advantageous and desirable that an advisory body, composed of independent advisers, is created.

9.15 pm

I do not wish to go over at length the points that my hon. Friends have made, but I emphasise to the Minister that, apart from clause 1, which establishes the offence, this is clearly the most critical clause. The Government have moved forward from the position in last year's private Member's Bill. I am grateful for that and readily acknowledge it, but it is imperative that the amendment to substitute "shall" for "may" be included in the Bill.

I have listened carefully to the Minister on numerous occasions on the subject. I think that that total commitment is still not there. The provision is not strong enough. Reassurances are needed. The amendments go significantly towards filling that gap. I hope that the Minister will seriously take them on board.

Mr. Paterson: This is the most important subject of the Bill. It is the first time I know of that a Government have wilfully closed a legitimate business activity which is flourishing in the rest of Europe. For example, fur farming accounts for perhaps 4 per cent. of Danish gross domestic product. I pick up on the comments by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg). It is important that the Bill has clear provision on a fair and comprehensive compensation scheme, or the Government risk running into fearfully expensive legal actions in Europe.

I pray in aid the National Farmers Union, which as we all know is a non-political organisation. It has made it clear in letters on the subject, including one that I received in January that

> Should this legislation proceed it is therefore imperative that the individuals concerned are treated fairly.—*[Interruption.]*

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle), who promoted the private Member's Bill, is laughing. There are people who have built up businesses for 40 years. It is their life's work. There is a business in the west country that employs 40 people. I do not think that it is a laughing matter. Because she finds the activity distasteful and hides behind the idea that it is publicly immoral, she wants to close it down. The one thing that we must do—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is already starting to stray. I should like to bring him back to the terms of the amendment, which is about compensation.

Mr. Paterson: Absolutely, Mr. Deputy Speaker. What I am objecting to is that the hon. Lady is laughing at the discussion on compensation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. There is no need to repeat the point, which I have just ruled out of order.

Mr. Paterson: Moving on to the Europeans, who will pick up the matter if the Bill is not fair? I have talked to Wim Verhagen, chairman of the European Fur Breeders Association, who is adamant that it will take the measure to the European courts if there is no fairness in this country. I pray in aid Helge Olsen, manager of the European Fur Breeders Association, who made it clear that it would be extremely damaging for the industry in Europe if the measure went ahead. They are concerned about compensation in this country.

The only reference to sums of money is tucked away on page five of the explanatory notes. Under the heading "Financial effects of the Bill", paragraph 26 states:

> It is estimated that the cost of compensation under the Bill for the current thirteen mink farms could, in respect of assets, be up to £400,000 and perhaps four times that amount if income were to be compensated.

That figure laughably underestimates the true cost of the measure. From a few brief conversations that I have had, it is clear that that would not pay to close even one farm. A farm in the west country has had a quote for £2.6 million on the plant and assets alone. It has had an independent assessor in. The estimated loss of income is £1 million a year. There is the question of returning the site to a green field because the buildings will incur rates. Those buildings will have to be demolished, a point that the Minister might like to pick up. The cost of demolishing the buildings on just one farm would be £100,000.

Therefore, I estimate that that farmer alone would look for at least £3 million to £4 million, which is a large sum. The man has built up the business over 30 to 40 years and invested not only in its physical assets. Fur farmers have invested substantially, although investment has come to a halt in recent years because the Government have said that they would not compensate farmers for that.

As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham pointed out, the stock is valuable. Farmers have bred the animals, created a brand and developed good will. The businesses have an international reputation. The Bill does not refer clearly to income and there are also the issues of redundancies, wind-down costs and loss making as wind-down takes place. I have already touched on rates and demolition costs, but there is also interest and fees, which we discussed in Committee at some length. They constitute substantial costs and the figure in the explanatory notes cannot possibly be anywhere near accurate.

As a further guide to the figures' inaccuracy—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have tried to help the hon. Gentleman, but this is not the appropriate moment for a general discussion about compensation. The debate is about the specific terms of the amendments. I would feel a little more comfortable if he directed his remarks towards the amendments.

Mr. Paterson: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The amendments would provide much better terms of compensation than are currently in the Bill. That is the most important point that we are discussing. Will the Bill offer a satisfactory compensation scheme? My answer is no. Would the amendments, as tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss), improve it? The answer is yes.

I have cited one example that shows that the Bill is simply not adequate as it stands. It will not cover all the costs that I have mentioned. A farm in Austria is the only one in Europe that has been bought out and it cost 4.7 million Austrian schillings to do that. The cost was the equivalent to about £400 for each breeding female. The Bill does not refer to anything like that sum. It does not provide a mandatory compensation scheme.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I do not think that the hon. Gentleman has taken on board my advice. He should consider not the general amount of compensation, but the mechanisms for compensation that are at the heart of the amendments. He must direct his remarks to the scheme that is proposed in the amendments.

Mr. Paterson: I was saying, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the Bill does not provide for an adequate scheme. As it stands, it would not come up with anything like the figures that have been proved necessary elsewhere. The figure in the explanatory notes is simply not adequate.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must take on board my advice. We debate within the Standing Orders of the House and he must follow certain rules. He cannot go outside those rules in the way that he is seeking to do. The amendments have a narrow scope and he must focus on that.

Mr. Paterson: Amendment No. 8 would provide for an independent advisory body. That would provide a more viable basis for compensation. It would touch on some of the aspects that I have mentioned. The proposed subsections (a) and (b) in the amendment touch on professional fees and interest payments, and it also refers to buildings. Those are the most important issues for the farmers who have built up their businesses over the years. They need a thoroughly fair and transparent compensation scheme. The amendment would provide for that.

The only figure that is currently referred to is in the explanatory notes. The Treasury will run rings round the Minister. The compensation offered is not satisfactory.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Some of the provisions were discussed in Committee, but the replies that we received, although courteous, were not satisfactory in substance. Our concerns therefore need airing again on Report.

On amendment No. 5, as my right hon. and hon. Friends have said, it is essential that in clause 5 the word "may" should be replaced by "shall", otherwise there is no obligation on the appropriate authority to produce a compensation scheme. That would be appalling. I see no reason why the Government should not accept the amendment.

Maria Eagle: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. The right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) first made the point, but perhaps I can try again to explain. Clause 5(1) already provides for the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in England to make a scheme, through the use of the word "shall". In Wales, that would be a matter for the National Assembly, but there are at present no fur farms in Wales for which a scheme would have to be made. Although one can see the point of the amendment, it is defective. Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that?

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I entirely accept what the hon. Lady says. The amendment is defective. That shows how

[Mr. Clifton-Brown]

carefully one needs to read an amendment before appending one's name to it. Nevertheless, the spirit of what we tried to achieve through the amendments is clear. If we had the access to the parliamentary draftsmen that the Minister has, I am sure that such an elementary mistake would not have been made.

Before I am led too far down the path of temptation and ruled out of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall move quickly on to amendment No. 8. Many aspects of the amendment were covered in Committee, but there are one or two that I shall discuss. On the aspects that we raised in Committee, the Minister said that they would be subject to consultation; and that the Bill would provide for them if the Government considered it necessary; but that the Government would give no guarantee that the Bill would provide for them.

That is an unsatisfactory way in which to proceed. As I said on the previous group of amendments, we must be clear in the legislation that we pass. People's livelihoods are to be taken away. It does not matter whether one approves of their livelihood or not. The fact is that we are taking away people's livelihoods and they deserve to be compensated.

Mr. Hogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Does he agree that it should also be borne in mind that this will be the last time—other than when we come to discuss Lords amendments, if we do—that the House will have an opportunity to discuss the compensation scheme? He will have noticed that the scheme is subject to the negative resolution procedure rather than to the affirmative resolution procedure.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: My right hon. and learned Friend makes an interesting point, and if time permits, I may get on to the subject of the negative and affirmative resolution procedures.

Let me return to amendment No. 8. I hope that, as my right hon. and learned Friend said, if the Minister does not accept the amendments this evening or give an undertaking that the Government will move similar amendments in the other place, our noble Friends act accordingly.

It is a fundamental principle of a compensation scheme that professional fees should be paid. No one would argue with that. In any statutory compensation scheme, it should be possible to claim reasonable professional fees. In many cases of compulsory purchase, interest is also paid.

As I said in Committee, it seems entirely reasonable that, since the Inland Revenue and Her Majesty's Customs and Excise charge interest on late tax and VAT payments, if the Government delay paying compensation under the Bill, they should also pay interest. Not only is that equitable: it gives the Government an incentive to agree to the compensation and get it paid as soon as possible. If people's livelihoods are being taken away, they deserve to have their compensation paid quickly.

New subsection (2B)(c) in amendment No. 8 provides for 60 per cent. payment in advance. Again, I declare an interest as one of only two chartered surveyors in the House. I have drawn up such claims in the past. When there are two opposing valuers—as I am sure will be the case here—it is easy to get to the reasonable quantum of a claim quite quickly, although the parties often disagree about the last little bit and may have to go to arbitration.

9.30 pm

As the Bill will make statutory provision for compensation once it has been amended properly in the other place, it is wholly reasonable that a large proportion—personally, I think that 60 per cent. is about right—should be paid in advance. That will help with the costs of resettlement and so on. Some of the payments may be taxable, so it will help if some money is paid in advance and some a little later.

New subsection (2B)(d) in amendment No. 8 concerns clearing land and equipment. I have been involved in agriculture all my life and I know how quickly buildings can become out of date. I have no doubt that the specialist buildings and equipment will be completely useless for anything else, so it is wholly reasonable that compensation should be paid to allow the land to be rendered fit for other purposes. If the buildings are not demolished, they may well be subject to rates, even though the business is not being carried on. In that circumstance, I have no doubt that the owner or lessee of the land would want to demolish them as quickly as possible.

If the state is forcing people to give up their business, it is right to include the items listed in paragraph (e) in the heads of claim. I have no doubt that expenses will be incurred in cancellation of contracts. There may be long-term contracts and some may even contain penalty clauses in the event of premature termination.

I suppose that "other reasonable disturbance costs" could include loss of income. The Minister needs to come clean about that. He said:

> Yes, the Bill allows compensation for income. My hon. Friend's Bill specifically ruled that out. During the discussion that we had in that Committee—because, as I said, the Government must pay in the end—

which is very good news—

> I accepted that there would be an amendment that did not bar the consideration of income.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee E*, 6 June 2000; c. 62.]

In other words, the Government could consider paying for loss of income but were not obliged to do so.

I would contend that, if the Government do not pay for loss of income, the claims will rapidly end up before the European Court of Human Rights as a fundamental violation of property rights. Perhaps the Minister, in declaring that the Bill complies with the European convention on human rights, will tell us how that can be so if he is not providing a statutory basis for compensating loss of income. I look forward with great interest to his response.

Mr. Morley: The amendments are very important. The hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss) moved them in a reasonable way and made a number of fair points, which we discussed in Committee in some detail and I tried to address in some detail. I also tried to be as helpful as possible, bearing in mind that, as the hon. Gentleman rightly said, the Bill is an enabling measure. The Bill provides powers to make the compensation scheme. It is not appropriate to include enormous detail of the scheme in the Bill. The draft compensation scheme

will go out to consultation and involve independent assessment of its various aspects, to which I shall come in a moment.

Mr. Hogg: If the Minister is right about that—obviously he is, in a sense—would it not be right to use the affirmative resolution procedure? Then the Minister would have to lay a draft scheme for the approval of the House and the House would at least have an opportunity to express a view on it. At present, the probability is that the House will never have such an opportunity.

Mr. Morley: A draft scheme will be produced, circulated and opened to consultation. The right hon. and learned Gentleman will appreciate from his time in government that I follow the professional advice of departmental advisers on the use of affirmative and negative resolution procedures.

I shall deal with the amendments one by one. The right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham and the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) were right in their interpretation of amendment No. 5. It would extend a requirement to make a compensation scheme to the National Assembly for Wales. That would be superfluous because there are no fur farms in Wales.

I sympathised in Committee with the points made by the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire about the requirement for MAFF to make a compensation scheme in England. That was one issue debated by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) during the passage of her private Member's Bill, on which there was much consultation with the National Farmers Union—when, of course, we listened to points made by fur farmers.

I draw hon. Members' attention to clause 5(1), which states:

> The appropriate authority may (and, in the case of the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, shall) by order make a scheme for the making of payments.

I have already accepted that that is a cast-iron guarantee that there will be a compensation scheme. I give the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire that assurance.

Amendment No. 6 and the first parts of amendment No. 7 and new schedule 1 address aspects that can perfectly be part of consultation on the scheme. I caution the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire against requiring great detail in the Bill. I know that it is not his intention, but a quest for such detail can be restrictive and make it more difficult to respond to consultation and include aspects that people feel are appropriate. We believe that the current provision is adequate.

As the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire said, there is an appeals procedure via arbitration or the Lands Tribunal—two opportunities. Setting up an advisory body is a complicated and bureaucratic approach to the issue. We have already said that, in drawing up the draft compensation scheme, independent assessors will visit fur farmers to consider what should be part of a compensation scheme and, of course, of the valuation.

Although those assessors will report to MAFF, they are individual assessors—chartered accountants, for example. They are governed by their professional bodies, as those hon. Members who are chartered accountants know well. There is an element of independence within the assessment that we are proposing, so such an external body, with all the bureaucracy and possible delay that it would entail, is unnecessary.

Amendment No. 8 contains a list of compensation provisions, put forward in the light of the consultation exercise. I made it clear in Committee that many of those are perfectly reasonable and valid. In Committee, the Government accepted much of what was put forward, and the Bill provides the power for such a detailed scheme. However, we are back to the problem that to include too much detail in the Bill would be restrictive in a way that I know the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire would not wish.

Mr. Hunter: I have read and re-read the Parliamentary Secretary's comments in Committee on the issue of compensation, but I cannot see a categorical assurance that loss of income will be reflected in the scheme. Can the Minister clarify that point?

Mr. Morley: The original Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Garston deliberately precluded compensation for loss of income. In the light of representations that we have received, this Bill provides for compensation for loss of income, and that will rightly feature in the consultation process. The independent assessors will, among other things, assess income when they visit farmers when the Bill receives Royal Assent.

I was tempted by amendment No. 10 in the spirit of moving the Bill forward. I recognise that there are legitimate concerns about compensation, and I can give the clear undertaking that Ministers will not unreasonably withhold agreement to go to arbitration. I am happy to put that assurance on the record.

Amendment No. 11 relates to the time scale for compensation. I repeat that I understand that many fur farmers want a compensation scheme up and running as soon as possible. When I last met them they said that they were anxious to have some clarity about where they stood. If there was to be a Bill, they wanted it to make progress and have it implemented as quickly as possible so that they could make their decisions and be compensated accordingly. That is what we have tried to do. We must have the consultation period. It is a convention that, in general, no Act of Parliament should be brought into operation earlier than two months after Royal Assent.

Mr. Gray: If all the Minister wants to do is to get rid of the fur farmers in the United Kingdom and if he is prepared to pay compensation in order to do so, why does he not just offer that to the fur farmers without passing the Bill? He would then stamp out fur farming at a stroke in this country without any need for the process that we are going through at the moment.

Mr. Morley: There are one two tiny technical problems with that approach, one of which is that one may obtain the agreement of existing fur farmers but, without a Bill to prohibit fur farming, others might set up.

Mr. Ian Cawsey (Brigg and Goole): Without a Bill to outlaw fur farming, what would my hon. Friend be compensating?

Mr. Morley: That is a good point. Without the prohibition of fur farming there would be no grounds for

[Mr. Morley]

compensation. We are delivering a pre-election pledge. I recognise the impact of the measure on British fur farmers and that is why, throughout the Committee stage, I tried to incorporate as much detail as I could on compensation. I have tried to be genuinely helpful, almost to the point of bending over backwards, both in Committee and today, to take such matters into account. We intend to do that. I want a scheme to be established as quickly as possible after the Bill receives Royal Assent.

9.45 pm

Until the Bill becomes law, there is no basis for a compensation scheme. I therefore hope that the Bill has a speedy passage through both Houses and that I have dealt with the points that the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire made so reasonably.

Mr. Hogg: Will the Parliamentary Secretary give way?

Mr. Morley: I am afraid that I am about to conclude. I hope that I have answered many of the points that were made.

9.45 pm

Mr. Moss: I thank the Parliamentary Secretary for his response, but he did not cover all the points that I made. For example, he did not consider the proposed new schedule in any detail. He talked about special advisers, including a few accountants, but he mentioned no other professionals. I am astounded that even at this stage, he does not consider including other professional advisers in the team that he will send out to undertake the consultation and make the assessment. It will take more than accountants to reach a sensible conclusion.

Who will the accountants be? Will they be Treasury accountants? In Committee, the Minister said that the advisers would not be MAFF people. However, I begin to fear that if the advisers are only a few accountants, they may be from the Treasury. What hope would fur farmers have in that case? I should be grateful if he elaborated on the likely identity of the accountants, and whether he believes that, in the spirit of the proposed new schedule, there should be a balanced and professional team. He did not mention numbers. Does that mean that two, three or more people will be special advisers? A little more detail would have been helpful.

The Minister dismissed the main thrust of the amendments on the basis that they were too restrictive. However, I believed that I had covered that point in amendment No. 7, which proposes setting up an independent advisory body

to advise the appropriate authority—

that is, the Minister—

on all aspects of the scheme.

That, of course, refers to the compensation scheme. I did not believe that there could be a definition more all-embracing than

all aspects of the scheme.

The idea that the amendments would lead to restrictions on the consultation on compensation does not hold water. The amendments are clear cut. The body would deal with all aspects of the scheme. The proposed new schedule gives details about what should be included. For example, I mentioned income. The Parliamentary Secretary gave assurances in Committee that the Bill allows for income to be taken into account. We agreed that that should happen. We did not table an amendment to that effect because we had received assurances about it.

Any compensation scheme could be cash limited. The Treasury has suggested ball-park figures, of which the Ministry has taken account. The Treasury will not be happy if the upper limit of £1.6 million is exceeded. However, that upper valuation of the 13 fur farms is light years away from the industry's view of the real value of their businesses.

We have heard the example of the Austrian compensation scheme. It is the only one that we currently know about. Its compensation equates to approximately £400 per breeding female. That makes the total value of the United Kingdom fur farming businesses approximately £8 million to £10 million. The Minister assured us that the £1.6 million mentioned in the explanatory notes was not set in stone. We take that assurance with a pinch of salt.

If the Minister simply sends out a few accountants, and the ball-park figure remains the Treasury figure of £1.6 million, not much consultation will take place. The pre-ordained sum will simply be carved up.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Since I spoke, a document containing the compensation scheme for the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 has come into my possession. It took eight months to produce after the Bill received Royal Assent. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be intolerable if it took eight months to produce the compensation scheme for this Bill, when it will be illegal to keep the animals after 1 January 2003, roughly two and a half years after the Bill receives Royal Assent? Clause 5 will come into effect two months after Royal Assent, and the compensation scheme could take eight months to produce before anyone could start working on a claim. That is unacceptable.

Mr. Moss: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, which he also made in Committee. The Minister has not answered it directly, although he has given some indication of the likely time scale for setting up the scheme and the consultation that will accompany it.

The Minister should respond to some of the detailed points that I have put to him. No guarantees have been given, and the whole purpose of the amendments was to seek clarification and guarantees that key areas of the compensation scheme would be taken into account in the consultation. If the Minister intends to send out only a few accountants, with a ceiling for the scheme of £1.6 million, I fear that the fur farmers will be sold down the river.

Amendment negatived.

Order for Third Reading read.

9.51 pm

Mr. Morley: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss) did not feel that I gave enough assurances about the compensation scheme, which is, in many ways, at the heart of the Bill, because I tried

hard to do so. This is an enabling Bill and will give powers to bring forward a scheme with full consultation, during which all the points can be raised. In Committee, I also gave a detailed analysis of how we can achieve those objectives.

I thank those hon. Members who have made constructive and thoughtful contributions on the Bill; as well as my hon. Friends—not least, of course, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle), who piloted a private Member's Bill on the issue and did much of the preliminary work on prohibiting fur farming in this country. She was very influential in shaping the Bill in its final form. We took account of the representations that were made and tried to address the legitimate concerns that were raised.

We have had a response from the European Union to the Bill, and it did not object to it. I wish to make that clear. Therefore we are within our rights to proceed with it, taking into account our obligations under human rights and other legislation. We are confident that it meets all the requirements that we are obliged to address.

I must say to the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson)—or perhaps I should say the hon. Member for Denmark, Central—that the Bill does not seek to impose our views on other member states. The treatment of fur farming in other member states is, rightly, a matter on which those countries must make their own decisions. Several other member states share our views on fur farming, the moral issue of how animals are treated and whether animals are being killed unnecessarily. We do not seek to impose our views on other member states, so we are within our rights to say that we do not appreciate it when other organisations and countries wish to impose their views on what we, through our democratic processes, do. I hope that the hon. Member for North Shropshire takes that into account.

In conclusion, I think that the Bill is important. Many people feel strongly about as it deals with an issue of public morality. I am sorry that the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) referred to it as an odious measure.

Mr. Hogg: I said that it was an odious little Bill.

Mr. Morley: I stand corrected. Frankly, I think that the political philosophy that justifies the abuse of animals is odious.

The Bill addresses a real issue of morality concerning the way in which we treat animals. I am grateful for the support that it has received from many hon. Members on both sides of the House and I certainly hope that we have addressed the legitimate concerns that have been raised during its passage through the House.

9.55 pm

Mr. Moss: The heart of the Bill is not the compensation clause but clause 1, which creates the offence of keeping animals primarily for the value of their fur. For the first time it criminalises a legal farming activity, which even after the Bill receives Royal Assent will still be legal in the rest of the European Union.

It is incumbent on the Government to give their reasons for introducing such draconian legislation. The Bill proposes a ban on fur farming. What do the Government tell us by way of justification? Their only justification at the time of the private Member's Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) was animal welfare. They have now shifted to a position on public morality. The Minister said in Committee:

we want fur farming to be banned because it is unethical.

He confirmed the seismic shift in the Government's thinking when he said:

arguing purely on welfare grounds is irrelevant.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee E*, 23 May 2000; c. 34-5.]

There is some inconsistency in the Government's approach. They often use public opinion and opinion polls to justify their course of action. However, public opinion says that the live transport of animals is wrong, yet the Government have found a middle way on that. Public opinion says that the cloning of farm animals is wrong, but again the Government have found a compromise. So public opinion is not an overriding consideration. In our view the fact that a majority of people want fur farming banned is not a reason per se for introducing an offence and banning it.

Setting aside for a moment whether a ban is fair, reasonable or even justified, we must ask whether it is legal in the context of existing EU legislation to which the Government have signed up. It is worth exploring that point. After all, it is surely misguided of the Government to introduce legislation that seems to fly in the face of current EU law.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): Does the hon. Gentleman intend to divide the House on this matter?

Mr. Moss: The hon. Gentleman will have to see what happens at the end of the debate.

It is worth exploring the legal position given that the Bill appears to fly in the face of current EU legislation. So worried are the farming and agricultural interests within the EU about the implications of the offence created in clause 1 that they have sought legal advice.

The Committee of Agricultural Organisations in the European Community—COPA—and the General Committee for Agricultural Co-operation in the EU—COGECA—presented a paper of legal advice in which they argue that a ban as proposed by the Government is incompatible with European law on a number of grounds. They cite articles 28 and 29 and of the EC treaty, the principles of proportionality and non-discrimination and a judgment in November 1998 in which the European Court ruled that a member state is not entitled to enact national animal welfare measures once a harmonisation directive or regulation has been adopted. They also cite the common organisations of the market. They argue that where regulations are based on an open market to which every producer has free access, the keeping of animals covered by the organisations cannot be prohibited.

It being Ten o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Question agreed to.

Question again proposed, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Mr. Moss: Powerful and cogent legal advice from lawyers conversant with EU law questions in a

[Mr. Moss]

fundamental way whether the creation of an offence of keeping animals for their fur can be made to stick. Without the offence, the Bill collapses and a ban is impossible to implement. That is why it is vital to challenge that crucial element of clause 1.

In our opinion, the paucity of uncontested, reliable and corroborated scientific evidence about mink welfare has caused the Government to drop their animal welfare objections to fur farming, and to switch their justification for the ban to grounds of public morality. On Second Reading and in Committee, the Minister offered various definitions of what the Government meant by the term "public morality". The latest definition came in a written answer of 22 June. The Government admitted:

"Public Morality" is not susceptible to an absolute definition: it inevitably involves subjective judgment.—[*Official Report*, 22 June 2000; Vol. 352, c. 300W.]

The Minister mentioned that the Government had received a letter from the European Commission responding to the six member states that objected to the Government's proposals. The Commission said that countries such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands should wait for the proposed new EU legislation on fur farming

before taking any unilateral measures.

Mr. Morley: The hon. Gentleman might find it helpful if I clarified that situation. Six representations were received, but only one was an objection. Four countries made observations, and one country wrote in support of the UK position. The EU said that it would be preferable to wait until a forthcoming report on animal welfare was available, but that is irrelevant to the Bill, which is being introduced on the basis of article 30 of the European Convention on human rights. That article has to do with public morality, not animal welfare.

Mr. Moss: I accept that the Bill is being introduced in line with article 30, but the Commission has advised the Government to hold on before acting unilaterally in passing legislation. The reason is that the Commission is bringing in new directives and regulations that relate to fur farming throughout the whole of Europe. When those regulations are introduced, it may be even easier for countries to object to what the Government propose in the European Court.

Mr. Hogg: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government are introducing the Bill now rather than waiting for new proposals from the European Union because it would be extraordinarily difficult for them to bring forward a Bill prohibiting fur farming when a European Union regime is in force?

Mr. Moss: My right hon. and learned Friend makes an excellent point. The Bill represents a high-risk strategy. It must be obvious, even to this blinkered and politically correct Government, that these provisions will be challenged in the European Court by significant numbers of EU member states. That could be a prolonged and costly exercise, and I wonder whether the Treasury will countenance what the Minister is doing.

What costs are likely to arise, and who will foot the bill? No doubt the Treasury will say that any costs of litigation will have to come out of the budget of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food—which we already know is under considerable pressure.

The Bill is, as we know, supported by Labour Members, probably on a three-line Whip. They are determined to oppose fur farming—or, more accurately, those who wish to wear fur as part of a legitimate life style—and they are determined to force their views on the rest of us. I can put it no better than Roger Scruton, who said in a recent article that to imagine that we have the right to outlaw those life styles merely because they get up our class-conscious nose is to base our legislation not on public morality but on private snobbery.

10.5 pm

Maria Eagle: I do not intend to detain the House for long, but I wish to make a couple of remarks about the Bill before it goes to the other place, and shortly thereafter, I hope, becomes law.

I welcome the Bill. I listened with care to the debates on my private Member's Bill in the previous Session, and to those at all stages of this Government Bill. We have rehearsed some of the arguments again this evening on Report. However, I note that, despite much of the sound and fury and occasional flights of fancy about furry sheep that we have heard from Conservative Members, at no point thus far in the proceedings of either Bill have they sought to divide the House. It will be interesting to see whether they do so in due course.

The Bill will be welcomed by the majority of the public, by right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber, and even by the Fur Breeders Association, which represents all the remaining fur farmers in this country. If I were to confine my feelings about the Bill to one sentence, it is this: I welcome it because it will end the cruel practice of keeping essentially wild animals in extremely small cages merely and solely to collect the commercial value of their fur.

The right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), who has taken part in many of our deliberations during the proceedings on both Bills, and whom I have listened to with some respect, called this an odious little Bill. I beg to disagree with him: I think that it is a humane little Bill, and I commend it to the House.

10.7 pm

Mr. David Heath: I agree with the many right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken at various stages of the Bill's proceedings that it is a pleasure to reach Third Reading, especially having listened to some of the deliberations that preceded it. I congratulate the Parliamentary Secretary on taking up this measure and making it a Government Bill. My view is that it always should have been a Government Bill. By that I mean no disrespect to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) or my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker), who brought forward a similar Bill previously. However, Government legislation is appropriate in this area.

Fur farming is an anachronism, and the public are out of sympathy with it. However, that is not reason enough to ban what has hitherto been a legal activity, and

Parliament must take that matter extremely seriously. Nor do I think that we should act out of our personal taste or distaste for the activity and its consequences. If I have any difference of opinion at all with the Minister, it is about whether public morality or animal welfare comes first. To me, the public morality lies in the indefensibility, in animal welfare terms, of keeping in a small cage an animal which, as the hon. Member for Garston said on Second Reading, is a solitary carnivore, territorial in nature, semi-aquatic and, in its wild state, used to roaming over large areas of countryside. Given the intensive circumstances that are necessary for fur farming, I do not believe that it is possible to bring the detention of those animals up to standards that are acceptable in animal welfare terms. That is why I think that the Bill is to be welcomed and should command support.

The important issue of compensation is addressed in the Bill. I would not be happy to support it were there not adequate measures for compensation. I have to say that we have heard more from Conservative Members about the European convention on human rights over the past three or four months than in the previous 20 years. It is extraordinary that this measure, the incorporation of which into British law was so vigorously opposed by Conservative Members, is now seen as the touchstone for the appropriateness of every clause and sentence of legislation. Well, so be it.

We have had a declaration of compatibility for the Bill from the Minister. Were is not for the compensation provisions, the Bill would not be compatible with the European convention. I did not seek to intervene on the amendments that we discussed in the previous debate, but I have to say that if the compensation mechanism was unfair in its application or insufficient to meet the legitimate needs of those affected, the Bill would fall foul of the European Court. So it is incumbent on Ministers to get the compensation scheme right, and I am confident that they will do so. It is a prerequisite for completion of the passage of the Bill.

The last point is whether we have to wait for the European Union to take Communitywide action on fur farming. Sometimes we have some topsy-turvy debates in this place, but when I hear the Conservatives argue that we should not take a decision in the British Parliament on what happens in Britain because we must wait to be overruled by the EU, I fail to understand the position of that party on anything. That view is shared by many people across the country.

The Liberal Democrats support the Bill. I honestly do not know what the Conservative position is. We have heard the Bill described as odious, vile, appalling and dangerous, yet it appears that the Conservatives are not prepared to divide the House on it. Could it be simply that, whatever Conservative Members' personal prejudices, they are afraid to divide the House because they know that public opinion is strongly in favour of the Bill? So are we.

10.13 pm

Mr. Cawsey: I have some valued friendships on this side of the House, so I shall be brief. I want to say a few words on Third Reading because I missed Second Reading due to an unexpected hospitalisation. While I managed to wangle a discharge to get down here in time to vote, the House did not divide on that occasion, which only shows that one cannot rely on the Conservative party for anything these days.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) on all the work that she has done on the Bill. It is only through her determination that we have reached the stage that we are at today. I thank colleagues in the all-party group on animal welfare, which I have the honour to chair, for its support, and I am grateful for support not only in this House but in the other place. We hope that that means that the position looks good for the future.

Mink farms do not replicate the semi-aquatic environment that mink need to thrive. Mink are difficult animals, as all hon. Members have acknowledged. They are non-indigenous, and they can cause mayhem in the country. Conservative Members made much of recent escapes of mink and blamed animal rights groups for them. I agree with my hon. Friend the Minister that all escapes are to be condemned, but it is worth reminding ourselves that historically the feral population of mink came about as a result of poor husbandry on mink farms, not the activities of animal rights groups. So the fact that we have mink in the countryside now is the fault of neither one side nor the other. They are both responsible and all escapes should be condemned. The point is that the only way to prevent future escapes is to ensure that the Bill becomes law and that mink farms are abolished in this country.

The right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) referred to the Bill as "an odious little Bill" several times. I disagree with him, although it would be wrong not to say that as he was speaking, the words "little" and "odious" were in my mind.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. That was an unworthy remark, and I ask the hon. Gentleman to withdraw it.

Mr. Cawsey: I withdraw it and apologise to the House.

The issue is whether we believe that animals should be kept soley and primarily for the value of their fur. I do not, and I believe that most hon. Members do not. The Bill has warm support in the House, and I hope that it will have support in the other place and that members of the British public will support us for passing it.

10.14 pm

Mr. Hogg: I oppose the Bill. It is quite wrong and I do not resile from my comment that it is an odious little Bill. I oppose it on principle and on grounds of detail. I shall deal first with the detail—I can do so quickly as I have already covered it; it concerns compensation.

Let us be absolutely plain about the matter. The compensation set out in the Bill is quite inadequate. There is an obligation on the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to produce a scheme—that he must do. However, the Bill includes no provision that any particular element of compensation should be incorporated in the scheme. For example, we have been talking about compensation for loss of income, but there is no mandatory obligation on the right hon. Gentleman or his colleagues to include such a measure in the scheme.

Let us be clear too that, subject to any consideration of Lords amendments, this is the last time that the House will discuss the compensation payable under the scheme because, as it will be introduced as a statutory instrument subject to the negative procedure, we simply shall not discuss it.

[Mr. Hogg]

The scheme will be introduced by a Department operating within financial constraints, in the knowledge that there will be clawback under its budget. We can be sure that the scheme will be a mean one and that we shall have no opportunity whatever to expand on it. The measure is defective in detail because there is no mandatory requirement to include certain desirable elements in the compensation scheme. That is the first point.

The second point is not central, but it is of some importance: it is in regard to Europe. I have come to the view that we should not impose on British producers and farmers unilateral restrictions on grounds of welfare that are not matched by commensurate requirements elsewhere in the European Union. I know perfectly well that I was a member of a Government who did introduce such provisions. We introduced a range of unilateral measures—in respect of pigs, for example—that were not matched in Europe. That was a mistake. At the time, I made it clear that we should not do that again while I was a Minister. I am very much against imposing on UK producers requirements that are not matched in the EU, nor, indeed, outside the EU.

Those are minor points. My main point is that the Bill is wrong in principle. What is the justification for the Bill? We must ask ourselves that question. There are two possible justifications: the first is on welfare grounds; the second is that the practice is unethical, immoral and so on.

I shall deal first with welfare. I listened carefully to the Parliamentary Secretary. I read several of his observations in Committee. I have also read the speeches made by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle). She argues the welfare cause rather more than it has been developed by the hon. Gentleman today. However, he made it wholly plain that the welfare arguments are not the crux of the matter. He said that the killing was unnecessary. It is to be banned because it is unethical.

If we were debating the issue on welfare grounds, I should have more sympathy. It is at least possible that mink cannot properly be kept in conditions of captivity. If that were so—if it were a proven fact—I should give serious consideration to a prohibition. However, that is not the case that is being put forward, because—I suspect—of the European dimension.

It could also be said that the animals can be kept only in certain prescribed conditions that might have the effect of making the business uneconomic. If that was the position, I would give that serious consideration too, because if the Bill had a genuine welfare foundation, it would be proper for the House to respond. But I do not actually believe that that is the position.

The position that I believe to be the case—and, to be fair to the Parliamentary Secretary, it is the position that he declared in his Third Reading speech—is that he regards the keeping of these animals for fur as immoral, unethical and improper. In other words, he is elevating his own moral judgment—and, to be fair, that of his hon. Friends too—and saying that because they deem it to be unethical and improper and immoral, it should be made illegal. That is where I really do part company from the hon. Gentleman, on the ground of principle. I believe profoundly in liberty, and in a free society people do have a right to do those things of which other people disapprove. It is not a free society if the individual is allowed to do only that of which the majority approves. Within a free society one has a right to sin; one has a right to choice; one has a right to make these moral elections. We are being denied that right, and I say that that is profoundly—

Mr. Martlew: The right hon. and learned Gentleman obviously feels very passionately about this. Does he intend to divide the House on the matter?

Mr. Hogg: I will give an honest answer: no, I do not, because I do not have the troops. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Ms Atherton) may find that funny; I am answering the question. I do not intend to divide the House, because the troops are not here with which to divide the House. The point, none the less—*[Interruption.]* I can be accused of anything, but I cannot be shouted down. I propose to assert a principle.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Let me assure the right hon. and learned Gentleman that he will have the help of the Chair in ensuring that neither he nor any other hon. Member will be shouted down in this House.

Mr. Hogg: We are at risk of losing a principle. In a free society, people do have a right to so order their affairs as to do that which they wish to do, unless there is a compelling reason against it. I ask, what is the compelling reason in this case? We know full well that many species and classes of animal are kept in unsatisfactory conditions or in conditions which are not natural, for the use of mankind. We keep chickens in battery cages.

Mr. Morley: I want to make it very clear to the right hon. and learned Gentleman that, in coming to a position of public morality, issues such as welfare and the impact on the environment are all part of taking into account the morality of a decision. Any kind of rearing system which has the effect of animals chewing off their own tails is questionable ethically and morally. How far does the right hon. and learned Gentleman take his position about the freedom of individuals? Is he arguing that people should have the right to use drugs, for example?

Mr. Hogg: The Parliamentary Secretary has given the game away, because if he wants to talk about the conditions of animals, he had better address the keeping of chickens in battery cages. [HON. MEMBERS: "We are."] We are, but let me remind the hon. Gentleman how we are—

Mr. Keith Bradley (Treasurer of Her Majesty's Household): What did you do? Did you do anything?

Mr. Hogg: We did, in fact. We pushed forward within the European Union and secured a new regime on the size of cages and the conditions. The point is that in regard to the keeping of chickens in battery cages, which I have always found a rather disagreeable practice, the approach that the House has taken in the past, and the approach that the European Union has taken, has been not to prohibit that but to require a higher standard of husbandry.

We are entitled to ask why this distinction of principle is being made as between, for example, the keeping of chickens, which is the example that the Parliamentary

Secretary chose, and the keeping of mink. It is not good enough for the hon. Gentleman to say that questions of welfare go to the questions of public perception of morality, because in one sense they do but it is not his primary argument. Had the issue of welfare been the primary argument, that is what he would have advanced as the primary cause. In fact, he and his colleagues do not like keeping mink for the purposes of fur wearing. I suspect that they do not like individuals wearing fur—I am pretty agnostic about the wearing of fur, save that I do not want endangered species to be eliminated.

People who take that view should try to persuade people not to do it. That is persuasion. They should not use the criminal law to impose on their fellow citizens their own moral prejudices, which is wrong. *[Interruption.]* I hear wails, moans and groans from the Opposition and I am not in the least surprised. One of the characteristics of this Labour party is that it fails properly to weigh up the rights of fellow citizens. The Conservative party stands for freedom and liberty— *[Interruption.]* Oh yes it does, and the jeers and the restrictive measures—the proposed fox hunting Bill—come from members of a party who want to impose on their fellow citizens a narrow morality.

I am against the Bill and I hope that in another place it will be deeply amended and—even better—thrown out.

10.26 pm

Mr. Gray: My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) made a powerful and unanswerable libertarian argument. The catcalls and grins from Labour Members demonstrate that they do not understand libertarianism. They do not understand freedom of the individual; all they understand is central control and imposing their view of morality on the rest of us.

I hold no particular candle for fur farmers. I have none in my constituency. I am sorry to say that I think that I own no fur and neither does my wife. I have no reason to believe that fur farming is necessarily a good thing. My opposition to the Bill is based not on the principle, but on the Bill's sheer illogicality.

I see the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) returning to her place. *[Interruption.]* I was not implying that she had left it. I was about to, but then realised that she was delivering a note to the attendant, so I forgive her. I did not intend to impugn her attendance record. She has been here throughout the debate and has diligently pursued the matter for about three years, so I was not suggesting that she was slacking in any way.

When the hon. Lady brought her private Member's Bill to the House, her primary argument was animal welfare. She said that it was the wrong way to bring up these animals, it was disgraceful and it should not happen. That may well be a powerful argument. I am strongly committed to improving the standards of animal welfare wherever we can. However, that being so, there are many ways to do it by regulation: improving the way in which these animals are brought up.

There are about 8,000 mink farms in Europe. We have 12 or 13 in this country and, by banning them, we will not be improving the lot of the 500,000 mink, or thereabouts, in Europe. It will be a politically correct gesture within these shores that will achieve nothing for animal welfare. Indeed, one could argue that we are harming animal welfare, in that we are exporting the production of fur. We are saying that we do not want it here, but will be happy for it to continue in Russia, which is one of the biggest producers of mink—mink produced under some of the worst conditions. One might argue, as I think my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham did, that if we are concerned about animal welfare, we should encourage good practice here, where we can control welfare standards on the farms, rather than exporting them to Russia, Mongolia and elsewhere.

An interesting change came about between the Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Garston and this Bill. It was first raised by the Parliamentary Secretary during a MAFF press conference on the issue and he has raised it several times today. We have got away from the animal welfare arguments. I think that the Government realised that they were not sustainable. If one is talking about animal welfare, this measure is not the way to put that right.

All of a sudden, the Government raised the issue of public morality. Let us think for a few seconds about that. First, what is public morality? Their arguments on this Bill, on fox hunting and on other measures of the sort are that the practices that should be banned on the grounds of public morality are practices that the majority of people dislike. They constantly talk about polls and say that 80 per cent. of people in the United Kingdom dislike fur farming. They also use that argument against fox hunting, saying that the majority of people in Britain dislike it.

I would argue that true public morality is about looking after the interests of the minorities—the small battalions—and the people who cannot look after themselves. For the Government to ban something because most people say that they want it banned is to abdicate their responsibility and to say that they are unable to make decisions on behalf of the people, so they will govern by opinion poll.

The Bill puts the Government in a peculiar position. We know that the business of the House and the other place is in the most appalling logjam, and all kinds of rumours are circulating in the Corridors as to whether or not the Government will be able to complete the passage of their important Bills. Even my constituents are asking why, if that is the case, we are wasting our time dealing with this Bill. There are only 13 fur farms left in the United Kingdom. Even if the Government hate fur farming, we should be dealing with health, education, law and order, and defence. *[Interruption.]*

If Labour Members will listen, I will suggest a reason why we are dealing with this Bill. It has nothing to do with animal welfare or public morality, which the Government have not got around to defining; it is about political correctness. They want to demonstrate that they are friends of the cuddly animal, but the Bill is the enemy of the cuddly animal. If they raised the standards of UK fur farms, they would be friends of the cuddly animal.

There is a further fundamental illogicality in the Bill. The Government could come to the House and say, "We hate the wearing of fur. We believe it to be immoral. Fur is a disgrace. We shall ban the sale of fur in Harrods and the wearing of fur in public places. We shall ban the international trade in fur." Most of that trade is conducted in London. If the Government said that, I would wholly disagree with them and think it an absurdity, but it would

[Mr. Gray]

be an intellectually honest thing to say. The Government have introduced such bans on ivory and on the importation of certain animals. They have said that the trade concerned is immoral and disgraceful and that they will not have it—but they will not do that in this case.

The Government know that the wearing of fur is on the increase in the United Kingdom, as are the sales of fur in Harrods and elsewhere. Fur is imported from Russia and sold to America, but the trade is conducted here in London. The Government are not banning that. They do not have the moral courage to say that it is a disgraceful activity and that they hate fur. All they say is, "We know a group of 13 farmers and we believe that, politically, we would achieve an awful lot by coming down heavily on them. Despite the fact that there are 8,000 other fur farmers in Europe, we can demonstrate that we are hard on such people. We are politically correct, wonderful new Labour and we will sort out the ills of the world by wasting parliamentary time dealing with something in which the people are not the slightest bit interested." *[Interruption.]*

Once again, we see new Labour for what it is. All that Government Members can think about is whether or not it is time to go home. We are ready to discuss these matters for as long as it takes, and if we divided the House, as one Member has constantly suggested we should, Third Reading would take considerably longer than it otherwise would. Before he leaps to his feet, I should say that I have not discussed the matter with my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss), but as far as the Conservative party is concerned, this is a matter of individual conscience and there is no Whip on it.

I, for one, will not seek to divide the House because it is important that we should make these powerful arguments, and I am confident that noble Friends and peers from other parties will want to develop some of them in the other place. They will want to point out the illogicality in the Bill and its incipient and unpleasant political correctness. They will want to try to sort out compensation for the victims of that political correctness. They will seek to correct this badly drafted Bill, which was introduced not for reasons of animal welfare or public morality, which the Government have not defined, but simply to try to brush up the Labour party's rather tarnished credentials. It is an attempt to extend the Under-Secretary's career of political correctness and to achieve what he has sought throughout his life, as an animals rights activist, and to ban something—

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gray: I am sorry. I am winding up my speech. Anyhow, the hon. Gentleman has not been here all evening. He wants a little quote for his local paper. I will not give way to him for that reason. He might like to attend for the entire debate. If he wants to take part in the debate, he should attend for the entire debate and not walk in and try to intervene on an hon. Gentleman's peroration.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has spent a lot of his life campaigning for what he describes as animal rights. He has spent a lot of his life saying that animals are sentient beings and have the same rights as us. His friends in the animal rights movement are for ever saying—it is one of their famous quotations—that a dog is a cat is a human being; there is no difference between them. I do not agree.

My father used a great expression which annoyed my mother a great deal. There was nothing sexist in the remark. He used to say, "Men are the lords of creation." He simply meant that human beings are the lords of creation. I believe that to be the case.

I believe it reasonable that human beings should use animals' meat to eat and their fur to wear. None of that seems unreasonable. The Parliamentary Secretary thinks it is, but he should not use such a Bill to expose his personal prejudices and to impose on people out there, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham convincingly argued, a Bill that will interfere with individual liberties and achieve nothing for animal welfare at all.

10.36 pm

Mr. Paterson: It is a pleasure to speak on the subject. I think that it is for the last time, as we have thrashed the matter out over many months. I declare that I have no constituency interest in the matter. I used to be remunerated in the leather trade. I stress that there is no connection between the leather trade and the fur trade because the leather trade processes a by-product of the meat trade. We are discussing the banning of raising animals specifically for fur.

I believe that a pluralist society cannot be run peaceably if the majority abuse their power over the minority. We are talking about a tiny number of people: 11 fur farmers own 13 fur farms, as against 8,000 fur farms on the continent, where, as I have said, it is a significant business—fur farming makes up perhaps 4 per cent. of Danish GDP.

The central nonsense of the Bill remains. I know that Labour Members do not seem to like evidence from Europe this evening, but I have a fax from the marketing department of the Charente Maritime Department in France. It states that 40 per cent. of rabbits are raised for meat and 60 per cent. for fur.

That is the central nonsense of the Bill. If it is passed, a British citizen could be fined £20,000 for keeping a rabbit in a cage, despite adhering to a raft of UK and European regulations. Exactly the same rabbit could be kept in the same cage and could be legally sold on for a profit. The difference is that the first rabbit would be killed for its fur and the second for its meat. That is totally illogical. Labour Members have failed to address that at any stage on the numerous opportunities that they have had to do so.

I do not want to go into the great raft of regulations governing those animals. If there were a case of animal cruelty, we could consider banning the activity, but the man in charge of ensuring that the activity is not carried out cruelly is sitting before us. He is the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. He is in charge of the Mink Keeping Order 1997, the Agriculture (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1968, the Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995, the 1991 Council of Europe convention on the protection of animals kept for farming purposes, and the EU directive on farm animal welfare.

The Parliamentary Secretary is the man who should be ensuring that there is no cruelty. There is a library of regulations that he should be enforcing. If there is cruelty, he is the man in charge and at fault, but no one in the course of debates on the Bill has talked about animal cruelty. Members have fallen back on something extraordinary called public morality, which appears to come down to the ability of the majority to trample wilfully on the minority for doing something that they do not like.

It is immoral to force the United Kingdom into what might be a huge legal battle with determined, well financed industrialists on the continent. As I have said, there are 8,000 fur farms on the continent and they have substantial financial resources. They have made it clear to me that they will confront the UK Government head on. They are convinced that the measure is incompatible with the European convention on human rights and that it breaches articles 28 and 29 of the EC treaty: the principle of proportionality and the principle of non-discrimination. They have made it clear that they are determined to stop it.

Today, I received a telling message from Wim Verhargen. He said that he was still determined to stop this measure in the European Court and that it was ridiculous to be able to buy a Government. He added that it was not a welfare discussion. He said that it opened the door to banning many other activities on the ground of public morality and that it was a very dangerous precedent to ban an economic activity in which welfare was not a problem. I heartily endorse that view.

The conditions for compensation are wholly inadequate. They are not detailed enough and they are not mandatory. The figures mentioned in the explanatory notes are derisory. I talked today to Mr. Günter Pfeiffer, the only fur farmer in Europe to have a farm closed. Unfortunately, it was an extremely crackly mobile phone line and, although I learned my German in Vienna, he spoke with a strong Austrian accent. Still, the gist of the matter is that he was paid to cease his business. Although the law still allows fur farming in lower Austria, he was paid a lump sum of 4.7 million Austrian schillings to close his farm. To show what a pointless exercise that was, he moved his whole operation to the farm that he already owned in the Czech Republic, just 30 km away.

Exactly the same thing could happen in the United Kingdom. We have a large farm in the south-west that has a sister operation in Denmark. There will be no sum gain to mink happiness. Instead, there will be a huge bill to the British taxpayer. If there are about 25,000 female animals in UK mink farms and it costs £400 to compensate for each of them, the overall cost will be just over £10 million. That is a long way from the figure mentioned in the explanatory notes.

I do not believe that the Minister has gone into the issue in detail. For him it is a great victory. We know that the Labour party has received sums from animal welfare groups and that it considers it a triumph to get the Bill through. The Minister will be congratulated by Labour Members. However, it is immoral to spend a whole evening debating this issue when this country faces many much greater problems. We may have to spend £10 million of taxpayers' money to compensate for a business that is legal on the rest of the continent. The Bill is unsatisfactory, because it will launch the Government headlong into a lengthy and expensive legal battle with our European partners.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation).

PARLIAMENT

That the draft Attorney General's Salary Order 2000, which was laid before this House on 15th June, be approved.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Question agreed to.

Agricultural Wages Boards

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

10.43 pm

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the issue of the agricultural wages boards at a time when the Government are considering the future of the boards as part of the quinquennial review that they are required to carry out by statute.

My guess is that this is the first debate to take place in the House of Commons on the agricultural wages boards since devolution. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has direct responsibility for the Agricultural Wages Board for England and Wales, but the arguments that I deploy have equal force in Scotland and Northern Ireland where the decision is for the devolved Administrations.

British farm workers are skilled workers who deserve a decent rate for the job. I am sure that nobody would disagree with me on that point. However, individual farm workers are in an exceptionally weak negotiating position with their employers. They tend to be geographically isolated, operating in remote locations. They usually work alone or alongside just one other worker, and often their house goes with their job. About a third of agricultural workers live in tied accommodation, and in some parts of the country the figure is higher than that. There is little mobility of labour, and the social relationship between the farmer and the farm worker can bring its own pressures.

That is why the agricultural wages boards are so important. The boards provide the forum where both parties in the agricultural industry negotiate alongside independent members to reach an annual agreement on farm workers pay and conditions. The Government and the devolved representative bodies are currently considering the future of the boards under their quinquennial reviews. I am grateful for the opportunity to urge that the boards be kept, and that the Government explore options to expand their scope.

There has been a historical consensus of support for the agricultural wages boards across the farming industry and within the rural economy. Farmers do not want a minority in their midst undercutting them by paying exploitative wages, and they appreciate that the boards remove the time-consuming and stressful work associated with annual individual pay negotiations.

Furthermore, unlike other industries, farmers receive large sums of money from the taxpayer in the form of subsidies. It has long been accepted that as a quid pro quo, farmers should be required to provide statutory minimum rates of pay and conditions. Indeed, the Corn Production Act 1917, which first established the Agricultural Wages Board for England and Wales, also fixed minimum guaranteed prices for cereals.

The fact that the farming unions are currently split on the future of the boards is due to the crisis in the industry. That is understandable, but the crisis in the industry should not be used as a reason for abolishing or weakening the agricultural wages boards. The current trough, though deep and damaging, must be temporary. Farmers are under great pressure to cut costs, and a regrettable but defensible response would be to reduce the working hours of a farm worker when less work needs to be done on the farm. However, it would be indefensible if the farm worker's rate of pay were eroded.

Although the National Farmers Union and the National Farmers Union of Scotland report that their members currently want the boards abolished, the Country Landowners Association, the Farmers Union of Wales and the Transport and General Workers Union—the rural and agricultural workers union—are supporting the boards.

Policies that prevent the exploitation of rural workers, of course, have support which extends beyond the organisations that represent the industry. My right hon. Friend will be aware of the strong support expressed by the parliamentary Labour party agriculture committee for the continuation of the boards with at least their present responsibilities.

As well as the provisions of the agricultural wages boards, farm workers are protected by general employment law. It is to the credit of the Labour Government that employment law is much better than it was when last the future of the agricultural wages boards was up for review. The national minimum wage and the working time regulations are in place.

However, the improved legislation is in no way a substitute for the boards. The national minimum wage and the provisions of the working time regulations are intended as a floor below which it would be wrong to employ workers.

The agricultural wages boards are entirely different. First, I make the point again that the boards provide the forum where both parties in the industry reach an agreement on the pay and conditions of farm workers which reflects the state of the agricultural industry. The Country Landowners Association states that it is

> extremely important that the industry should continue to regulate the level of pay for agricultural workers and be able to take into account the peculiarities of employment in agriculture.

Secondly, the boards provide far more than the national minimum wage and the working time regulations, as is set out so clearly in the Government's consultation document. The agricultural minimum wage is higher than the national minimum wage. The standard agricultural adult hourly rate is £4.57 in England and Wales, £4.42 in Scotland and £4.38 in Northern Ireland, compared with the adult national minimum wage of £3.60.

The board in England and Wales sets down rates of pay to reflect the skills of farm workers. In an industry where a career structure is difficult to establish owing to the small number of workers in each unit, this provides an incentive to train. The Farmers Union of Wales said:

> rewarding qualifications, levels of responsibility etc is a vital means of persuading high-calibre people to remain in or enter the industry.

The boards set overtime rates. That is very important, as the average working week for a farm worker in England and Wales is 48 hours. They set a better working week, better sick pay, better holidays and rest breaks, a rate for working at night, a better rate for tied accommodation, an allowance for keeping a working dog and holiday entitlement for working Sundays. They also provide for paid paternity, adoption and bereavement leave.

The provisions of the wages boards are certainly better for farm workers than the national minimum wage and working time regulations, but it would be wrong to

imagine that they have been over-generous to farm workers. It must be remembered that they contain equal numbers of representatives of both farm workers and farmers. The minimum agricultural rate stands at about the same proportion of average male earnings as it did when the current board was established in 1947, and average pay in the agriculture, hunting and forestry sector is still £129 less every week than the average weekly pay in manufacturing.

If the boards were abolished or weakened, not only agricultural workers would suffer. The board rates are used as a benchmark throughout the rural economy. I understand that the Country Landowners Association has an agreement with the TGWU to recommend to all its members that they pay their staff the AWB rates. Furthermore, if farm workers receive less pay, it will mean more rural social exclusion, less money spent in the rural economy and a greater cost to the state through the working families tax credit.

The last time the boards were reviewed, the Conservative Government threatened to abolish them altogether. Their intention was clear from the letter covering their consultation document. It said:

> On the basis of its view that statutory wage fixing arrangements distort the labour market and destroy jobs, the Government has already taken steps to eliminate statutory wages controls in other sectors where they exist.

The Labour Party campaigned alongside the farm workers, other parties and indeed the farmers, to save the boards. We said that we would keep the them. I refer my right hon. Friend the Minister to Labour's general election policy handbook, where she will see the question:

> Will Labour keep the Agricultural Wages Boards?

The answer given is "Yes." We also knew that it was crucial that the boards were not weakened but that their role was maintained. In our policy document "Reforming the Common Agricultural Policy", we said:

> We see their continuing role as crucial to long-term prosperity within the industry.

The agricultural wages boards perform a most important service for farm workers, for the agricultural industry and for the rural economy. It would be a great mistake to weaken or abolish them.

There is a strong case for saying that the boards should be harnessed to do more: I commend to my right hon. Friend the proposal that their scope be extended to cover all workers in the rural economy who currently undertake agriculture-related jobs—gamekeepers, estate workers and so on. She will also be aware that there is a strong body of opinion that the boards should be used to develop a decent occupational pension scheme in the industry.

I understand that the Government are currently considering their review of the wages boards. I appreciate that my right hon. Friend will not be in a position to announce the outcome tonight, but I hope that she can give us a preliminary indication of her thinking.

10.53 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang) for initiating this debate. We all recognise his enviably long record in campaigning for improvements in the working conditions and remuneration of agricultural workers. He has taken an interest in those matters for longer than I have been in the House.

The debate gives me a welcome opportunity to update the House on the review of the operation of the Agricultural Wages Board and the agricultural wages committees. The review obviously includes a review of statutory wage and other employment provisions that obtain in agriculture and horticulture. My right hon. Friend mentioned devolution. I am primarily concerned with the arrangements in England and Wales and my remarks should be interpreted in that context, but right hon. and hon. Members will wish to note that a parallel review of the separate agricultural minimum wage arrangements in Scotland is also being conducted.

I know that my right hon. Friend is familiar with the history of the Agricultural Wages Board, which has served us well over a long period. It was established in 1924 and has played an increasingly important role in setting minimum rates of pay and other terms and conditions for agricultural workers.

In the early days, the board, working with the agricultural wages committees, was responsible for fixing minimum rates of pay, overtime rates and the value of payments in kind. The power to fix holidays with pay came in 1938, and the power to introduce agricultural wages sick pay came as recently as 1967. In 1975, the board was given the power to fix other terms and conditions for employment for agricultural workers, and in 1999 we imported the better enforcement arrangement, which was provided under the National Minimum Wage Act 1998, into the agriculture system.

In looking at the current agricultural wages order, which came into force in England and Wales on 1 June, one can certainly recognise the wide range of issues covered by the board. Those include minimum basic and overtime rates for standard workers, flexible workers, casual workers and several categories of young workers. The order provides a career structure for the industry by setting higher minimum rates for workers with particular qualifications and for workers with special responsibilities. Those relate both to the farming side of the business and to staff management. Workers on stand-by duty, on a day when they do not normally work, or those doing night work, perhaps during lambing or other busy times of the year, are entitled to a prescribed minimum payment.

My right hon. Friend also mentioned the dog rate. When I first heard of that I wondered whether it was some minimum wage for dogs, but of course, as he said, it is a payment to agricultural workers who are required to keep working dogs, in recognition of the additional costs they must bear.

The current order deals with rest breaks; additional holiday days for workers who normally work overtime on a Sunday; holidays and other leave, including public holidays; the new service holiday; bereavement, paternity and adoption leave; and the payment of agriculture wages sick pay. Those arrangements help to ensure that agricultural workers are given fair terms and conditions of employment and are treated fairly by their employers. The arrangements recognise, too, that agricultural work is highly skilled, demanding and, as we know, frequently dangerous.

[Ms Joyce Quin]

Since the election, this Government have made significant changes in the protection offered by general employment law. Those apply to all workers, including those covered by the agricultural wages order. The Government introduced the working time regulations, which place a limit on average weekly working hours and entitle workers to minimum rest periods and rest breaks and to paid annual leave.

A year later, we saw the introduction of the national minimum wage. There has also been legislation entitling workers to unpaid time off in certain circumstances, and dealing with part-time work. The result is that all workers are much better protected than they were when the Government came to power.

While ensuring that we protect employees, we have also sought in various ways not to over-regulate businesses—which is important in agriculture as well as in other sectors—and to look at issues of competitiveness. We know that some sectors of agriculture receive particular levels of subsidy from the European Union. Others, such as horticulture, pigs and poultry, have to compete freely, often against cheap imports from countries outside the EU.

However, a recognition of costs and the competitive factors never justifies exploitation, and it certainly does not justify any illegal activity such as the exploitation of illegal immigrant workers. I make that point because I know that there is interest in the House in some of the activities of gangmasters in the agricultural sector which have been discovered. The Government take those issues very seriously.

In May 1997, we began work on the issue, investigating gangmasters and their way of operating, and a year later we launched Operation Gangmaster as a way of joining up the enforcement activities of seven to eight agencies covering all aspects of employment law, taxation and benefits. We began that in a pilot area and we are now extending it to six other areas.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): The right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang) said that the wage rates set by the Agricultural Wages Board were in excess of the minimum wage under the National Minimum Wage Act 1998. Yet in rural areas, average earnings are very much below average earnings in urban areas. Does that not make the case for the Agricultural Wages Board to be strengthened and for its role to be broadened rather than diminished?

Ms Quin: In the course of the review, we are considering various proposals, not just in relation to the board's core activities but in relation to related issues. There is at least some evidence that, in rural areas, the agricultural wages committees have the beneficial effect of setting an example to other employers. It is important to take that into account.

I pay tribute to the work done by the Agricultural Wages Board over the years. It has been well served by the generation of representative members, particularly those nominated by the Transport and General Workers Union, of which I am a member, by the National Farmers Union, and by the independent members. I know that the members on the board have given a great deal of time and thought to the board's work.

I also know that the board has been quick to acknowledge the recent changes in the general employment law, and that it has taken steps to ensure that there is no conflict between the wages order and the general law. In 1998 and 1999 it made two orders to keep abreast of the changes. This year, the board has brought the holiday provisions as closely into line with those in the working time regulations as possible under the board's current powers.

The Agricultural Wages Board, like all other non-departmental public bodies, is subject to regular quinquennial reviews. That gives us a chance to take a fresh look at all aspects of the policy and the operation of the current arrangements. I recognise that such reviews can be unsettling, but they have an important role to play in ensuring that Government policy meets current needs, and that the work of those important organisations is regularly reviewed.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Reference has been made to England, Wales and Scotland, but I am sure that the Minister will agree that the same provisions should apply to agricultural workers in Northern Ireland.

Ms Quin: Obviously, the principles that we are discussing are important in all parts of the United Kingdom, but I do not want in this debate to trespass on the responsibilities of our good colleague, Brid Rodgers, whom I was pleased to see return to her agriculture and rural affairs portfolio in Northern Ireland.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh made a number of comments to which it is important I respond. In general terms, the results of the consultation process are not wholly surprising. Obviously, the trade unions and representatives of agricultural workers strongly support retention of the board. The NFU has advocated its abolition, while some other employer organisations, and some individual employers have backed its retention, but some have put forward ideas for modifications to the current arrangements.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the views of the Farmers Union of Wales, which supports the board. On the other hand, the Horticultural Trades Association saw little need to retain it. The Country Landowners Association believes that it serves a useful purpose, although it and the Tenant Farmers Association made some proposals for change. That is a broad-brush account of the response, which contained a great deal of detail and is currently being considered thoroughly.

An independent research project also examined the impact of the current arrangements on employers and their workers. My right hon. Friend expressed some anxiety about that procedure, but that approach has been applied to at least one review of the Agricultural Wages Board, and to other normal quinquennial reviews. Again, I would not like to suggest that the approach to the review that we are considering was unique. The opposite is the case.

I understand the desire for an early announcement on the board's future. I recognise the strong belief of many

hon. Members of all parties in the work of the board. I know about the recent early-day motion tabled on the subject, which shows strong support from colleagues. However, we want to do the review process justice. I hope that my right hon. Friend and other hon. Members appreciate that the issues that the review raised mean considering a range of social, employment and competitiveness matters.

I assure my right hon. Friend and other hon. Members that their points are being given due weight in the current deliberations. I hope to be able to announce the outcome of the review as soon as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at seven minutes past Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 29 June 2000

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

LONDON LOCAL AUTHORITIES BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

Order for consideration, as amended, read.

To be considered on Wednesday 5 July at Seven o'clock.

MERSEY TUNNELS BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second Time on Thursday 6 July.

Oral Answers to Questions

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

The Minister was asked—

Common Agricultural Policy

1. **Mr. Derek Twigg** (Halton): What plans he has for reform of the common agricultural policy arable regime. [127030]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): As part of the Agenda 2000 agreement we achieved a substantial narrowing of the gap between European Union and world prices. We also secured a further review of price levels in 2002 and will use this opportunity to further our reform agenda. Arable area payments account for one third of CAP expenditure in the United Kingdom and will amount to about £1 billion this year.

Mr. Twigg: Is there not a better way to use the £1 billion that subsidises large arable farm businesses? The savings being made could be used to conserve the countryside and support business plans to return small farms to profitability.

Ms Quin: My hon. Friend is right to talk in terms of a new direction for agricultural policy, which is precisely what the Government are seeking to bring about through their use of the rural development regulation and in their reform agenda throughout the European Union.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): In the common agricultural policy debate on 11 May the Minister said that he was disappointed that there was no cut in the sugar price, and that the case for the cut was strong, because the support was increasingly out of line with that for other crops. Does he not realise that with a harvest price of £60 a tonne for wheat and barley this year, no farmers will make a profit? He is giving the clear impression that the only justification for cutting the sugar price is that because farmers cannot make a profit on any other crop, they should not make one on sugar beet either. What reasons does the Minister have for seeking a cut in the sugar price when sugar is about the only arable crop left that is making any profit whatever?

Ms Quin: I am rather surprised to hear the hon. Gentleman ask that question, because I am sure that he knows the answer. My right hon. Friend the Minister rightly pointed out the difference between some of the prices for arable products, particularly wheat, and the price for sugar, which is about four times the world price. We know that the European Commission is making proposals for changes to the sugar regime, so we need to look at them and act consistently with our drive for agricultural reform in general. The hon. Gentleman should also take into account the fact that many of our food processing industries are damaged by the artificially high EU price for sugar. It is the Government's duty to consider everyone who is affected by the EU regime and find a sensible way forward. We shall certainly consult all parts of the sugar industry, but we are concerned about our responsibilities to consumers and the British economy generally.

GM Crops

2. **Joan Ruddock** (Lewisham, Deptford): What response he has had to his consultation on separation distances for GM crops. [127031]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): Lead responsibility for different aspects of policy on genetically modified crops falls to different Ministers. My responsibilities in this area cover seed purity, agronomic practice and agricultural production, and the implications, other than food safety implications, for different sectors of the food chain.

My hon. Friend asked about the review of separation distances, for which I have lead responsibility. As of this morning, 12 individual responses to the review have been received, expressing a range of views. The deadline for responses is 10 July.

Joan Ruddock: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply, and for his timely consultation. Will he ensure that account is taken of the research into low frequency and high magnitude weather events which transport much larger quantities of pollen over much greater distances? Does he agree that he must take account of that factor as the consultation runs its course? Does he further agree that separation distances to protect seed purity need to be negotiated internationally?

Mr. Brown: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend on the last point, but that does not relieve us of our responsibility to get things right here. That is precisely

the purpose of the consultation exercise on which we have embarked. I will take what she says about the variations in climatic conditions as representations to the review.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Has the Minister visited America or sent any officials to look at separation distances there, where GM crops have been grown commercially in substantial quantities for more than 10 years?

Mr. Brown: Yes, I have visited the United States and discussed these matters with my counterparts there on a number of occasions. As I think I have already informed the House, I have also sent an official to Canada to liaise with the Canadian authorities over the latest incident involving the contamination of crops with genetically modified seeds in oilseed rape.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): Separation distances are also important for small-scale test sites. Has my right hon. Friend had any representations about them? I raise this matter because the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has no information on small-scale test sites as it does for farm-scale trials. Will he consider making representations to the DETR so that farmers and consumers alike can know where all test sites, whether large or small, are?

Mr. Brown: That is an important point; it is necessary to protect the interests of small farmers as well as those of large farmers. My hon. Friend is right to make the point. Officials in MAFF are working closely with officials in the DETR on the review, but the review is being conducted primarily to give security for reasons of agricultural production.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): On 8 June, the Minister told Parliament, as recorded in column 502 of *Hansard*, that he had put the minutes of the early meetings—I emphasise the plural—with Advanta in the public domain. As of last night—almost three weeks later—the Library had received a minute only of the meeting of 17 April. Why has the Library not received other minutes? Last month, the Minister told the House that his officials had been in continuous contact with the company. Why will he not come clean and tell the House what advice his officials gave Advanta and when they gave it? Above all, will he tell us why no warning was given to farmers, such as those in Scotland, who were still planting GM-contaminated seed after MAFF knew that contamination was possible?

Mr. Brown: As I carefully explained in my initial response, responsibility for GM issues is shared among several Ministers; I am not the Minister with responsibility for co-ordinating Government policy on the matter. I gave the House an assurance that a note of the meeting of 17 April would be put in the Library; that has been done. What I cannot do—as the hon. Gentleman is well aware—is to share more generally the policy advice given to Ministers.

Mr. Yeo: In the debate organised by the Opposition on 8 June, the Minister confirmed to the House that

> I can put the minutes of the early meetings in the public domain—I understand that there is no reason why I should not; therefore I shall do so, as I want to be candid.—[*Official Report*, 8 June 2000; Vol. 351, c. 502.]

The Minister is reneging on that assurance. Having told the House that the information would be in the public domain, he refuses to put it there. The conclusion drawn by the farmers whose businesses have been damaged, by the company, which is apparently liable for damages, and by the general public, will be that he has much to hide. This smacks of a ministerial cover-up. The House and the public deserve to know what advice was given to the company and when that advice was given. The longer the Minister fails to provide that information, the more his actions directly destroy confidence in the whole technology.

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman completely misrepresents what was said in the debate. Earlier, I was careful to qualify what I said. If he reads back a few paragraphs, he will see that—in response, I think, to something said by one of his hon. Friends—I was careful to qualify what I said. The information that I promised is in the Library, where the hon. Gentleman can go and see it—now, if he would like.

Animal Welfare (World Trade Organisation)

3. **Mr. Brian White** (Milton Keynes, North-East): What plans he has to raise animal welfare issues with the World Trade Organisation. [127032]

12. **Ms Joan Ryan** (Enfield, North): What representations he has received concerning animal welfare in the next round of World Trade Organisation negotiations. [127041]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): The European Union has made a commitment to taking forward the issue of farm animal welfare in the World Trade Organisation negotiations. The UK has been a strong supporter of that commitment, which was reinforced by the Prime Minister in his strategy for agriculture, published on 30 March. We will certainly pursue the issue in the negotiations on agriculture that have started.

Mr. White: I thank my right hon. Friend for that response. In my constituency, many farmers are quite happy with the current standards of animal welfare. However, they are concerned about imports of animals from places where standards are lower. Will she give an assurance that she will ensure that farmers in my constituency do not lose out under any liberalisation as a result of the WTO negotiations?

Ms Quin: I recognise the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend. In the Ministry, we have held several meetings with interested parties throughout the farming industry about how best to pursue the important subject of animal welfare in world trade negotiations. I am glad that the EU is addressing the issue more seriously than it

has in the past, and that we can secure, in the official EU mandate governing the negotiations, a specific reference to animal welfare.

Ms Ryan: May I lend my support to that of Compassion in World Farming for the idea of making payments for high animal welfare standards eligible for green box treatment in the World Trade Organisation? That is the best way to move ahead in liberalising trade in agricultural products while preserving high animal welfare standards in the United Kingdom. Will my right hon. Friend raise that matter during the World Trade Organisation negotiations?

Ms Quin: The suggestion that we should get payments authorised within the so-called green box is an interesting idea that my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture has put forward. It was also explored with me when I recently gave evidence to the Select Committee on Agriculture. Obviously, we want recognition of animal welfare standards. However, we want them recognised in a way that will fit in with the WTO, that is not subject to cuts in support, as under the blue box arrangement, and that will allow us to move forward in a way that does not distort trade. The negotiations will be difficult and we shall need to build up alliances for the position that we are taking.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): I welcome the Minister's extremely cautious response, given that the action plan for farming covered that commitment in a single brief sentence. Does she accept that the achievement of the rules-based system to discipline world trade is one of the great achievements of the post-war world? One of the reasons why it has been so successful is that it has dealt with trade, while people have found other forums to deal with issues such as the environment and labour conditions. Does she recognise that if we are to continue to succeed in promoting world trade, we must not hang too many other issues on the trade issue, because they can be dealt with in other forums. Will she therefore persist with her extreme caution and realise that what is at stake is very important?

Ms Quin: I understand some of the issues that the right hon. Gentleman raises, but I hope that he will not confuse caution with a lack of determination to pursue the issue. As I mentioned, this is part of the European Union mandate. However, we have a responsibility to explain to other countries why we feel the issue is important, and that we are not pursuing it in a protectionist way. I accept his comments about world trade, but I am encouraged that there now appears to be a greater understanding of the issue. My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary recently attended an animal welfare congress that discussed world trade, and it welcomed the view that this issue should be seen as a dimension of world trade.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): I am sure that the House recognises that some hon. Members hold strong views on animal welfare, and set greater store by that than by the viability of British agriculture. Will the Minister assure us that that is not her priority, and that the Government will do nothing to detract from the competitive position of British agriculture by introducing unilaterally any further welfare measures?

Ms Quin: May I remind the hon. Gentleman that our animal welfare measures have been introduced with the support of the whole House? Members on both sides have spoken up strongly in favour of animal welfare. However, it is important to pursue these issues, particularly within the European market. With laying hens, for example, it is much better to take action at a European level than to introduce unilateral measures that simply damage competitiveness and encourage imports from places where standards are not so high.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): Taking that point forward, the Minister will know that the competition faced by British pig producers is from lower-grade competitors from within Europe rather than outside it. What action is she taking, and what discussions is she having with our European partners so that they will follow our good example in animal welfare and improve their standards? We would not then face unfair competition much longer.

Ms Quin: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have actively pursued that aim in Europe. Indeed, there are some moves to improve welfare standards in European pig production. We have also supported marketing and promotional efforts which, importantly, highlight the high standards that we have introduced in this country. Of course, we are glad that the price for pigmeat has increased in recent weeks.

Exchange Rates

4. **Mr. Ian Bruce** (South Dorset): What action his Department is taking to assist farmers who are affected by the fall in the value of the euro. [127033]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): The Government have undertaken a range of measures to help farmers through what I freely acknowledge are difficult times. Farm incomes have been depressed for the last three years. On the specific question of the euro's fall in value, the principal instrument that the Government can use is agrimonetary compensation. Up to the end of 2001, we will have paid some £595 million in agrimonetary compensation, which is broken down as follows: £22 million will have gone to dairy producers, £235.4 million to beef producers, £82.4 million to sheep producers, and £254.9 million to arable producers. Small amounts are also paid to farmers under agri-environmental schemes.

Mr. Bruce: I am grateful for that full answer, which contrasts with many answers that we currently receive from the Dispatch Box. Will he confirm that the saving to Her Majesty's Government in agrimonetary compensation is £110 million, despite all the money that has gone into it? More importantly, will he take the Chancellor by the hand—if one can do that—and get him to go to the European central bankers and protest about the fact that our European partners are deliberately devaluing the euro to give themselves a competitive

advantage, and are not sorting out their own economies? Our farmers may be the most efficient in the world, but that is unfair competition.

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that macro-economic policy has an impact on agriculture, as Ministers have previously acknowledged in the House. We can only make so much use of the instrument of agrimonetary compensation. The Government are making proportionate use of it, but it is wrong to encourage British agriculture to look to supply side measures as a solution to their problems. The solution must be closer market orientation.

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): My local farmers have been helped by the countryside stewardship scheme. However, have the Government not been hampered in their efforts by the previous Government's neglect of the rural environment, which has led to a low allocation of EU funds for environmental development?

Mr. Brown: Although I secured a 30 per cent. increase in the funds made available to this country from central European funds, I was handicapped by the low starting point in the negotiating base that I inherited from the previous Government, which means that we still do not get what I believe is our fair share of central European funds for these measures. I set great store by the second pillar of the common agricultural policy, and believe that we shall make more, not less, use of it in future.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): When the traditional arrangements run out, will agricultural compensation cease completely? If the differential between the euro and the pound continues, will the Minister seek to make new arrangements?

Mr. Brown: I was in Northern Ireland yesterday, and met, I believe, some of the hon. Gentleman's constituents, and had a good exchange with them on a range of issues. The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the future of the agrimonetary compensation scheme, as other member states of the European Union will not have such a close interest in it in future, as they move to the single currency. No final decision has yet been made about the future of the agrimonetary regime once the two years that it still has to run have elapsed.

The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the matter now. The long-term future of agriculture lies not in supply side measures from the EU or the UK Government, but in a liberalised world market, in which the industry can earn its living in the marketplace.

Organic Farming

5. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): What his Department's planned expenditure is on research and development into organic farming methods in the current financial year. [127035]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): The budget for MAFF's dedicated programme of research into organic farming methods is £2.1 million in this financial year. In addition to the annual funding of research, the Government have committed from central funds an increase of £300,000 in this financial year and £1.9 million in the next financial year to create a new European centre for organic fruit and nursery stock. MAFF also spends £8 million on biological control, which of course has implications for the organic sector.

Mr. Chapman: I welcome those figures, but does my hon. Friend agree that the ability to buy organic vegetables is a choice that consumers may increasingly want? Against that background, does he welcome the decision by the Iceland chain of shops to purchase, reputedly, 40 per cent. of the world's crop and make it available to consumers at prices similar to those of other vegetables? Does he believe that the increased demand for organic vegetables will be met by UK farmers or by imports, and is he satisfied that the money for conversion to organics will be sufficient to meet that demand?

Mr. Morley: The Government have substantially increased the money available for organic conversion, including doubling the conversion rate. We have made some £12 million available for this financial year, and a further £18 million is available for the next financial year. Clearly, Iceland has made its decision based on market conditions, but that demonstrates that there is a strong demand for organic produce in this country, and although a great deal of fruit and vegetable produce is imported, we are almost 100 per cent. self-sufficient in some sectors, such as meat and eggs.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Does the Minister agree that the success of the organic market is dependent on the purity of the product, as perceived by the consumer and by the Soil Association? How does he reconcile that with the comments on GM crops by his colleague, Baroness Hayman, who said to the Agriculture Committee:

> the organic movement has to recognise and find a way of living with contamination from other crops'?

Does not that destroy the very purity that the organic sector is attempting to market?

Mr. Morley: No, it does not. The issue at stake is thresholds. Although we are discussing with the organic sector how to tackle matters such as crop trials and separation distances, organic producers cannot at present guarantee that there is no spray drift from pesticides used in adjacent farming activities, so the issue is the acceptable threshold. Thresholds have to be kept to a minimum, while ensuring the purity of the organic food by keeping spray drift to negligible amounts.

Milk Prices

7. **Mr. Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury): If he will make a statement about the current level of farmgate milk prices. [127037]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): The Government recognise the considerable problems currently facing the dairy industry. A combination of factors have reduced milk prices and

had a consequential effect on incomes in the sector over the past two years. The farmgate price for milk in April 2000 was 15.25p per litre.

Mr. Robertson: The Minister mentions that several factors have affected milk prices, and those include the weak euro and the recent depressed prices of skimmed milk and butter. A third factor is structural problems. Does the Minister now regret encouraging the break-up of Milk Marque, and if so, will he explain what he will do to put the situation right?

Mr. Brown: Of course I did not encourage the break-up of Milk Marque; it resulted from an independent report by the competition authorities—the sole ministerial responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. If the hon. Gentleman is implying that the Government of the day, regardless of party, should put the views of the competition authorities to one side, I have to say that I completely reject that view. The board of Milk Marque responded very responsibly to the difficult situation in which it found itself; it has devised successor arrangements that will endure, and it has my support in that. Where the Government can provide support to the dairy industry we are doing so, as the Prime Minister's farming summit has shown.

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): Will my right hon. Friend join me in praising the producers of the very good TV commercial that promotes milk, using well known milk drinkers such as George Best? Has he made any assessment of how that will help farmers by affecting farmgate prices?

Mr. Brown: I was wondering whether my hon. Friend was about to invite me to take part in the campaign on the same basis. I support the generic promotion of milk, and think that it is a way forward for producers.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I also support generic milk marketing. I hope that it will increase the overall volume of milk sold, but increasing the volume will not help the primary producers if the margin at the farm gate is still too small for them to be viable. Is not it important that yet again, we tell the processors and the supermarkets that the health of the whole dairy industry depends on farmers getting a fair return for their milk, and do we not need a joint approach by the Ministry, the processors, the retail trade and the farmers themselves?

Mr. Brown: The whole supply chain has a vested interest in the health of its component parts. I make that point to everyone involved every time I meet them, but I cannot order people to adjust the commercial arrangements in the chain, because that is ultimately a matter for the private sector, not for Government.

Wheat Prices

8. **Mr. James Clappison** (Hertsmere): If he will make a statement on the price of wheat in *(a)* 1980, *(b)* 1990 and *(c)* currently. [R] [127109]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): The average price of UK wheat in 1980 was £105 per tonne, rising to £120 per tonne in 1990. It is currently about £80 per tonne. However, in real terms, adjusting for inflation, the price of wheat has declined overall on a constant basis since 1980. Low prices for grain currently apply throughout the world, and are largely the result of oversupply following a run of good harvests and a downturn in consumption caused by the recent financial turbulence in Asia.

Mr. Clappison: Does the Minister of State agree that those figures are desperate, and are reflected in farm incomes? Is she aware that the Ministry's statistics show that the income of cereal farmers has gone down by 72 per cent. since the Government took office, and that many believe that farming today is in its worst state since the second world war—probably worse than the 1930s? Ministers may be sympathetic, but if that continues there will soon not be much left of British farming. Against that background, should Ministers not do all they can to help British agriculture? Could not they make a good start by looking at the workings of the Intervention Board, because reform of that would help to give British farmers a better deal?

Ms Quin: The hon. Gentleman is wrong to suggest that we have given only sympathy to British agriculture. The results of the farming summit on 30 March and the previous packages of support that the Government announced show that we have given practical and financial assistance to agriculture, as well as sympathy. Although it is true that wheat prices are lower than they were years ago, they are now much closer to world prices. In our new direction for agriculture, we want to reduce the artificial difference between European and world prices and to support agriculture differently. The amount of public money that goes into the cereals is considerable; as I announced in reply to an earlier question, it is about £1 billion a year.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): In view of the reductions in subsidies as a result of the World Trade Organisation arrangements over the next two to three years, is my right hon. Friend satisfied that we are fully prepared for the changes that have to take place to ensure that the industry can survive in this country?

Ms Quin: The Government are fully preparing for the pressures that will affect European agriculture in the next few years. My hon. Friend is right to mention the pressures caused by the WTO, but there are also budgetary pressures in the EU—and, of course, the important matter of enlarging the EU to take in new member countries.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Having regard to enlargement and the next round of WTO negotiations, what message can the Minister of State give wheat growers to show that they will have a future in the United Kingdom?

Ms Quin: We believe that our growers, and indeed our agriculture generally, are in a position to be good competitive performers in the EU. I believe that if we

manage to move further away from the production-related subsidies of the past and ensure that those decisions are applied uniformly across Europe, British agriculture will be in a good position to compete.

IACS Payments

9. **Ms Sally Keeble** (Northampton, North): What progress he has made towards ensuring that field margins are eligible for area–based integrated administration and control system payments. [127038]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): We were pleased to secure the European Commission's agreement that, for the current year, we should continue to apply the rules on field margins in the same way as we have in previous years. For 2001 and subsequent years, we continue to explore with the Commission the options for achieving the objective to which my hon. Friend refers.

Ms Keeble: I welcome the progress that has been made. Farmers in Northamptonshire have in some cases lost thousands of pounds on the issue, and they are also concerned about the loss of hedgerows, wildlife and traditional countryside features. However, may I ask my hon. Friend to look at two particular things: ensuring that there is proper flexibility, so that field margins allow for the varying width of hedgerows and are not too fixed; and ensuring that there is speed in making progress. Farmers will start planting their first crops in August. They want to be sure that progress will continue to be made, so that they will know where they stand on their subsidies next year.

Mr. Morley: My hon. Friend is right. We appreciate that there is a deadline on the issue because farmers will have to take decisions on their autumn planting regime. However, farmers should not have lost money on the issue. The ideal will be to persuade the Commission to accept the current situation, whereby we apply traditional cropping methods in terms of the arable area payment claims. There are a number of ways of addressing that. We are exploring all those options with the Commission and hope for a speedy resolution.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): It was tragic and heart-breaking to see the bonfires all over North Wiltshire as a result of the introduction of the 2-metre IACS rule last year. Farmers acted swiftly, taking note of what the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was saying, but it was tragic to see the destruction of historic hedgerows as a result. Perhaps the Minister will kindly advise the House precisely which Minister proposed the 2-metre IACS rule, which caused that destruction.

Mr. Morley: We have received no reports from our regional service centres of bonfires all over the hon. Gentleman's constituency. Was he referring to 5 November by any chance? The proposal has not come from any Minister. It has come from auditors and accountants from the European Commission. They are charged with the responsibility of ensuring that funds are paid on the area of land that is actually eligible for them. We understand that point. The point that we want to get over to the Commission is that we had original agreement that payments would reflect traditional cropping patterns in this country. That meant reflecting, in some cases, traditional field boundaries, which we are anxious to maintain and, indeed, to enhance if we have the opportunity to do so.

Hill Farmers

10. **Helen Jackson** (Sheffield, Hillsborough): What proportion of subsidy paid under the common agricultural policy to UK agriculture goes to hill farmers. [127039]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): Provisional figures for 1999 show that common agricultural policy subsides paid in the UK totalled some £2,851 million. Hill farmers received 25 per cent. of that in livestock subsides alone. In addition, hill farmers received various other payments such as those for agri-environmental schemes.

Helen Jackson: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree that hill farmers have suffered a triple whammy: the total mismanagement of the BSE crisis by the previous Government, the general depression in livestock prices and, now, the absolutely correct emphasis on the role of hill farmers in the leisure and environmental management of the countryside in future? Will he ensure, as he moves further through the reform of the CAP, that the important and specific role of hill farmers, as represented by the 25 per cent., continues to be recognised as they move in the direction of countryside management?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right to refer to the combination of factors that has made life particularly difficult for hill farmers and to say that it is important, when considering reform and what publicly funded support schemes should be put in place, that we consider the environmental and landscape roles of hill farmers, not focusing solely on agricultural production.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that he has no plans further to reduce support for hill farmers until their average incomes, currently standing at a meagre £2,000 a year, have recovered to an adequate level; and will he tell us what he thinks is an adequate level?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman is right inasmuch as my policy is to help each hill farm business to reach better—sustainably better—times; that is the Government's policy. Can I give him an assurance that no one's income will ever go down as a result of necessary changes that are now under consideration? No, of course I cannot. However, for the range of reasons, I have just explained to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson) we have devised policies to get hill farm businesses through to better times.

Mr. Bercow: What level of income?

Mr. Brown: The decision on what level of income is appropriate is for the person running the business, not for the Government.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Will the Minister tell the House what preliminary views his

Department have fed into the sheepmeat review currently being undertaken by the European Commission? He will know both that consultation is under way and that sheep annual premium is extremely important to hill farmers. We must sustain the current level of premium at all costs.

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman is on to a good point, although it is early days yet. I have discussed with the Agriculture Minister for Wales and other territorial Ministers our joint approach to the forthcoming review. For reasons that the hon. Gentleman will understand, I do not want to set out our negotiating position now, but I assure him that I am alert to the fact that if the review is conducted in isolation from reviews of other regimes, the outcome might be different from that which would have emerged had the views of the British Government carried the day originally and the review been conducted alongside other reviews under Agenda 2000. I greatly regret that it was not, and that fact conditions my thinking about the whole process.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the superb initiative to bring together producers, auction marts and other processors in the Bowland Forest foods initiative, which points the way to the future of agricultural production, especially in hill areas. Can he assure me of the Government's utmost support for such initiatives?

Mr. Brown: I recently had the pleasure of visiting my hon. Friend's constituency and seeing for myself the work going on there. Such initiatives have my Department's support.

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): Does the Minister agree that it is extremely helpful to hill farmers to have easy access to small abattoirs, which, as we all know, currently suffer under considerable cost burdens? When asked his opinion of the Meat Hygiene Service, the chief executive of the Food Standards Agency said that it was

an outdated system, one which provides little protection to consumers while placing considerable burdens on businesses.

Does the recommendation of the Maclean report to introduce a new formula for meat inspection charges find acceptance with the Government? Does the right hon. Gentleman believe that that "ingenious proposal"—the words of the FSA chief executive—may avert the annihilation of small and medium-sized abattoirs, and so give support to hill farmers?

Mr. Brown: There is much in what the hon. Gentleman says, although were I to set out to close down as many abattoirs as were closed down under the previous Government, I could not do so, because there are not that many left. However, he is right to ask whether the Government support the change to a hazard analysis critical control point system, or HACCP system, from the current system of veterinary inspections. We are taking that issue forward with other EU Ministers. On the related question of charges, as the House will know, since 1 April that has not been my direct ministerial responsibility, although I retain an interest because of my industry sponsorship. That question is now being examined by the FSA, which has the lead role, and myself.

Arable Stewardship Scheme

11. **Mr. David Kidney** (Stafford): If he will expand and make permanent the arable stewardship scheme in Shropshire and Staffordshire. [127040]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): The arable stewardship scheme is a three-year pilot scheme that has been operating in two areas of the west midlands and East Anglia. Before deciding whether to make the scheme permanent and expand it, we need to see the results of the three-year monitoring and evaluation study of the options that we are testing in the two pilot areas. The results are due in spring 2001.

Mr. Kidney: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. I do not recall such a scheme being introduced by the previous Conservative Government. Is my hon. Friend aware of how phenomenally popular the scheme is proving to be in Shropshire and Staffordshire, as evidenced by the representations that I have received from individual farmers, the National Farmers Union locally and the NFU regionally? In addition, is my hon. Friend aware that over the past year the scheme was over-subscribed threefold in Shropshire and Staffordshire? Given such success signs, is it possible even now to say that the scheme should be expanded over a wider part of the country?

Mr. Morley: I can certainly agree with my hon. Friend. It is a popular scheme. I have been to Staffordshire to see it in operation. I have talked to local farmers who are part of the pilot, and they are enthusiastic about it. I am convinced of the benefits of many aspects of the scheme. We have already offered an over-winter stubble option in some environmentally sensitive areas. My hon. Friend will know that we are substantially increasing the budget for countryside stewardship schemes under our rural development programme. There will be about £1 billion available for agri-environmental programmes over the next seven years. I am sure that there will be room within that programme for extending the scheme into other areas.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

The Solicitor-General was asked—

Judicial Conference

28. **Ann Clwyd** (Cynon Valley): What the purpose was of the recent Conference of European Chief Justices and Attorney Generals sponsored by Her Majesty's Government in London; and what the cost was to the Law Officers Department. [127059]

The Solicitor-General (Mr. Ross Cranston): A conference of presidents of the supreme courts and Attorneys-General of the member states of the European Union has taken place every two years since the 1970s. The conference is not, formally speaking, an EU event. The theme of this year's conference was human rights, focusing in particular on the impact of the European Court of Human Rights over the past 50 years, the relationship

between EC law and ECHR law and the doctrine of the margin of appreciation. The cost to the UK Government was £60,000.

Ann Clwyd: Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that under the international law principle of universal jurisdiction, those accused of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide can be prosecuted in any country? Did the EU meeting discuss the responsibility of various EU countries to prosecute war criminals, particularly Iraqi war criminals, and what is the role of the United Kingdom in all this?

The Solicitor-General: I cannot reveal the substance of the discussions as they proceeded on the basis of the Chatham House rules. My hon. Friend knows that we and other European states are determined that, for example, there should be an international criminal court. Draft legislation on that will be published in the fairly near future. The United Kingdom Government and other European Governments are also signatories to instruments such as the UN convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

My hon. Friend will know also that the acts of the Government and of the UK courts in the Pinochet case have been warmly welcomed throughout the world in establishing that there should be no hiding place for war criminals.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): Will the Solicitor-General share with us his view of the status of any agreed charter or convention on human rights, even one that is not incorporated in the treaties, in the light of his discussions with his colleagues in other countries? Does he take the view that is circulating in parts of the Government that any such agreement, even if not in the treaty, could be used in the European Court of Justice and could become part of UK law, even though the Prime Minister is saying that it would not do so?

The Solicitor-General: We have made it clear that the charter must be simply declaratory; it should not create any new competences. That is accepted by President Herzog, who chairs the convention that is drawing up the charter. We are absolutely clear about that: no new competences and a purely declaratory charter. We take the view also that a charter would set out clearly for EU citizens the rights that they have. We consider that to be very important.

We are aware of the problem that the right hon. Gentleman has raised, but we have said clearly that the European Court of Justice must not go beyond existing rights. We have said that social rights are better dealt with in other ways. Some of the social rights that have emerged—in terms, for example, of a fair balance between family and work life—are legally pretty meaningless.

Legal Costs

29. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): If he will make a statement on the legal costs incurred by his Department in *(a)* 1998–99 and *(b)* 1999–2000. [127060]

The Solicitor-General: When I saw this question, I thought that it was like the 19th century report on Malvern water that contains absolutely nothing.

Apart from staff costs, my Department incurred £573,900 in disbursements for legal costs in 1998–99. The figure for 1999–2000 was £716,000.

Mr. Bercow: Given that the Attorney-General is thinking of dispensing with the services of Treasury juniors—barristers in private practice who undertake important prosecutions at the Old Bailey—will the Solicitor-General confirm that they do outstanding work and provide excellent value for money? Does he agree that to dispense with them could cause an unnecessary increase in the costs of his Department?

The Solicitor-General: Treasury counsel at the Old Bailey prosecute heavy cases involving, for example, the Official Secrets Act and terrorism. They also prosecute in murder cases, which throughout the country are also prosecuted by ordinary counsel from the Bar. My noble and learned friend the Attorney-General has requested an inquiry into whether it is appropriate for cases of murder, rape or robbery heard at the Bailey always to be handled by Treasury counsel. But we accept that some important cases should be dealt with by a specialist cadre of barristers at the Old Bailey.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): What proportion of the costs incurred related to the expense of employing Queen's counsel? Does my hon. and learned friend agree that the Government should do all they can to push down those exorbitant fees, whereby some barristers earn more than £1 million a year? Is everything being done to get the Government's legal bill down to sensible proportions?

The Solicitor-General: All Treasury counsel at the Old Bailey are juniors, not silks. Civil work by counsel representing the Government is done by juniors. We have various panels representing levels of expertise whose members are all juniors. Only exceptionally are silks employed, and that has to be approved by me personally or by the Attorney-General. The Bar accepts that there must be a discount on fees for Government work, so we are certainly conscious of expenditure. When the Attorney-General or I appear, we charge absolutely nothing.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): What impact do the costs referred to by the hon. Members for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) and for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) have on the budget of the Crown Prosecution Service? On Monday in another place, the Attorney-General announced a slight increase in the CPS budget. Given the costs we have just heard about and the 3 per cent. per annum budget savings, how much money will be left to improve the performance of the CPS?

The Solicitor-General: I am pleased that we have been able to secure £15.8 million extra for the Crown Prosecution Service on a budget of about £350 million per annum—and I am confident that we will do well in the comprehensive spending review for the next three years. The CPS budget is quite separate from that for counsel employed by the service, which is uncapped. The CPS is always highly conscious of the fees payable to prosecution counsel. The complaint is made, quite legitimately, by counsel who appear for the CPS that they are paid much less than defence counsel—which disparity we are trying to address.

Human Rights Act 1998

30. **Mr. Brian Jenkins** (Tamworth): What training has been given to Government lawyers to prepare for the implementation of the Human Rights Act 1998. [127061]

The Solicitor-General: A busy programme of training and guidance has already been provided to Government lawyers on the European convention on human rights and the Human Rights Act 1998. The training takes the form of conferences, training events, departmental in-house seminars, and attendance by Government lawyers at external training events. An updated version of "Judge over your Shoulder", an information booklet aimed at non-lawyers, is available on the Treasury Solicitor's website.

In addition, Departments are supported by three cross-cutting committees. Two of them consider the human rights aspects of civil and criminal proceedings, and the third, a Cabinet Office committee, considers human rights issues on which a collective view is required.

Mr. Jenkins: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for that answer. Will he give the House an assurance that the Government lawyers will be ready on the implementation day of the Human Rights Act 1998, which is only weeks away?

The Solicitor-General: There is an extensive training programme, as I explained. There is also a training programme for the Crown Prosecution Service, jointly with the police. Some 3,000 lawyers and others have to be trained in the CPS, and I am confident that the training will be completed by the end of July.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I have no doubt that Government lawyers are well trained for the implementation of the Human Rights Act 1998; my concern is that Ministers are not. I asked the Home Secretary last Monday what training Ministers were receiving to bring them up to date with their own legislation, and he was not able to answer the question. Perhaps the Solicitor-General can answer it on his behalf. What has he done, and what has the Attorney-General done, to make sure that Ministers know even the slightest bit about their own legislation?

The Solicitor-General: I certainly would not say that Ministers are all-knowing, but they know a great deal about the Human Rights Act. They are conscious that it is one of the most important steps that the Government have taken. As always, the Opposition are turning wine into water. As I have said on previous occasions, the Act is a significant development in persuading the country that a rights culture is important.

Fraud

31. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): If he will make a statement on his policy towards serious fraud cases. [127062]

The Solicitor-General: Effective investigation and prosecution are the best deterrents to fraud. I have every confidence that the investigating and prosecuting authorities who come under the superintendence of the Law Officers—the Serious Fraud Office and the Crown Prosecution Service—have had notable success in recent years in pursuing serious fraud cases.

Miss McIntosh: Does the Solicitor-General share my concern at the increasing delays in the bringing of serious fraud cases to prosecution? Can he assure the House that the Human Rights Act 1998, once implemented, will not add to the delay? That is particularly important when someone is accused of a serious fraud and is subsequently cleared.

The Solicitor-General: We are conscious of the problems of delay. That is why reducing delays and bringing persistent young offenders to justice appeared on our pledge card as a prominent pledge. Serious fraud cases are frequently complicated and their scope is often international, so inquiries must be undertaken in other countries. One of the difficulties that we have faced in prosecuting international fraud is that sometimes other countries are not as co-operative as we would want.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): In view of what my hon. and learned Friend says about the complexity of many serious fraud cases, and the fact that with new technology the situation can become even more complex, what steps does he believe the Serious Fraud Office can take to increase the speed with which cases are dealt with and the effectiveness of prosecutions?

The Solicitor-General: I have no difficulty with the speed with which prosecutions are brought. The Serious Fraud Office is successful. In the current financial year, for example, the SFO has achieved 12 convictions, as against four acquittals—a 75 per cent. conviction rate. Of course, conviction rates are not an absolute test of the success of any prosecuting agency.

Only last week, for example, the SFO secured convictions against two directors of the Ostrich Farming Corporation Ltd. They had been selling ostriches as an investment opportunity and had attracted some 2,800 customers. They had an annual turnover of £21 million, but the birds sold did not exist. It was all very much like the Opposition: heads in the sand and selling duff policies.

Madam Speaker: We now come to written question No. 5.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

The Minister was asked—

BSE

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): What is the latest date of birth of a BSE-confirmed case.

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): With permission, I should like to answer the question orally. An animal born on 25 August 1996 was confirmed as a BSE case on 27 June this year. The date is significant because it is after 1 August 1996, when extra control measures on animal feed containing

mammalian meat and bone meal—MBM—had been implemented. The state veterinary service will carry out a special investigation into the background of the case. However, experts have always foreseen that a few cases of BSE could be confirmed in animals born after 1 August 1996. Indeed, an assessment last year on behalf of the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee assumed that, by the end of 2000, up to 19 cases born after August 1996 might be identified.

This does not change in any way our view that we have the toughest rules in place to protect public health and to eradicate the disease.

Mr. Quinn: On behalf of all hon. Members, I thank you, Madam Speaker, for allowing my question to be answered orally. It is important for many people in agriculture to be fully informed of all the issues. Given that the animal was born after the ban was in place, what reasons can my right hon. Friend offer for the animal becoming infected? What assessment has he made of the health implications of the news for many consumers in my constituency and throughout the country? What impact will the news have on lifting the international ban on British beef? Does my right hon. Friend propose to hold any discussions on the information with his European colleagues, especially those in France?

Mr. Brown: There are several important points to make. First, I make it absolutely clear that there is no risk to food safety as a result of the case. The Food Standards Agency is issuing a statement to that effect today. The cow—aged 44 months at time of slaughter—would not have entered the human food chain, because of the rules that prevent animals aged over 30 months from getting into the food chain. The animal has one offspring, which has already been traced, and will not enter the food chain.

Secondly, the animal would have been ineligible for our date-based export scheme, not only because of its age, but because its mother was slaughtered as a casualty in November 1996, less than three months after the animal was born. As many hon. Members know, under the date-based export scheme, the dam must survive for at least six months after the birth of the calf and show no signs of BSE.

There is an automatic cull of offspring of animals that are confirmed cases of BSE. That would not, however, prevent cases of maternally transmitted BSE if the dam was slaughtered for reasons other than BSE when the disease was in its pre-clinical phase. That could be the explanation in the case that we are considering.

Investigations into the source of infection are continuing. In accordance with standing procedures, cohort animals born six months either side of the animal will be traced, placed under movement restrictions and barred from the food chain. The state veterinary service will thoroughly investigate the background to the case in order to establish whether anything about the BSE epidemic can be learned from it.

The overall BSE epidemic continues to decline along predicted lines. Details for Great Britain are given in the table that I shall lay before the House today.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): I welcome the Minister's prompt release of the information, although the House might have preferred a different procedure, such as an oral statement. I accept entirely the Minister's assurances that public health has not been put at risk and that the controls that relate to BSE have proved effective in the case that we are considering. Will the Minister publish any advice that he obtains from the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee as soon as it is available? In relation to the actual case, were the symptoms manifested before the animal was slaughtered? Is the Minister planning to check whether there was any contamination in the cattle food supply? Will steps also be taken to trace the siblings of this animal? Finally, does the Minister agree that this case will reinforce concerns that have been highlighted in the farming press very recently—that imported meat from cattle which are over 30 months old is being sold in Britain? Do the Government believe that British consumers may be at risk from such imports?

Mr. Brown: The case that we are discussing today has nothing to do with imported meat products. The hon. Gentleman asked me about siblings. Yes, they are being traced. He asked me about the possibility of contaminated feed being a route of transmission—an alternative theory to maternal transmission. Yes, I can confirm that the veterinary authorities are looking closely at that potential route. As the hon. Gentleman implied in his question, the animal concerned had been under surveillance for some time, but there was never any possibility of its entering the food chain. As for the procedure, I thought carefully about what would be proportionate. I carefully considered a statement, which frankly this single incident does not warrant. I considered providing a written answer, and had it not been for the fortuitous fact that Agriculture questions were today, I would have followed that route and probably will follow it for other such incidents—and it is forecast that they will occur.

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): How does our experience of BSE cases compare with the experience in France and Germany?

Mr. Brown: We have unique, very powerful public protection measures in place. The German authorities visited recently when they were considering their own position on the date-based export scheme. They were very impressed by our public protection measures and reported favourably on them to the German federal Government and to the regional governments too. I regret the fact that the French Government are still persisting with their ban. There is no good reason why they should do so and today's incident gives no additional reason why they should do so.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): I too welcome the openness with which the Government have approached this matter, in stark contrast to the previous Administration, who tried to hide the problem of BSE. It is important that we continue with this approach and that if any other cases come to light in the near future they should be reported. Will this news have any effect whatever on plans in respect of the continuance of the OTM scheme?

Mr. Brown: I know of no reason why it should do so. If anything, the discovery of this animal and the way it has been dealt with ought to provide additional reassurance to those who are interested in the scheme.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): Does my right hon. Friend believe that this case makes it all the more important to develop tests to detect the agent of BSE before the disease is apparent to clinical observation, so that we can detect whether an animal has the disease before it becomes ill?

Mr. Brown: I strongly agree with that. No country has more to gain from the development of a live test for BSE, particularly one that is effective before the clinical conditions become obvious. However, there is no such test at the moment, although there are some promising developments.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Is not the most important element the fact that the system of public surveillance and protection has worked, in that the mother, the animal, the offspring and the siblings can be and have all been traced and slaughtered? Is there any evidence that the animal was kept in proximity to other animals which might have had access to contaminated feed and hence offered a possible source of the problem?

Mr. Brown: I strongly agree with the first part of the right hon. Gentleman's question. Traceability is one of the foundations of our powerful public protection measures. On his second question, I am not sure how far it is proper for me to discuss the individual details of the case, but the right hon. Gentleman has not said anything that I would dissent from in general or in principle.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): The right hon. Gentleman will, of course, accept that the news is a disappointment. Will he confirm that only one case has been discovered of an infected animal born after 1 August 1996? He will know that no farm should have had any contaminated foodstuffs after that date. Has he been able to eliminate that as a possible cause? Assuming that he has, it must be a case of maternal or vertical transmission. Can he confirm that?

Mr. Brown: I cannot tell the House the cause of the case with absolute certainty. Some evidence points to maternal transmission, but that does not rule out contaminated animal feed as a potential route. We are investigating every aspect thoroughly. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right to say that it is disappointing—I agree—but to put it in context, those who advised SEAC anticipated 19 such cases before the end of this year. This is the first and only case so far, which speaks well for the public protection measures that we have in place and for the thoroughness with which the work was done in August 1996.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the speed with which he has come to the House, which will prevent the rumour-mongering that would no doubt have occurred if he had not. Does the incident make any difference to the timetable by which eradication will be complete?

Mr. Brown: No, it makes no difference to the timetable. The incident was foreseeable, and the fact that it is the only one suggests that the public protection measures are working even more effectively than those who provided the forecasts to SEAC envisaged.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): The Minister has been frank in saying that he is not certain about the cause of the incident. Against that background, will he confirm that the Ministry will continue to give support, where appropriate, to further research work, not least the alternative hypothesis advanced by my constituent, Mark Purdey, and Dr. Brown of Cambridge university, about which I have already had a meeting with the Minister of State?

Mr. Brown: The Ministry has provided some funding for research based on alternatives to the prion theory, and I do not rule out the possibility of doing so in the future. However, the mainstream view from the scientific community—I am not a scientist, but a generalist who relies on being professionally advised—appears to be well founded. The combination of the public protection measures based on that scientific approach seems to be working effectively, and we will wish to draw the lessons from that.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): My right hon. Friend mentioned work that was being done on the issue of the pre-clinical live test. Could he give further details? In the event that a live test could be established, would it apply throughout the whole of the European Union, and have other nation states accepted it in principle?

Mr. Brown: I and my fellow Ministers at the Council of Ministers are all keen on the development of a live test and we can all see the huge advantages for the industry and for public protection of having such a test. Several different countries have projects, and some may offer a way forward, but we are not there yet.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Has the Minister considered the possibility of introducing post-mortems for all cattle slaughtered over 30 months, which do not enter the food chain? When the post-mortem shows no trace of BSE, those animals could be allowed into the food chain. We would also have the assurance that we were picking up every case of BSE, even though it had not been diagnosed prior to slaughter.

Mr. Brown: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that we have an extensive testing programme on animals not destined for the human food chain. The purpose of that is to try to gauge the extent to which BSE is present in those animals. We have no cheap and easily administered test. At the moment, we have three tests—all of which were used in the present case—but they take time and carry a cost. Thus it is not realistic to test every animal. Once we have a live test—when that day comes—no country will have more to gain than ours, given our current position.

Business of the House

12.45 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business of the House for next week is as follows:

MONDAY 3 JULY—Opposition Day [16th Allotted Day]. Until about 7 o'clock, there will be a debate on "The Government's early release of prisoners" followed by a debate on "Neill recommendations relating to Ministers and special advisers". Both debates will arise on Opposition motions.

TUESDAY 4 JULY—Progress on remaining stages of the Local Government Bill *[Lords]*.

WEDNESDAY 5 JULY—Conclusion of remaining stages of the Local Government Bill *[Lords]*.

The Chairman of Ways and Means has named opposed private business for consideration at 7 o'clock.

THURSDAY 6 JULY—Estimates Day [2nd Allotted Day].

There will be a debate on HM Customs and Excise followed by a debate on Department of Social Security medical services. Details will be given in the *Official Report*.

At 7 o'clock the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

FRIDAY 7 JULY—Debate on the report of the committee of inquiry into hunting with dogs in England and Wales on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

The provisional business for the following week will be:

MONDAY 10 JULY—Proceedings on the Consolidated Fund (Appropriation) Bill.

Consideration of Lords amendments to the Terrorism Bill.

The Chairman of Ways and Means is expected to name opposed private business for consideration at 7 o'clock.

TUESDAY 11 JULY—Remaining stages of the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 12 JULY—Remaining stages of the Care Standards Bill *[Lords]*.

THURSDAY 13 JULY—Opposition Day [17th Allotted Day]. There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

FRIDAY 14 JULY—The House will not be sitting.

The House will also wish to know that, subject to progress of business, it will be proposed that the House should rise for the summer recess at the end of business on Friday 28 July, and that it will return on Monday 23 October.

[Thursday 6 July:

Class XVI: Vote 4: Customs and Excise: Administration.

Class XII: Vote 3: Department of Social Security: Administration as it relates to medical services.]

Sir George Young: The House is grateful to the right hon. Lady for next week's business and for an indication of the business in the following week. We are also very grateful for the information about the summer recess. Does the relatively late return of the House in October, combined with the large volume of legislation still in the pipeline, mean that the opening of Parliament will be delayed until December, or that the Government are planning to abandon part of their legislative programme, such as the Freedom of Information Bill?

Will the Leader of the House confirm that the Chancellor of the Exchequer will make a statement in the next two weeks on the outcome of the comprehensive spending review, and will she give the date? Will she confirm that there will be a debate in Government time on that statement?

Will the Prime Minister make a statement on Monday on the outcome of his hastily arranged summit with the German Chancellor?

Will the right hon. Lady confirm that, before the House rises, we will have the outstanding debate on defence procurement, and that there will be the normal two-day debate on the defence White Paper in the autumn?

It is a year since we had a debate on drugs in Government time. Will the Leader of the House find time to debate that most important subject?

Finally, when the right hon. Lady has had her frank and cordial exchange of views with the Liaison Committee, may we have a debate on its most important report, "Shifting the Balance"?

Mrs. Beckett: First, the right hon. Gentleman referred to a relatively late return after the summer recess, but the period for the recess is perfectly ordinary. Indeed, if one looks at the record one sees that the recess was substantially longer in 1992, 1994 and 1995 than is proposed for this year. It is true, of course, that we had shorter recesses in 1998 and 1999, but that was under a Labour Government; under Conservative Governments, holidays are clearly more of a priority.

Secondly, the right hon. Gentleman asked me for a debate on the outcome of the comprehensive spending review. I cannot give a date for that at present, but I do anticipate that a statement will be made and hope that the House will have an opportunity to debate the matter.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is not likely to seek to make a statement on a summit meeting with the German Chancellor, as he is not having a summit with him.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): What is he doing there then?

Mrs. Beckett: The Prime Minister is going to Germany to make a speech, and as a matter of courtesy he will pay his respects to the German Chancellor while he is there.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about a debate on defence procurement, and of course we anticipate that those matters will be discussed. When that will be we can discuss through the usual channels. He also asked me about the Defence White Paper, which, again, is a matter that the Government have under review.

On the subject of the Liaison Committee, I am very much looking forward to giving evidence to the Committee. At some point following that, I anticipate that the House will wish to discuss its report.

Mr. George Mudie (Leeds, East): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the recent reports from that increasingly

eccentric and politically motivated organisation, Ofsted. One such report contains the quaint observation that only two local authorities in the country are adding to the value of their schools: one is a borough of only 26 schools; the other is the City of London, which has a grand total of one primary school. In view of the harm that this organisation is doing to individuals and to local authorities, can my right hon. Friend possibly find time for a debate on Ofsted's sad and sorry record?

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that I cannot offer my hon. Friend time for an early debate on the issue, although I know that some Ofsted reports have caused considerable controversy. He will be well aware that there are reports in which there has been praise for various local authorities, as well as some in which there has been criticism. He will be aware also that this matter goes across authorities that are under different political control. I fear that I cannot promise an early debate on the matter, but I remind my hon. Friend that Education questions will be held next Thursday.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): The Leader of the House will have heard the serious concern that greeted the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food's statement about BSE. Can she give any indication when the Government expect to receive the report of the Phillips inquiry into the sad saga and gross mishandling of the BSE crisis by the previous Government? Can she give an undertaking that if there is a possibility of the report being received before the summer recess, there will be an early statement and debate before the recess, as this is a matter of major concern to both sides of the House?

On the subject of certainty in the parliamentary year, the Leader of the House will have heard Members on both sides expressing concern about the present uncertainty. Can she give any indication whether a date has been pencilled into the royal diary for the opening of Parliament and the Queen's Speech, as that is clearly a matter of real concern? Will she give an undertaking—either through the usual channels or to the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons—to consider a proposal which has been made before: that the House should meet the holiday requirements of those from Scotland and a number of northern cities and towns and have the summer recess at the end of June; that it should come back in September for the spillover; that we should have the interim period before the Queen's Speech to coincide with the party conferences; and that we should have the Queen's Speech later in October, rather than later in the year?

Mrs. Beckett: First, my understanding is that the Phillips report is not likely to be available before the summer recess, although I take on board the hon. Gentleman's remarks about the House's wish to scrutinise the report when it becomes available.

Secondly, I am afraid that it is certainly not within my power or remit to give indications in advance as to the contents of the royal diary. However, I can certainly say that the wilder hopes entertained by Conservative Members are unlikely to be borne out. The hon. Gentleman will understand it when I say that careful scrutiny of the amount of legislation that has been put through in previous years in no way justifies any contention that this Government's programme is heavier than normal. In the early years of the Government headed by Lady Thatcher, there were 10 or 20 more Bills than the present Government are endeavouring to put through. There is certainly no indication of difficulties.

Any glance at the statistics will show that, under a Labour Government, discussion in the Lords—for some unaccountable reason—seems to take more time and has resulted in more defeats for the Government's programme. The statistics are incontestable. That is a cross that all Labour Governments have had to bear and, no doubt, this Government will continue to bear it. *[Interruption.]* As for the noises from sedentary positions about the Lords being our House, I remind Conservative Members that there are still 30 more Conservative peers than Labour peers there. Hopefully, in the fullness of time, that will change—at least a little.

With regard to the recess, I believe that under the previous Government, straight after the Jopling report, there was certainly one year—perhaps even two—in which an attempt was made for the House to rise earlier in July. However, I fear that the previous Government were not successful in maintaining that record. The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that a change in the pattern of the kind that he describes would have substantial knock-on effects for things like party conferences.

I suspect that the House will continue to return to this matter. However, it seems to me that a more general organisation of our business and other improvements in the way we handle legislation are required before we can come to such conclusions.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): My right hon. Friend will very kindly be coming to give evidence to the Liaison Committee. Will she be able to indicate to the House the Government's attitude towards its very sensible report? It is, after all, a way in which modernisation can be carried forward and Back-Bench Members can have a much stronger and more effective role in the House of Commons. I hope that my right hon. Friend will find time to indicate how we can proceed.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend will know that the Government have published a response to the Liaison Committee report. As I have told her and others, I take that report very seriously. Its proposals are profound and would have a significant impact on the work of individual Members. For that reason, I believe that it deserves the most serious scrutiny; but I fear that I cannot tell my hon. Friend that it is likely to be before the Chamber of this House in the very near future.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): Last night the Select Committee on Broadcasting agreed a report on the future televising of the proceedings of Parliament. That report will be published on Wednesday 5 July. Given the urgent need, in the light of changing technology and the changing circumstances facing the sittings of the House, to revise the procedures for broadcasting, will the right hon. Lady find time for a debate on that report before the House rises in July?

Mrs. Beckett: Of course I take that report seriously, and I am sure that the House will want to look at it carefully. I fear, however, that it is not altogether likely that it will be possible to debate it before the end of July

[Mrs. Beckett]

since, as the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, by the time the House has had a chance to consider it, we will be heading for the second week in July. However, I take his point seriously.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): If we are to debate Neill's recommendations on ministerial advisers—and I presume that Tory Members think that they will have a feast—would my right hon. Friend arrange to have a document placed in the Library? I refer to the agreement on Short money, whereby taxpayers' money is paid to Conservative Members of Parliament for them to hire political advisers for Front-Bench spokesmen. [HON. MEMBERS: "Wrong."] In that way, there will be a level playing field in the debate. As I understand it, £3 million of taxpayers' money has been allocated to them for that very purpose.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right. I am not sure that there is a need to place a document in the Library, because the terms of the motion were on the Order Paper, and were agreed to. I was very surprised to hear Conservative Members suggesting that my hon. Friend was wrong. It suggests that their leadership may not have conveyed this useful information to them.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): The Leader of the House has put down business in relation to Northern Ireland for 11 July which is, of course, the eve of the parades and marches that take place on 12 July. Air traffic between London and Belfast is difficult on the evening of 11 July and the morning of 12 July. It so happens that the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs is going over on 12 July to see the marches, as part of its inquiry on the Parades Commission. Was there any consultation with Northern Ireland interests when this particular conjuncture of dates was set down?

Mrs. Beckett: My understanding is that there was substantial discussion, but is not wholly clear to me whether it focused on the particular aspect of the date to which the right hon. Gentleman has quite properly drawn attention. If the interests of the Select Committee have been overlooked in any way, let me at once apologise. I shall ensure that the issues that he raises are drawn to the attention of all responsible. However, I can assure him that there has been considerable discussion of how to handle these later stages of the legislation.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): There has been a hysterical reaction to the comments of my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office about the use of royal palaces. Given that this is said to be a no-go area for elected politicians, would it be in order for us to debate in this House the role of the monarchy, so that we can deal with those issues calmly and reflectively?

Mrs. Beckett: Of course it is open to any hon. Member to seek a debate on any issue. However, pressure on business in the Chamber is always substantial, as my hon. Friend will know, and I could not undertake to find time for such a debate here.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Following a meeting in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions yesterday afternoon, when hon. Members of all parties—and in substantial numbers—sought to discuss fair funding for education in their constituencies, can we have an early debate in the House so that counties such as mine, Shropshire, which comes bottom of the pile not only for education funding but for police, health, fire and emergency and social services funding, will have an opportunity to examine the Government's policy? More particularly, we could investigate why the Government will, during the whole of this Parliament, steadfastly have set their face against changing a formula that, for many local education authorities, is totally inadequate. We were told yesterday that the formula is unlikely to change for the next three years. The Leader of the House will be aware that there has been no change for the past three years and no attempt to consider these matters. Please may we have an early debate?

Mrs. Beckett: I am indeed aware that there has been no change in the funding formula in recent years, which means that it is the formula that was put in place by the Government that the hon. Gentleman supported. I am sure that it is within his knowledge that it is not true that the matter has not been considered: it has received, and continues to receive, extensive consideration. The hon. Gentleman will know that the issues are both complex and difficult. I can assure him that the Government will continue to work to try to get greater fairness into the system. As he will readily identify from the fact that it is the formula that we inherited, there are no easy answers.

Mr. Roger Casale (Wimbledon): Following the recent meeting in London of Attorneys-General and European Chief Justices to discuss, among other matters, the provisions of the international criminal court, can we have an early debate that could lead to ratification of the ICC treaty? Britain was one of the leading players in gaining international agreement to the ICC and was one of the first to sign the treaty. It would not be right for Britain to be one of the last to ratify it, nor would it send the right message at a time when we should again be taking a leading role in injecting a sense of urgency into the implementation of this important international initiative.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is right to say that this is an important initiative on which Britain has a good record. Of course, he will be aware that, unfortunately, an early debate would not be to the point. What is needed is legislation. He will also know that that legislation is not in this year's programme and that we do not discuss what may be in next year's. However, I accept his point; this is an important issue.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Can we please have a debate entitled "Crime and Punishment", to be opened by the Home Secretary and wound up by the Prime Minister, so that the Home Secretary can clarify for the House the recent alarming stories that crime is spiralling completely out of control in this country and that we are now more lawless than the United States of America? We need clarification from the Home Secretary on that. Could the Prime Minister wind up the debate and tell us who these extra people he wants to be put in prison are, where the prison places are, and whether he is remotely concerned with judicial process or just wants to bang them all up straight away?

Mrs. Beckett: I detected an interesting inconsistency in the right hon. Gentleman's question. He started by

attacking the Government's record on crime, but promptly turned round to ask, "Does the Prime Minister just want to bang them all up without trial?" That is precisely what we see from the Conservative party. Conservative Members claim continually, whether about asylum, crime, hooliganism or whatever, that the Government are not taking action. The minute we start to do so, they cause problems and do not support us. As for the remarks to which he drew attention, I am not entirely sure where the gentleman who made them resides in the United States, but I can only think that he works for the New York tourist board, because the notion that one is more likely to experience violent crime in Britain than in the United States is not borne out by any statistics that I have ever seen.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): Given the wise decision this week by members of Standard Life to keep that organisation mutual, can my right hon. Friend find time for an urgent debate on the benefits of mutuality to its members? I ask that for two reasons. First, Bradford and Bingley members will make a crucial decision on their future next month, and organisations such as Nationwide, the headquarters of which are in my constituency, would appreciate the opportunity for Members to make it clear that carpetbaggers who are pushing for a quick buck now make members pay for it time and again later. Secondly, if we lose this mutual status from our organisations, we will lose crucial competition in our financial services markets.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right that competition in the financial markets is beneficial and that the element that mutuality can provide is worth while. Certainly that is the view of all on this side of the House and, until I heard certain remarks from the Opposition, I had thought that was perhaps even the view of Conservative Members. However, I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a debate on the Floor of the House. My hon. Friend will know that there are now 200 extra opportunities for debates—in Westminster Hall—and I suggest that she should perhaps consider one of those.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): We know that the Government are shirking their responsibility to reply to the Neill report, but so far they have also failed to reply to or to allow a debate on the Fritchie report, which points to deliberate and systematic politicisation of national health service appointments under this Government. Given that the written answers that I have now obtained demonstrate that things have not improved since the report's publication and that, indeed, 30 per cent. of short-listed applicants for appointments as non-executives to the new primary care trusts declare political activity for the Labour party, is it not now essential that the Government make a statement or allow a debate on the matter?

Mrs. Beckett: I remind the hon. Gentleman that the Government will reply to the Neill report and that we are still within the time that is normally expected for such replies to be made, so the notion that the Government are evading their responsibilities is not in any way borne out. I remind him too, on the issue of the Fritchie report, that the appointments made under this Government have resulted in substantially more women and people from minority communities being appointed to such boards than previously. I note that the Conservative party is opposed to that.

When the hon. Gentleman talks about 30 per cent. of recent appointees being from the Labour party, we are talking about the smallest element—the political appointees—of the appointments that are made. Within those, it is perfectly natural that some come from the Labour party, although I recognise that that was not what happened under the Government whom the hon. Gentleman supported.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I was tempted to ask whether we might have a statement from the Minister responsible for Lord Levy on whether Lord Levy has been given the number of the Inland Revenue's confidential tax helpline to help those in the hidden economy regularise their affairs—but I will resist that temptation. May we have a statement from the Prime Minister on the reason why his office cleared last night's speech by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, outrageously suggesting that a future Labour Government would bring in the alternative vote system for future parliamentary elections? Had it been applied at the last election the Government's disproportionate victory would have been massively increased. Is this not a sign that the Government are beginning to recognise that their only hope for long-term electoral success is to rig the rules, fix the elections and cheat the electorate?

Mrs. Beckett: First, Lord Levy has made it plain that he disagrees with tax avoidance and has never practised it. Unlike many who support the Conservative party, he has paid literally millions of pounds in tax in this country without taking advantage of any of the avoidance devices so familiar to Members opposite. Secondly, I have not seen a report which makes the suggestion that the hon. Gentleman is making about the speech of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The reports that I have seen suggest that my right hon. Friend said that the matter should not be regarded as closed and that people should give serious consideration to it. As for the notion that there are currently any proposals to change the electoral system, the hon. Gentleman will know that there are not.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Will the right hon. Lady invite her right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to make a statement to the House in the next few weeks on the state of negotiations between the United Kingdom and United States Governments on bilateral air service agreements? Will the Secretary of State take that opportunity to give the House an assurance that he will not conclude such negotiations under pressure from the US before elections take place there this year, unless it is in the interests of British airlines—passenger and cargo—to do so? Will he also give the House an assurance that he will conclude any agreement only on the basis of access to US cabotage—with an end to the "fly American" policy and to the stringent ownership and control rights currently enjoyed by the Americans?

Mrs. Beckett: I am not aware in precise detail of where we are on the timing of the negotiations; to my

[Mrs. Beckett]

knowledge, they have been going on—literally—for years. The reason they have been going on for years is because the Deputy Prime Minister is determined to defend Britain's interests—as the House would expect.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): May we have a debate on the agreement on the civil list reported in today's newspapers? It appears that the royal household has cut its costs enormously and that there will be a real-terms reduction in the amount paid to the civil list. Perhaps it would be useful if someone from the royal household could put a feed into the Government as to how one can cut one's costs these days, especially as the Prime Minister—in setting up his presidential office—seems constantly to be increasing expenditure.

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for such a debate, or indicate that there is likely to be a statement on the matter in the near future.

On costs, the hon. Gentleman should know that the costs of central Government have reduced in real terms since the Labour Government were elected. As for how the royal household managed to make savings, it is my understanding that—perfectly reasonably, as it was a long-term settlement—the royal household assumed, and it was assumed under the previous settlement, that inflation and interest rates would continue at the same disastrous levels as they were under the Conservatives. A successful Government conducting a successful economic policy have turned that around.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): As the right hon. Lady is aware, the Prime Minister chose to alter the structure of Prime Minister's Question Time after the general election. May we have an urgent debate about the new structure that we seem to have? The right hon. Lady will be aware that an analysis of yesterday's Prime Minister's Question Time shows that the Prime Minister spent more than 25 per cent. of his answer time talking about what he perceived to be Conservative party policy. Is it not true that he is not responsible for Conservative party policy? Is it not completely improper that he deliberately sets out to distort policy when he knows that what he is saying is not the truth?

Madam Speaker: Order. I cannot accept that last sentence. I do not think that the hon. Gentleman realised what he was implying. He must apologise and withdraw those remarks.

Mr. Fabricant: I have no hesitation in withdrawing them. I am sure that the Prime Minister does not mean to give a misleading misrepresentation of Conservative party policy.

Mrs. Beckett: I am aware, as we all are, of the changes made by the Prime Minister. That has resulted in his being in attendance at Prime Minister's Question Time more often. He has taken more questions than his predecessor, just as he has made more statements than his predecessor.

I have not calculated—indeed, I should be surprised if anyone could do so—how much time was spent yesterday on remarks on Conservative party policy. However, if it was 25 per cent., that too is a significant improvement, as it is well within my memory that my right hon. Friend's predecessor used to spend at least 90 per cent. of his time talking about Labour party policy.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): May we have a debate on postal services? The Postal Services Bill has received its Second Reading. Many of us sat, day after day, in Committee on that Bill and it has been considered on Report and Third Reading—but there was not a word from the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry about how he would help rural post offices until yesterday's statement. It was only when the Prime Minister got a rollicking from the Women's Institute that the Government made any proposals to help rural post offices. In addition to a debate on rural post offices and the future of the Post Office, will the Leader of the House advise us on how to nominate the WI for a collective DBE for its contribution to the rural economy?

Mrs. Beckett: If the hon. Gentleman took part in the debates on the Postal Services Bill, he must surely have observed the discussions about the possibility of making resources available to keep a good post office network. If he thought that that would exclude rural post offices, I would be very surprised. The statement made yesterday by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry was welcomed by both sides of the House and it was based on a performance and innovation unit report that has self-evidently been under preparation for a considerable time. The notion that the statement was in some way related to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's speech to the WI has no foundation. On the other issues that surrounded that speech, a small number of those in attendance clearly did not wish to know what the Government are doing for rural post offices, but I imagine that most of the population take a rather different view.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Earlier, the Solicitor-General was so garrulous that we were unable to reach Question 32, and therefore unable to ask him quite what he meant when he said today that it was important to create a rights culture. Yesterday, the Home Secretary told local government representatives that they would be facing a raft of legal challenges as a result of the Human Rights Act 1998, and the Lord Chancellor has pointed out that it will cost £40 million in additional legal aid next year. I do not recall Ministers being quite so forthcoming when the Act was being considered by the House, so is it not a matter that we might revisit with a further debate? Furthermore, does the Leader of House agree that our human rights are being infringed by being unable to celebrate the Queen Mother's birthday with a public holiday?

Mrs. Beckett: I am not aware that it is a human right to celebrate the Queen Mother's birthday, although I expect that many people, not least the Queen Mother herself, will do so.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that we are already subject to the European convention on human rights. All that has happened as a result of the change that the Government have made, is that people can exercise their rights in this

country instead of having to exercise them by accessing courts overseas. Given their Europhobia, I would have thought that Conservative Members might welcome that.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): A Minister from the Department of Trade and Industry said in the *Berliner Zeitung* that this country was likely to become a member of the single currency sooner than everyone expects and that this country would be bounced into an early referendum on the single currency should the Labour party form the next Government. Last night, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said that the Prime Minister had not gone cold on proportional representation and that it was likely that a commitment for a referendum on a changed voting system would also be given. Will the Leader of the House tell the House whether Alastair Campbell has yet told the Prime Minister when the country is likely to have both referendums?

Mrs. Beckett: I am not aware that anyone has suggested that my right hon. Friend from the DTI said that this country would be bounced into a referendum. The Labour party is offering the people of this country a referendum, and the Conservative party will certainly not do that in the next Parliament. As to the issue of what my right hon. Friend is or is not supposed to have said, heaven knows that it is difficult enough to get people to report things accurately even when the remarks are not translated.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): Further to the right hon. Lady's reply, will she help the House by saying whether the remarks of the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe were a translation of the views of the Prime Minister, or those of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, or possibly even those of the Foreign Secretary? Is it not time that the House at last had an open and full discussion of the genuine intentions of the Government on the single currency and on when they wish to introduce it?

Mrs. Beckett: My understanding is that the report was not even a translation of the views of my right hon. Friend.

Opposition Day

[15TH ALLOTTED DAY]

National Health Service

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment that stands in the name of the Prime Minister. Because of the number of Back-Bench Members who wish to take part in the debate, I have had to limit speeches to 15 minutes.

1.19 pm

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring) *rose—*

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Dr. Fox: I will be happier if my hon. Friends cheer when I have finished my speech, Madam Speaker.

I beg to move,

That this House deplores the Government's continued distortion of priorities in the National Health Service through its focus on political targets rather than clinical outcomes, its waste of scarce NHS resources, which would be better spent treating patients, on propaganda exercises, the bogus "national consultation" and a new logo, its manipulation of the appointments system within the NHS and its continued political interference in day to day management, creating a climate of fear and frustration which is driving good NHS managers out of the Service, and its failure to live up to its promises to end post-code rationing and to put patients first; and notes the huge gap between Labour's promises on health at the last General Election and the reality today, which is that, for the great majority of the British people, the NHS has got worse, not better, under this Labour Government.

If we want a clear example of the Government's priorities in their approach to running health care in the United Kingdom, we need to look no further than last night's edition of the *Evening Standard.* Its headline "NHS blocks shock report on killing" tells us all that we need to know about the culture in the Government and the attitudes of Ministers. The report states:

Publication of a damning report into a care in the community patient who killed his girlfriend in London has been postponed in a Government attempt to control bad news.

Independent experts were instructed by the Department of Health to delay the inquiry report, which was due out today, because it would clash with a "big news day" on health, with Health Secretary Alan Milburn expected to make a major announcement.

The report continues:

The move has dismayed leading mental health charities, which believe reports are being systematically delayed and unpublicised in order to avoid damaging headlines about the failures of care in the community.

Marjorie Wallace of SANE said: "We're concerned that, increasingly, inquiries are being treated as only bad news to be suppressed, rather than giving vital evidence to prevent future tragedies."

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): On that very point—

Dr. Fox: I have hardly started, and shall take interventions later. *[Interruption.]* I shall not take the intervention of the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours). He may as well save his blood pressure and sit down for a moment.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. There is a tradition in the House of Commons

[Mr. Campbell-Savours]

that a Member who makes an allegation of that nature gives way to interventions. Is that not correct? What is wrong with the man?

Madam Speaker: The Member who has the Floor determines for himself whether to give way. I heard the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) say that he would give way in a moment or two. Is that correct?

Dr. Fox: Yes, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will stand by that statement.

Dr. Fox: I did not say that I would give way to the hon. Member for Workington, only that I would give way. Some hon. Members, however long they have been here, are slow learners.

The Government exist only to be in office and are obsessed with their own image.

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): On a point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Is this a genuine point of order?

Mr. Bennett: Surely the hon. Gentleman's remark was an insult to you, Madam Speaker, and he should withdraw it.

Madam Speaker: I must have a particularly thick skin this Thursday morning, as I did not recognise it as an insult.

Dr. Fox: I do not feel too sorry, as I have been in the Whips Office and know a Whips' operation when I see one. I know what a badly rattled Government try to do when they are in trouble. If there are no more points of order for the time being, I shall continue with bad-mouthing the Government.

The Government are obsessed by their own image, PR and propaganda. They are devoid of substance and are willing to subjugate truth, public interest and individual well-being and care to their overwhelming desire to remain in power. Yesterday's incident was just another example of that. The Government's priority is prioritising good news for Labour politicians, which is underpinned by bullying, secrecy and manipulation. In 1995, the Labour party stated:

> One particularly damaging development in the Conservative years has been the emergence of a culture of fear in the NHS . . . We believe that all staff should be able to speak their minds.

Mr. Campbell-Savours *rose—*

Dr. Fox: True to my word, I shall give way to the hon. Member for Workington.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I thank the hon. Gentleman. May I have the good fortune of telling him that yesterday's *Evening Standard* report that he read out is a total and utter fabrication. In the light of that, is he prepared to reconsider what he said and withdraw the text?

Dr. Fox: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the barrister involved in that report. I am sure that she would be very interested if he wished to repeat outside the House the allegation that the report is bogus.

Another example that comes to mind is the headline in this morning's edition of *The Independent* "Officials drew up plans for NHS cuts cover-up". *The Independent* reports that the Leader of the Liberal Democrat party raised the matter yesterday, and states:

> Substantial cuts in the budgets of health programmes for some of Britain's poorest communities—

apparently—

> have been agreed by Ministers.

The Independent reports that a Department of Health letter written by an official said:

> "We will in effect be announcing cuts to anticipated health action zone budgets this year. There is likely to be some negative financial management and political feedback from HAZ partners."

The Independent reports that another letter said:

> "There is an issue about whether you would want to write to MPs pre-empting any complaints about funding.
>
> Ministers have only previously written to MPs when announcing successful HAZs and on balance we feel a letter would probably draw attention to this issue and is not merited."

That says everything about the Government's culture.

More substantial comment on that aspect of the Government was made by Judy Jones in a revealing series of articles in the *British Medical Journal*. She said that when an NHS trust in Northern Ireland reneged on promised funding for a new 10-bed drug rehabilitation unit, a consultant psychiatrist expressed his concerns to a newspaper. How audacious of him! As a result, he was called to account by the trust chief executive, who told him that his actions were ill judged, ill advised and detrimental to the trust. The consultant construed the dressing down as a warning and asked the British Medical Association for advice; he was the first of a very large number of consultants to do so in recent months.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): Does not the hon. Gentleman recognise, as I do as someone who has worked in the NHS for the last 20 years, that in such cases NHS servants are only exercising the skills that they have honed over the last two decades?

Dr. Fox: We are discussing what, according to huge numbers of people who work in the service, has increasingly become a culture of fear, bullying, intimidation and the suppression of truth and of the interests of individuals. It is increasingly likely that managers of trusts and health authorities will be phoned by Ministers or senior civil servants and be given a dressing down and asked why they are not giving core good news stories to the newspapers instead of allowing bad news about what is happening in the NHS to filter out. In running our health service, the Government's culture is becoming increasingly corrupt, and the NHS is playing second fiddle to the interests of the Labour party's news machine.

At last year's Labour party conference in Bournemouth, Victoria MacDonald, the health correspondent for "Channel 4 News", was confronted by Joe McCrea—at that time the special adviser to the Health Secretary—who unleashed a stream of abuse at her, at one point throwing a mobile phone. I shall not repeat his language because it would not be suitable for *Hansard*. Victoria MacDonald explained the reason for the attack to the *British Medical Journal*, saying that Mr. McCrea thought that she was off-message because of a film that she had made about the waiting lists initiative.

In the film, which was made as a result of several off-the-record briefings, Victoria MacDonald suggested that the then Health Secretary was keen to ditch the waiting list initiative because it was distorting priorities. She said that he did not like the word "ditch" because he thought that it was damaging to the Government, although he did say that Ministers had come round to the idea that waiting times were more important than waiting list numbers. She wanted to report what Ministers genuinely thought, while they wanted to maintain complete control because they thought that in the short term the spin would be wrong for the Government, even though the policy may be right. How twisted and perverse is it possible to be? [HON. MEMBERS: "You should know."] Labour Members may think that it is funny that professionals who work in the media or the NHS should be subjected to a culture of bullying, fear and intimidation. They may think that that is immaterial and that sitting on the Government Benches is more important than any respect for truth or for professionals. However, those outside the Chamber certainly will not think that, and they will note the attitude of Labour Members.

Another major priority for the Labour Government when they came to office was their desire to abolish the internal market and to reorganise the system. The current Secretary of State takes great credit for having abolished the internal market, but Lord Winston, in the other place, says that one of the Government's biggest failings is that they have not abolished the internal market. It is difficult to know who is in touch with reality. However, the effect on the system of Labour's ideological reorganisation matters more than the question of who is giving us the correct version—and, as ever, the effect is that we get less choice.

Just this week, 24 of the United Kingdom's leading neurosurgeons, neurologists and anaesthetists joined the Parkinson's Disease Society in calling for changes to the current mechanism. They explained:

> Since the abolition of Extra Contractual Referrals in 1999 many patients with conditions such as movement disorders, spinal injuries and severe chronic pain syndromes are no longer able to benefit from treatment outside their local area. The current funding arrangement, known as Out of Area Treatment Allocations . . . operates under a fixed annual budget regardless of demand for operations. No mechanism now exists for the transfer of funds from Local Health Authorities to specialist centres.

They then said in a statement:

> We are told that since the abolition of ECRs no mechanism exists for the transfer of funds to follow the patients that urgently need our help. Consequently our waiting lists continue to grow and we are unable to treat these patients with the procedures they need. We have gone backwards since last year and the year before. This is unacceptable.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Fox: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman if he thinks that that is acceptable.

Dr. Palmer: As the hon. Gentleman continues his review of the media, would he like to comment on the today's admirable editorial in *The Daily Telegraph*, headlined "Dr. Fox's good health", which examines his proposals in detail and states:

> Those who continue to rely on the NHS for their health needs should not expect an analogous level of care.

Does he accept that that would be the consequence of his approach to the health service?

Dr. Fox: I accept that that is the view of *The Daily Telegraph* editorial today. I shall deal with my views shortly. *[Interruption.]* Given that we are discussing the lack of treatment for people with Parkinson's disease, and the fact that neurosurgeons and neurologists cannot refer their patients for the treatment that they want when they say that they were able to do so only a short time ago, it is interesting that the hon. Gentleman puts the interests of the Whips Office before those of patients in the NHS.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dr. Fox: I have given way several times already, and I shall do so again later.

Another priority in the Government's armoury is to make funding available for their pet proposals. We have had reports this week that hospital managers say that the Government's national changeover plan in preparation for Britain's entry to the European single currency is costing millions of pounds and increasing work loads dramatically. A trust manager said:

> The plans will require substantial extra work from staff at a time when we are facing disintegration through the loss of mental health services, community hospitals and community services.

The report further states that

> computers, printers, financial forms and stationery will be changed and new equipment for cashiers, vending machines and car parks required.

The trust manager continues:

> It is likely that management consultants may be needed to support the process.

It has been reported that the Department of Health admitted that the costs of preparing for the euro were high for the NHS. A spokesman did not know whether central Government would provide financial help.

We received information this morning suggesting, from calculations made throughout the country, that the cost of preparing for the Government's changeover plan could be between £75 million and £95 million for this year alone in the NHS. Will the Secretary of State tell us whether those figures are accurate, too low or too high?

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Fox: If the hon. Gentleman—he has practised as a doctor, so I shall give way to him—thinks that spending

[Dr. Fox]

£75 million to £95 million on preparing for the euro is a good use of NHS money. I look forward to hearing from him.

Dr. Stoate: The hon. Gentleman will know, as a doctor, that GPs find it impossible to refer out of area because the Government of which he was a member set up extra-contractual referrals in the first place to limit GPs' freedom to refer out of area. If he thinks that the ECR system delivered the goods, I am afraid that he needs to talk to some more GPs, because the GPs know that the ECR budget was so tight that it was almost impossible to get health authorities to agree to pay for ECRs in the first place.

Dr. Fox: Sometimes I really do despair. If the problem with extra-contractual referrals was that the budgetary constraints were too tight, the solution would have been to loosen them, not to abolish the system. That is typical of all that the Labour Government want to do; they want to level down to the lowest common denominator and deny choice to doctors and patients, which is exactly what they have done. The consultants, such as the neurosurgeons whom I have mentioned, have less freedom to refer. That is why their patients throughout the country get a worse quality of care under Labour than they did under the previous Conservative Government—when, although I confess there could have been fewer constraints on extra-contractual referrals, there was a big improvement for GPs. The hon. Gentleman and I know that that was a great move forward for GP choice, which this Government have denied because they do not like doctors to have increased freedom.

The next pet project to be given extra funding is the new NHS logo. Everything must say "new" on it. Of course, there was not room to say "modern new NHS" on the logo. I wonder whether the Secretary of State will give us an idea of how much that will cost.

Those are minor points, although they tell us much about the Government and about the rotten culture that is eating away at them. They have no concern for truth and are obsessed by their own image and spin. What really matters, however, is what they are doing to patient care.

As the previous Secretary of State's adviser intimated, the Government themselves know that the waiting list initiative, one of the central parts of their policy, is deeply flawed, and distorting clinical priorities in our health care system. We have been told repeatedly by doctors throughout the country—I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House have heard it, and we have raised it here on several occasions—that clinical priorities are being distorted, with some of the sickest patients being made to wait longer while minor cases are moved up the list simply so that a bigger number are treated to make the figures look good for the sake of the politicians in Whitehall.

To put that those remarks into context, I should like to focus on a single case. The wife of a patient in County Durham wrote that her husband had been having chest pains on the treadmill and when playing golf. He consulted his GP on 17 February 1999. When he first saw a consultant it was 28 April 1999, and he told him that he thought a bypass would be needed and referred him to South Cleveland hospital. He had an angiogram in September 1999. It was not until 22 March this year that he had a consultation with a consultant. In a letter dated 28 March, he was told

the current waiting time for heart surgery is 12 months.

Tragically, that lady's husband died on 26 May at the age of 53, still not having received any written confirmation of his operation.

There is no way of knowing what will happen in any particular case—we all understand that—but the most important factor is that last year, 450 fewer cardiac bypass operations were carried out in the NHS than the year before—the first time in 25 years of the NHS carrying out those operations that there has been a fall, according to the cardiac register.

Does it not say everything about the culture and the way in which the Government are running the NHS that they increase the number of minor procedures, yet the number of coronary bypasses is going down? It confirms everything that we have said about the Government's approach to health care, their lack of clinical priority and their obsession with political priority.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): The hon. Gentleman has outlined a sad case, but we could produce equally sad cases from when his party were in government. If he looks at what the Government have done, he will see a huge initiative on heart specialists. We know that there are not enough. The Secretary of State has talked to heart surgeons, has worked out what needs to be done and has said that the money and the beds will be there and that the medics will be trained, so that as soon as possible, we will get an NHS of the kind that the patients of this country need. Why does the hon. Gentleman not recognise that?

Dr. Fox: To paraphrase the hon. Lady, things have not got any worse under the present Government—they are just as bad as they were before. That will come as bad news to the people who put her into Westminster, who were told that there were 24 hours in which to save the NHS. I suppose that we should all feel very reassured and can sleep safely in our beds knowing that, while the NHS is cutting the number of bypass operations, the Secretary of State has spoken to a couple of heart surgeons so it is all going to be fine.

Several hon. Members: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Fox: It is hard to choose from the chorus. I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key).

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Does my hon. Friend agree that most of the problem is that the Government should not be running the NHS? They should be funding and regulating it. Most of the problem is interference the whole time. Four thousand people work in my constituency hospital. They are sick to death of the Labour party treating the NHS as the Labour party poodle.

Dr. Fox: I think that there is a role for politicians in regulating the NHS and deciding what we should get out of the service, but they should then allow managers and

doctors to do what they are trained to do, which is manage the service and treat patients. To have politicians interfering at every level of the service, sending circulars minute by minute and meddling wherever conceivable, is the worst possible way to run any health care system. Ministers cannot micro-manage a system that employs 1 million people, and even if were possible for them to do so, it would not be desirable. Politicians should not be managing services; we have specially trained professionals to do that. It is up to the Secretary of State and his Ministers to regulate the system and allow people to get on with what they are trained to do.

We are concerned about the effect of Government policy not only on individual patients but on hospitals. I have here a typical letter on a subject that is raised time and again as we go around the country: the increasing prevalence of hospital-acquired infections. It states:

To get to the point, my father recently died in Wycombe General Hospital of a hospital-acquired infection, MRSA septicaemia—

methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus, or the "superbug" to which the tabloids refer. The letter continues:

My mother . . . discovered my father's pillow had a long faeces stain on it. She asked the nurses to remove it and was horrified to later find it under my father's head . . . Nurses have described this infection as 'the silent epidemic' . . . One killer fact you can throw back in Tony Blair's face is that 5,000 people a year die from hospital-acquired infections and 15,000 a year (this figure is on the increase) get infected in hospital with an infection that significantly contributes to their death. MRSA is now responsible for 37 per cent. of all cases of fatal septicaemias . . . tragically my father was one of those government statistics—and this is directly attributable to the filthy state of hospital wards. The rate of infection in NHS hospitals is 10 per cent. and in private hospitals it is only 1 per cent."

The letter concludes:

PS. The money spent on the recent NHS publicity stunt could have been better spent on some mops and disinfectant for hospitals.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): I share the hon. Gentleman's concern about hospital-acquired infection. Perhaps he can tell the House whether he supports or opposes our setting standards for infection control in hospitals, or does he stick by his assertion that the Government should not be sending hospitals circulars about cleaning?

Dr. Fox: Setting the quality of standards for all health care, in both the private and the state sector, is a legitimate role of Ministers. *[Interruption.]* If he could retain in his memory more than one line at a time, the Secretary of State would find that I said exactly that in another part of the speech that I gave yesterday in Glasgow.

Perhaps the Minister of State would like to tell us why, after Labour has been in office for three years, only 10 per cent. of NHS hospitals have proper infection control plans and only 15 per cent. have infection control budgets. What have Ministers been doing for the past three years?

Mr. Denham: We have been setting in place a system—*[Interruption.]* Calm down. In three years, we have ensured that every single hospital has an infection control team. That was not the case when we came to power three years ago. On the subject of setting standards, let me point out that the hon. Gentleman said:

Ministers should not be issuing endless circulars on everything from cleaning to catering.

He opposed having cleaning standards yesterday, but today he wants cleaning standards.

Dr. Fox: Even given the level of distortion that we are used to from current Health Ministers, that was a particularly pathetic intervention. Apparently, the Government have spent three years putting together a piece of paper that tells hospitals to establish an infection control team. Any monkey with a typewriter could have produced one as quickly as that.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): The Government are hypersensitive because the World Health Organisation has found that the national health service ranks 18th in the league of health organisations. Under this Government, we have a health service that is worse than that in Greece.

Dr. Fox: I find no pleasure in the fact that the world's fourth largest economy has only the 18th best health care system. There are many reasons for that, far too many to go into now. I was rather surprised by the reaction of the Department of Health, which regarded the findings of the survey as something of a pleasant surprise. It seemed to believe that it would be further down the league than it was. That says a great deal about the Department's expectations for our health care system and its confidence in running the system.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): What assessment has my hon. Friend made of the letter to the Prime Minister from Mr. Tipu Aziz, an internationally distinguished surgeon, who declares that he has supported the Labour party for more than 25 years, but that he now feels betrayed by that party because, as he sees it, morale in the national health service is at a lower level than he has ever seen in his professional life?

Dr. Fox: My assessment is that Mr. Aziz will not be alone.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): Throughout health policy and social policy, is not the first tactic of the party which wants to destroy the health service to privatise it and to denigrate and destroy public services, reducing confidence in them and bringing them down in the eyes of the public?

Dr. Fox: Given the few interventions that the hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity to make, he could surely have thought of a better one than that.

Before coming to the House, I spent all my working life in the NHS, as a hospital doctor and as a general practitioner. In the days when the Secretary of State was running his "Days of Hope" bookshops supporting CND and selling Marxist international newspapers, I was one of those junior doctors working long hours for low pay. I do not need to be told by any Labour Member what dedication is like in the NHS and about the quality of members of the medical and nursing profession. I have

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seen that at first hand. I do not need to be changing my line on what works and does not in the NHS according to my level of preference for any political system.

Ann Keen (Brentford and Isleworth): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Fox: I have given way nine or 10 times. Given the time constraints, I think that that is sufficient.

Ann Keen *rose—*

Dr. Fox: Let me say it slowly for the hon. Lady; I am not giving way.

Next week, we are getting the Government's latest and greatest stunt so far—NHS week. We are told that there will be NHS Oscars and lots of good news stories. No doubt the press will be pinned down and subjugated to ensure that no one dares to utter a peep against the Government during that period. Ministers should understand that the Government's image is not the problem. Changing it, spending more money on PR and adding more spin will not improve the situation. The lack of substance is the problem.

I will repeat what I said yesterday, because it is time the Opposition said what we want to see. We will transform the culture of the NHS by redefining the relationship between politicians and the management of the system. We aim to take the politics out of health care by changing the role of politicians altogether.

We will maintain an NHS which is free at the point of use and which, as now, provides a comprehensive range of services, funded by the taxpayer. We reject the idea of an NHS core service alone on the grounds of equity.

We intend to diminish the barriers between primary and secondary care and between the independent and state sectors to maximise partnership in all areas. We believe there should be a single regulatory framework based on the needs of the patient and not the needs of the care provider. We must ensure the safety and well-being of all patients wherever they are in the health care delivery system. Our watchwords should be quality, access and choice.

We do not believe it is desirable for politicians to be involved in the detailed management of the state system. The Secretary of State's role will be to take a strategic view of total health care, to agree funding and guaranteed minimum standards of quality and to set public health priorities.

We will abolish the Government's flawed waiting list target and adopt targets based on cure rates and survival rates, to bring them up to the level of our European counterparts. We need to place less importance on input and throughput targets. In defined clinical areas we will give a guarantee to patients that they will be given—

Mr. Derek Twigg (Halton): Which treatments does the hon. Gentleman want paid for privately, rather than being free on the NHS?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. We have had sufficient sedentary interventions.

Dr. Fox: It hurts Government Back Benchers when they are forced to listen to the real words, rather than the distorted versions they get from their own Front Bench. I said that patients will be given a guaranteed specific maximum waiting time—

Mr. Twigg *rose—*

Dr. Fox: I will not give way again. I said that patients will be given a specific maximum waiting time for treatment decided by their consultant. It will be set specifically for their individual cases, not arbitrarily by politicians for the average patient. Good medicine is about seeing patients—

Mr. Twigg *rose—*

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) *rose—*

Mr. Ivan Lewis (Bury, South) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has indicated that he will not give way again. Hon. Members must resume their seats.

Dr. Fox: Those of us who have been, and can expect to stay, in Parliament more than one term know what it means when Government Back Benchers feel that they have continually to heckle those on the Opposition Front Bench. That shows that they are rattled and know we are telling the truth. What is more, our claims chime with the real experience of the public—who know that health care has got worse under the current Government.

I thought that we were moving towards some sort of consensus on public-private partnership. On BBC's "Newsnight", no less a person than the man in charge of the health service—the Prime Minister—said:

> There is absolutely no ideological barrier to using private beds. If there is a policy which prevents this, it should be removed. I will look into this.

That was interesting because it is not what we have been hearing from the Secretary of State this week. Two weeks ago, he took the same line when the soundbites were being dictated by No. 10, rather than Millbank. Rodney Bickerstaffe, the general secretary of one of the main unions, said on BBC's "Question Time":

> We want to abolish the private sector altogether. I would love to see it go altogether

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): Absolutely.

Dr. Fox: At least the hon. Gentleman is honest. He wants the private sector abolished. I applaud him for having the honesty to say what many of his colleagues believe.

If the private sector—in which 1 million surgical procedures, or 20 per cent. of the total, are carried out each year—were abolished and did not exist, it would cost between £8 billion and £10.5 billion to have all those procedures done by the NHS. Do Labour Members want everything done on the health service? If so, do they want to use all the extra money and more—or do they want NHS patients to wait longer?

Every country in the developed western world has a proper partnership between the state and private sectors. In all the countries of Europe in which the Prime Minister

takes his free holidays, his socialist friends in charge of health services understand the need for partnership. My greatest problem with the Secretary of State is that he said in response to the World Health Organisation report:

> we are not prepared to trade off being free and fair for efficiency and responsiveness to the demands of patients.

Leaving aside the fact that postcode rationing is hardly fair, who believes that one has to trade off a fair and free service for efficiency or responsiveness, or that the two are mutually exclusive? A free and fair service can be efficient and responsive. The Secretary of State was giving away the fact that he does not understand the concept of choice. He does not believe that doctors or patients should be free to choose. He thinks that they should stand in line like Dickensian paupers having gruel given out to them and be thankful, irrespective of the second-rate care they are getting.

We all remember it; voters remember it—"24 hours to save the NHS", "Things can only get better", "Modernise, not privatise". We have heard it a thousand times. It is meaningless, vacuous drivel.

This is a Government with no substance, scared of their own shadow, obsessed with their image, driven by ego, incapable of taking difficult decisions—a Government afraid to govern. Their twisted priorities mean that the sickest patients get pushed down the queue or die, while more minor cases get moved up to make the figures look better. The Government are spending money preparing for the euro, while our hospitals get filthier. They speak about a national plan, but have no moral authority to call themselves national in any sense.

The best way to expose the situation is to quote from a letter from a GP in Wolverhampton, who writes:

> I am a G.P. in Wolverhampton. I went straight from a State School to Cambridge University, much the same background as some of the Labour Government's M.P.s, though I gather some went from public school, a privilege my farming parents could not afford for me.

The GP continues:

> I thought the Labour Government would reward our changes. . . I have never felt like resigning from the N.H.S. before. I knew that Labour would not change the N.H.S. and education as per election promise, but I never expected to be blamed myself for their failure.

The letter goes on:

> I am disgusted with Mr. Milburn's lack of respect for me and my team. You have got to get this across to him, he has to stop bashing doctors and the N.H.S. just because Labour hasn't delivered. All our efforts . . . are rubbished by him.
>
> I met Mr. Dobson. I believe he was "passionately" committed to the N.H.S. which is why Mr. Blair got rid of him when he realised that Doctor-bashing was the political answer to their problems.
>
> I am now worried that I will leave the N.H.S. if Labour is returned at the next election. I fear that other forward-thinking practitioners who have that option will also go. This will wreck Primary Care. My patients and others need to know the consequence of voting Labour. Tell them. I will tell my patients.

What an indictment. What a disgrace. What a betrayal! "New and modern"? Labour have been rumbled for the self-satisfied, smug, hypocritical, bullying, shallow, soundbite-ridden and vacuous scam of a Government that they are. They should start counting their days.

1.57 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

> 'welcomes the decision to prepare a National Plan for the NHS in England, bringing together doctors, nurses, patients' organisations and others working in the NHS to set out priorities for the modernisation of the NHS; welcomes the largest sustained increase in funding in the history of the NHS; and rejects the use of taxpayers' money to subsidise private medical insurance.'

I am glad that the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) has got that off his chest. This debate on priorities in the national health service is very welcome, for a simple reason: it will reveal the clearest of differences between the policies of the Government and those of the Conservative party. For two decades they ran the national health service. They failed to invest in it or to modernise it.

For three years, the Government's priority has been to lay the foundations for a modernised national health service. Let me tell the hon. Gentleman what our priorities have been. First, we have been getting more doctors into the NHS as a priority. That is why there are 4,780 more doctors since we came to office. We have almost 500 extra GPs and 4,300 more hospital doctors.

By 2005, we will have increased the number of medical school places by more than 1,100—a 20 per cent. increase, and the biggest for a generation—and established two new medical schools, the first for 25 years. The hon. Gentleman always says that he wants more real doctors, rather than more spin doctors. That is precisely what we are providing.

Dr. Fox: How many consultants took early retirement from the NHS last year, and was it a record?

Mr. Milburn: I do not know those figures, but I will be happy to write to the hon. Gentleman. I can tell him that we are getting more consultants working in the NHS, and there will be more consultants working in the NHS.

Secondly, we have made getting more nurses into the NHS a priority. That is why there are now 5,000 more nurse training places than when we came to office. I remind the Opposition that when we came to office, the number of nurse training places had been cut by them. Now the numbers are rising. There are 10,770 extra qualified nurses working in the NHS—an increase since we came to power. Last year, the increase in nurse numbers was the highest for seven years.

Thirdly, we have made treating more patients in the NHS a priority. The NHS now carries out 500,000 more operations each year, sees 400,000 more patients as first out-patient appointments and treats 300,000 more emergency cases.

In May 1997, waiting list figures were rising, and were at a record level. Today, the figures are down by more than 100,000. Last year, there was a fall in both in-patient and out-patient waiting list numbers for the first time ever.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Milburn: I shall give way in a moment. The hon. Member for Woodspring made much of distorting numbers and distorting the truth. I wish that he would concentrate on the genuine figures, and the truth about the number of heart

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operations. He alleges that the number of heart operations decreased in the last year for which we have figures. That is not true. In 1997–98, there were 21,110 coronary artery bypass grafts. The following year—when the hon. Gentleman claims that the numbers fell—they increased by approximately 1,300 to 22,494. The hon. Member for Woodspring and other Conservative Members should give fewer lessons on distorting the truth.

Mr. Burns: On the Secretary of State's claims about falling waiting lists, will he tell me in straightforward language why 8,391 were waiting for hospital treatment in the Mid Essex hospital trust area on 31 March 1997, whereas the latest figures show that 9,953 people are waiting? Why have not the numbers on waiting lists fallen in the past three years?

Mr. Milburn: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the number for in-patients has fallen by 100,000. The number of out-patients waiting for treatment remains too high—that is undeniable—but it is falling. Last year, for the first time since records began, the number of in-patients and the number of out-patients waiting for treatment fell at the same time.

The hon. Gentleman knows that performance varies across the NHS. I cannot micro-manage the North Essex trust, if that is the relevant trust. Management is up to individual managers and clinicians. If the hon. Gentleman, as the local representative, is so worried about the matter, he should take up the trust's performance with the people who are responsible for it.

Dr. Stoate: My right hon. Friend promised to present a clear contrast between the Government's priorities and those of the Conservative party. How is that possible when the Conservative party has not yet identified its priorities?

Mr. Milburn: If my hon. Friend has a little patience, I shall come to the Conservative party's priorities. To give him a little taster, I can tell him now that Conservative Members' priorities are not to modernise the NHS. They want to spend public money on subsidising the costs of private health insurers. That is their priority; the hon. Member for Woodspring told John Humphrys that on "On the Record" on Sunday. He also told the NHS Confederation in Glasgow yesterday that that was Conservative policy.

The hon. Gentleman has trouble remembering what he said from one day to the next. Yesterday, he said in his speech in Glasgow that it was not right to send out health service circulars on clean hospitals; today, he claims that it is right. I assume that he abides by his comments on BBC television, and that Conservative party policy is to spend millions of pounds of taxpayers' money not on modernising the NHS, but on subsidising more and more people to go private. That is the Conservative party's priority, but it is not that of this party.

Mr. Roger Casale (Wimbledon): Doubtless my right hon. Friend will agree with John Humphrys' remarks in *The Sunday Times* last week, when he described Conservative party polices as wishful thinking.

Mr. Milburn: I do not always agree with John Humphrys, and I did not see the article to which my hon. Friend refers. Whether the Conservative party's policy is wishful thinking is a secondary consideration. What counts is who can be trusted with this country's health service. People will decide that in the forthcoming general election.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: I shall give way in a moment. It is time not only to judge the Conservative party on its past record, but on its promises for the future.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Will the Secretary of State explain why he has changed the guidelines on hospital transport? The change means that an 84-year-old woman with angina was able to get an ambulance to take her to hospital, but was not allowed an ambulance to take her home. That is a disgraceful way in which to treat our elderly people. Will the Secretary of State examine the guidelines as a matter of urgency?

Mr. Milburn: I shall look at the guidelines, although I am not sure what the hon. Gentleman is talking about. As he and the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow)—who really ought to calm down as I may give way to him if he behaves himself—should be aware, the Government are investing extra money in patient transport. More money is going to improve and modernise ambulance services, to get response times down and to make sure that patient transport is available. Of course I will look into the hon. Gentleman's concerns if he writes to me with the details.

Mr. Ivan Lewis: Does my right hon. Friend agree that more interesting than the comments of John Humphrys are the comments of the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), the former Secretary of State for Social Security, when he said this month:

> My departure from the front bench followed a high-octane row about my affirmation that there are distinct limits to the scope for private provision in healthcare. I trust no-one suspects me of plotting wholesale privatisation.

What does my right hon. Friend think that says about those who remain on the Opposition Front Bench?

Mr. Milburn: It says quite simply that they have won the argument within the Conservative party. There were one-nation Tories in charge of the Conservative party, but now they are all on the Back Benches or they have left this place. The people who are in charge of the Conservative party today are like the hon. Member for Woodspring, who rightly described himself as an ardent Thatcherite free-marketeer. That is what he is, and proud of it, and it is about time that the British people understood the implications of that sort of policy for the national health service.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He said that the party will be judged at the time of the general election. He knows that a number of hospitals and services in my constituency are under threat. The South Staffordshire health authority is conducting a review. He knows that as we have discussed the matter at Health questions. Why has the regional health authority told the South

Staffordshire health authority to delay any final decisions on closures of hospitals and services in my constituency until after the next general election?

Mr. Milburn: I do not know when the next general election will be, and I guess that the regional office of the NHS does not know when it will be. The hon. Gentleman has asked a question so I shall try to give him a helpful answer.

Mr. Fabricant: Think quickly.

Mr. Milburn: I shall heed that advice, which is always gratefully received. Perhaps it could apply to those on the Opposition Front Bench and other Opposition Members.

Consultation is taking place in the hon. Gentleman's area. It will continue and the hon. Gentleman should participate in it, as I expect that his views will be listened to. However, the Conservatives cannot have their cake and eat it. The hon. Member for Woodspring, who speaks for the Conservative party on these issues, is urging me not to micro-manage the national health service and not to get involved in local decisions. I agree with him on that. He is absolutely right. We want to make sure that the people on the ground have the tools and the resources to do the job. However, Conservative Members should not then ask me to intervene in each and every case. Those on the Conservative Front Bench, and those on the Conservative Back Benches, should really get their act together.

We have made rebuilding the fabric of the national health service a priority—*[Interruption.]* I wish that the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) would stop chuntering to himself. Accident and emergency departments in 182 hospitals are being expanded and refurbished, 1,000 GP surgeries are being modernised—*[Interruption.]* Keep taking the tablets.

By the end of the year, 36 walk-in centres will be open, and by next April, we will have created nearly 500 additional secure beds for people with severe mental illness. A new hospital in Carlisle has already been opened.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): Is my right hon. Friend aware that under the previous Government, the new hospital in my constituency was cancelled four times even though the premises of one of our hospitals was the old Victorian workhouse? Within three months of the Labour Government coming to power, the project was given approval and the new hospital was opened in April on budget, and ahead of time. That is the difference between the Tory Government and the Labour Government.

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Liz Blackman (Erewash): Will my right hon. Friend give way on that point?

Mr. Milburn: Let me answer my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) and then I shall give way. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The people of Carlisle, the community in north Cumbria and, indeed, my hon. Friend have campaigned assiduously and put a very strong case for a new hospital in their city. I am very pleased that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was able to open the new hospital. I shall read out the list in a moment or two, but I can tell my hon. Friend that it will not be the last new hospital to be opened this year, next year or the year after.

Some 21 other major hospital developments are already under construction, and those in Dartford, Rochdale and south Buckinghamshire will be finished this year—the hon. Member for Buckingham might wish to jump up and congratulate the Government. Five more hospitals will be completed next year and nine more the year after. That is the biggest hospital building programme that the NHS has ever seen.

Liz Blackman: My right hon. Friend mentioned the new hospital in Carlisle. Some 40 years ago, I had my appendix out in that old Victorian workhouse, so the people of Carlisle have waited a long time for their new hospital—and this Government have delivered it.

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's observations. It is true that communities up and down the country have waited many years for the new hospitals that are now coming on stream. I remind the House that when the Conservatives were in office, they managed to spend £30 million on lawyers' and accountants' fees for PFI hospitals, but they did not get a single new hospital built. We have changed that.

Dr. Brand: For the sake of completeness, can the Secretary of State tell us what has been the effective reduction in bed availability as a consequence of the PFI projects that have resulted in those new hospitals?

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that when we announced the first wave of new hospital building under the PFI arrangements—including Carlisle and Dartford, I believe—we carried out a comparison between the public sector and the PFI option to get the best value for the taxpayer. Indeed, we will proceed with any of the schemes under the PFI option only if it offers better value for money. In some cases, we will not proceed with PFI on value for money grounds if we think that Exchequer capital can produce a better deal for the taxpayer than the private finance option.

When we compare the number of beds available under PFI with the number available under the public sector comparator option in the first wave schemes, the number barely differs. In fact, my recollection is that the number of beds overall is slightly higher under the PFI option than it is under the public sector comparator option. Therefore, the idea that PFI is reducing the number of beds in the system is wrong.

Over many years, especially under the previous Government, the number of hospital beds declined markedly. Some 40,000 beds disappeared in the Conservatives' last 10 years in office alone. I have said many times that that decline has gone too far, and we now need to see an increase in the number of beds in the system. We have an opportunity to achieve that, given the resources that we are making available.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: I give way to the hon. Gentleman, and I realise that he does not represent south Buckinghamshire.

Mr. Bercow: I am glad that the Secretary of State recognises that, among other things, he needs a lesson in

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geography, because my constituency is in north, not south Buckinghamshire. Will he now explain why he is cowering behind NICE—the National Institute for Clinical Excellence? Why, in the consideration of the supply of beta interferon, is he refusing to take account of the cost of the domestic adaptations required in the absence of the supply of that drug, and why does he think that it is right and proper to deny the additional 50 patients each week who are diagnosed as suffering from a chronically debilitating disease the prospect of some alleviation through the supply of that crucial drug?

Mr. Milburn: There is no argument about multiple sclerosis being a deeply debilitating disease. Every hon. Member understands that, and also understands that there is no cure for MS. The hon. Gentleman knows that I am not sheltering behind NICE. As I understand the position from the speech by the hon. Member for Woodspring yesterday—if it is still Conservative policy today—the Conservatives now support the role of NICE in the assessment of both cost and clinical effectiveness.

The hon. Member for Buckingham knows that NICE is assessing beta interferon. It is supposed to be a confidential process, as the drug companies preferred. NICE conducts its own appraisals in the way that it decides is best. The appraisal committee has met and made a provisional appraisal which has been leaked, unfortunately. It is not, nor will it ever be, the Government's intention to comment on leaks or provisional assessments from the appraisal committee. We will see what NICE comes up with, and I do not doubt that it will take the views of MS sufferers and others fully into account in reaching a final decision and making recommendations.

Dr. Fox: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for allowing me to clarify the point. We believe that NICE has a role in exactly the areas he outlined—cost and clinical effectiveness. That was agreed by both sides of the House when the Bill was in Committee. The trouble is that the Government sneaked affordability in, by statutory instrument, as another criterion for NICE. It is not equipped to deal with that criterion, nor does it want to have to assess it, but that is the arm's-length rationing mechanism for Ministers who do not have the courage to take the decisions overtly and transparently.

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman knows well that that is not the case. There is the clearest of differences between an assessment of clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness—which, from his speech yesterday, he now supports—*[Interruption.]* NICE will make decisions based on clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness, and it will have to assess the drugs and treatments according to whether—for the amount of money available—they offer a clinical benefit to patients. Decisions on affordability are decisions for the NHS, not for NICE. That is precisely what the establishment order makes clear.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): On the point that the Secretary of State has just explained so precisely, can he tell the House why, if affordability is not to be taken into consideration by NICE, the House passed a statutory instrument last year that made a change in the criteria to be applied by NICE? That change was sneaked in last August when the House was not sitting.

Mr. Milburn: Sometimes I wonder why I bother. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] Well, I am pleased that the Tories are glad about something. I have just explained why we made the amendment to the establishment order. It was precisely to clarify that NICE has a role in assessing not only for clinical effectiveness but—as the hon. Member for Woodspring and his party now agree—for cost-effectiveness. As I understand it, there is no argument about that. Decisions about affordability are a separate issue for the NHS. *[Interruption.]* I have tried to explain it twice and if the hon. Lady does not understand, that says more about her than about the explanation.

We have invested more money in the NHS as a priority, which will mean the largest sustained increase in funding in the history of the NHS. It will be twice the historic growth trend in NHS spending, up from 3 per cent. under the Conservatives to more than 6 per cent. under Labour. By 2004, the NHS will grow by more than one third in real terms, and more than 50 per cent. in cash terms.

Our immediate priorities for the NHS have been more doctors; more nurses; modern hospitals; more patients treated; and more money invested. Not every problem has been solved, but a start has been made on turning round the NHS after decades of neglect. Those priorities have been underpinned by the changes we have made to tackle the two-tier system of care that we inherited. First and foremost, we have abolished the hated and divisive internal market foisted on the NHS by the Conservatives. In its place, we have put the primary care groups and primary care trusts, with control of local health services now in the hands of the people who know patients' needs best.

This year alone, the primary care groups—front-line doctors and nurses—are in charge of a budget of over £20 billion. That is not what the hon. Member for Woodspring calls an act of centralisation: it is the biggest-ever decentralisation in the history of the health service.

The motion accuses the Government, as did the hon. Member for Woodspring, of day-to-day political interference in the management of the NHS. The hon. Gentleman cited the number of circulars issued by the Department of Health to the health service. For the benefit of the House, I shall describe what the circulars are. Essentially, they are instructions from Ministers to NHS trusts and primary care groups.

I have some interesting figures about the extent of so-called day-to-day political interference in the work of the local NHS. In 1996, the final year of the previous Conservative Government, the then Secretary of State for Health issued a grand total of 305 explicit instructions to the national health service. Since I have been Secretary of State, I have issued a total of 21 explicit instructions to the national health service. What is more, I have set a cap on the number of such instructions to be issued from Richmond house to local health services. This year, no more than 100 health service circulars will be issued by Ministers to the local health service—and I expect the total to be far lower than that.

I hope that that puts an end to talk about political interference in the national health service. If any party was guilty of that, it was the Conservative party.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Is not it correct that the modernisation fund, which is worth £0.5 billion a year, is entirely in the hands of Ministers, to be used at their discretion? A quarter of the beds at the Royal Surrey hospital have been cut over the past two and a half years. Senior civil servants recommended that £2.5 million be given to that hospital, but the Secretary of State personally cut that allocation to just £1 million. Will he say why he did that? If that is not political interference, what is?

Mr. Milburn: I shall deal with ring-fenced funding for coronary heart disease and cancer in a moment. I make no apology for setting tough national standards for the national health service. Anyone who takes even the most cursory look at the NHS will realise that, all too often, the care that people get and the services that they receive depend on where they live. That is unfair. It is unacceptable, and it has to change.

That is why we have created the first-ever independent inspectorate for the NHS, the Commission for Health Improvement, to drive up standards of care for all patients. It is also why we set up the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, and it is why we have been working with doctors, nurses and managers to draw up clear national standards to treat and prevent the biggest killers that our country faces—coronary heart disease and cancer. National standards for treatment have also been drawn up for mental health problems.

It is worth reminding the House that, when we came to office, there were no such standards for tackling heart disease, even though Britain has one of the worst records of heart disease in the developed world. Today, those standards are in place. A national service framework has been established which commands the confidence of the service and which sets out a clear, 10-year programme of reform and improvement. It is a blueprint for change which is backed by £100 million of ring-fenced cash. That money will be used to pay for 3,000 more heart operations, cut ambulance waiting times and set up fast-track chest pain clinics. In addition, smokers will be helped to give up smoking, rather than just being exhorted to do so.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): May I take this opportunity to thank the Secretary of State for making a difference in my constituency, which has one of the highest rates of death from heart attacks and strokes in the country? In nearly 20 years under the Conservative Government, my district general was almost unique in having no dedicated coronary care unit. The hospital now has £800,000 to invest in a coronary care unit. It is moving its intensive care beds out of the portakabin that has housed them for years. It also has £3.5 million for a new accident and emergency department. Will not that deliver better help for the appalling health record of the people of Slough?

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Frankly, it is a bit rich of the Opposition to cry crocodile tears over heart patients. There is no argument but that waiting times for heart operations are too long, but we are going to get them down. The waiting lists are too long for a self-evident reason—under that lot, there was no national plan for coronary heart disease, and inadequate training meant that we had too few cardiologists and cardio-thoracic surgeons. As a result, in today's national health service, there are only 171 surgeons capable of doing heart operations.

That is the legacy of the previous Conservative Government, not of this Government. I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) that, over the next five or six years, we will increase the number of doctors capable of carrying out heart operations by between 50 and 60 per cent. That will be an investment in the future. Like everyone else, I wish that the increase could be accomplished faster, but we must make no bones about who were responsible for today's long waiting times for heart operations. They are the people who failed to invest in heart surgery yesterday—the previous Conservative Government.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Milburn: No, I have given way once to the hon. Gentleman, who should not point his finger at me like that. It is most rude.

I do not say that we have solved all the problems the NHS faces, but we have made a start. The policies of the Conservative party would take the NHS back instead of moving it forward. There could not be a clearer contrast between the priorities of this Government and those of the Opposition.

The hon. Member for Woodspring gave an infamous speech to his party conference which has become known as his "NHS plc" speech. He said:

> The biggest problem that we have in the NHS is that it is not a proper market.

Given that the Opposition see that as the biggest problem, I can only assume that it is their biggest priority too. We know now that they intend to tackle it by using public money to subsidise and expand the private medical insurance market.

The hon. Member for Woodspring confirmed this week that the Conservatives would spend £468 million subsidising employer-based private medical insurance. That is their policy and it is on the record—but it is just the start. On at least four occasions this year—twice in January, once in March and once in April—the Leader of the Opposition has repeated his commitment to introducing tax relief for individuals in private medical insurance schemes, as well as for those in employer-based private schemes.

The total cost of that policy could come to £1 billion. That would more than dwarf this year's pay rise for nurses, and all the investment that the Government are making in casualty departments. The resources that we have prioritised for the NHS would be frittered away in tax perks for people who already have private medical insurance—and all in the name of creating what the hon. Member for Woodspring calls a "proper market".

It is no good for Conservative Members to claim that that spending would be additional to matching our commitment to big increases in the NHS budget. They are spending money that they have not got. The Opposition's tax guarantee, their refusal to support tobacco taxation being ring-fenced for the NHS and their extension of tax

[Mr. Milburn]

perks for private medical insurance mean that they could not even hope to match the Government's spending on the NHS.

The Opposition cannot match our commitment to modernisation, so they are forced to prioritise their real policy. That is not to modernise the national health service, but to privatise it. [HON. MEMBERS: "Rubbish."] Conservative Members say that that is rubbish, but the hon. Member for Woodspring has said that he wants more patients to be pushed into paying for treatment and for what he calls non-urgent operations.

Dr. Fox *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman shakes his head, but that is what he told *The Sunday Times* in January—

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mrs. Laing: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is obvious that the Secretary of State is not giving way at the moment.

Mr. Milburn: If they stopped shouting at me, I might give way. In an interview with *The Sunday Times* in January, the hon. Member for Woodspring said that

hip and knee replacements, and cataract and hernia operations

were at the top of his hit list. Whenever I have challenged the hon. Gentleman about that interview, in the House and elsewhere, he has always denied it and said that he was misquoted. I give him the opportunity to put the record straight today.

Dr. Fox: I have made it perfectly clear that if people choose to go privately, it is up to them. Yesterday, I said explicitly:

It is not important to us where treatment is carried out—simply that it is carried out in the appropriate time and of the appropriate quality. We must also ensure that the system works effectively to deal with debilitating if not life-threatening conditions such as patients requiring hip replacements or cataract surgery. One of the solutions is to have stand-alone surgical units dedicated to these procedures without the pressures of having to deal with emergencies. It is an attractive idea which I hope the Government might include in the national plan.

It could not be much clearer.

Mr. Milburn: The House will note that despite the fact that the hon. Gentleman claims that he has been misquoted by *The Sunday Times*, he did not use that opportunity to say that he was misquoted. He does not withdraw what he told *The Sunday Times*, published on 18 January. The House will be interested in that—as will, I suspect, *The Sunday Times*.

If the hon. Member for Woodspring does not agree with himself, I wonder whether he agrees with his hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond). In January, the hon. Gentleman said on Sky News—live on air—that the system that the Conservatives were advocating meant

people would look to the NHS to provide them with service when they had serious, life-threatening conditions—

and we have no argument about that. He went on to say that people

would look to their private insurance to help them with those things where the NHS has to ask them to wait a little bit longer.

Is this another case of the hon. Gentleman being misquoted? Did he misquote himself? Does he stand by those remarks—yes or no?

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I stand by those remarks entirely. Even the Secretary of State acknowledges that people in this country have a right to buy private health insurance. That is their choice and their right. Does the Secretary of State prefer a model in which people try to opt out of the NHS, buying private medical insurance that will cover all their needs? Or does he think it is a better model to have private health insurance products that are complementary to the NHS, so that people will look to the NHS for their serious and life-threatening conditions and turn to private insurance, if they have it, for those conditions

where the NHS has to ask them to wait a little bit longer?

Mr. Milburn: I can feel a general election campaign coming on—I can feel it in my bones. I can see the leaflets and the party political broadcasts. There we have it, from the lips of the hon. Gentleman; the authentic voice of today's Conservative party. The Conservatives are no longer committed to getting waiting times down for everybody in the NHS; they are committed to extending waiting times in the NHS. They are committed to taking non-urgent operations out of the NHS altogether. *[Interruption.]* That is what the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge said.

Let me tell the House exactly what those non-urgent operations are. Some 1.2 million took place in the NHS in England in 1998-99. More than 300,000 of them were carried out on pensioners. A quarter of a million were general surgery operations and a further quarter of a million were orthopaedics. Just under 200,000 were eye operations and more than 100,000 were gynaecological operations. The priority of the Conservative party could not be clearer: a two-tier health care system with fast-track treatment for those who can afford to pay and second-rate treatment for those who cannot. Those might be the Conservative party's priorities, but I tell the House that they are not the Government's priorities.

Dr. Fox: Will the Secretary of State tell us how many patients forced out of the NHS to buy their entire treatments in the private sector did not have private insurance last year?

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman knows that there are two trends in the private health care market. There is one trend for private health insurance that is basically flat, although I know that the hon. Gentleman wants to bump it up and spend taxpayers' money doing so. He would rather spend £400 million on subsidising people for their private medical insurance than invest it in precisely the areas that Labour Members would recognise as priorities.

There is a rise in the number of so-called "self-payers"; people who decide to pay for their own care. That is true. I was asked whether I thought people should have a choice. Fine—they should have a choice, but it should be a genuine choice with a first-class national health service,

not just in some parts of the country, but in every part. That does not mean shorter waiting times for some treatments, but shorter waiting times for every treatment.

Mr. Burns *indicated assent.*

Mr. Milburn: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman is nodding so enthusiastically, and I can let him into a little secret; that is not the position of his Front-Bench colleagues.

Dr. Fox: Does the Secretary of State think that those 160,000 patients who, last year, paid entirely for their own care—many from out of their life savings—for operations such as cardiac surgery or major orthopaedic procedures, did so because they wanted to have that choice or because they were forced to do so by the unacceptable waiting times in the NHS, for which the right hon. Gentleman is responsible?

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman assiduously quotes his own medical experience. He will know at least as well as I do how many years it takes to train a cardio-thoracic surgeon. Could he remind me? How many years is it? Is it three years? Or is it seven or 10 years? Who was in power seven or 10 years ago? I will let him into another little secret—it was not a Labour Government, but a Conservative Government. The failures that we see now in our heart surgery services have everything to do with the failure by the previous Conservative Government to invest, plan and modernise. That is the case and however much the hon. Gentleman may wish to dismiss it, he knows that as well as I do.

I have described the Opposition's priorities, but they are not our priorities. Within four weeks, the Government will publish our national plan for the NHS. It will set out our national priorities for reforming the national health service. The national plan will be both radical and reforming. It will make clear that the nation's priorities are more doctors and more nurses, not more markets. Our priority is to expand the national health service; the Conservative party's priority is to extend the private medical insurance market.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Milburn: No, I will not give way. I have given way on countless occasions and, frankly, every one was a waste of time.

Our priority is to reduce waiting times for all conditions. The Conservatives' priority is to increase waiting times for many conditions. Our priority is the opportunity for all to have a decent health service. Their priority is to waste NHS resources on subsidising the private medical insurance industry.

The national plan will deliver on our priorities for a bigger, better NHS, treating more patients more quickly. Those are the priorities for the NHS. They are the priorities for Britain. I believe that they are the priorities of the British people. From what we have heard today, we now know that they are certainly not the priorities of the Conservative party.

2.38 pm

Mr. Nick Harvey (North Devon): I congratulate the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) on securing this debate on priorities in the NHS. It is an important issue and a timely moment for the House to debate the matter, as we are a few weeks away from a national plan that will point the way for the NHS in years to come. Everybody in the Chamber will recognise that there is a still great deal to be done to improve our national health service and certainly that perception is shared by the general public.

The 1980s and 1990s saw a decline in the NHS, as it was starved of investment. The decline is demonstrated by the waiting culture which continues to bedevil the service. The public are increasingly aware and concerned about waiting lists and times, increases in the number of operations cancelled and poor access to appropriate drugs in certain areas. However, those are merely symptoms. The causes have been the dwindling number of health care professionals, too few staffed beds and the deteriorating state of equipment and buildings. At the start of the 21st century, the service is slow and often unresponsive to patients' needs.

The principal problem with the national health service is lack of capacity. There are too few doctors, too few nurses and other health professionals, too few hospitals, too few beds and not enough modern equipment. These are the problems that bedevil us, and which come to light all too clearly in circumstances such as the flu crisis last winter. Not having the capacity to cope with the sudden upsurge in the numbers needing to use the health service brought all sorts of problems.

In the midst of that crisis, the Prime Minister outlined his goal of seeing spending on health in the United Kingdom increase to the European average. In March, the Chancellor committed new sums of money to the health service. We welcome that money; in some cases, we feel that it comes with too many strings attached, but it is clear that, in committing these resources, the Government recognise the scale of the problems that need to be addressed.

Our criticism is that if the Government had started making such an investment, and had called together the stakeholders in the health service to formulate their national plan—which they are now doing—when they first came to office three years ago, the dividends from that investment would now be starting to show. At the most rudimentary level, if more nurses had started training in 1997, they would be qualifying this summer and could help tackle the problems. However, better late than never—I think that the Government have been absolutely right to sit the stakeholders in the NHS round a table to discuss what they believe to be the way forward.

When I listened to the hon. Member for Woodspring talk about political interference, I could not help but look at the contrast between the process in which the Government are currently engaged and the manner in which the previous Government's health reforms were steamrollered through in the early 1990s as they ignored all the warnings that were given and refused to carry out any pilot studies. The Government's stance is in marked contrast, and is a welcome change in approach and emphasis. It gives us an opportunity to consider what the basic principles of the NHS should be for the next 50 years.

[Mr. Nick Harvey]

The NHS has been well served by the original founding principles outlined by the great Liberal, Beveridge, and implemented by the post-war Labour Government. The first of these principles, in my view, is that the NHS should remain free at the point of need and paid for out of general taxation. The principles have ensured that the NHS has survived 50 years in which it has often been deprived of the resources that it needed and has suffered all sorts of experimentation and tinkering. That the NHS still exists is testament to the fact that people in Britain still regard it as their most valued institution.

Let me nail the Liberal Democrat colours to the mast on this first key principle. We believe that a tax-based NHS is sustainable; we believe that a tax-based NHS should be the route to expanded health care, not increases in private health insurance. A tax-based system is fairer and more efficient than a system based on continental social insurance or on private health insurance. At its most basic, the British people will get more health bangs for their buck through the NHS than through privately funded health care.

Britain cannot afford to encourage cheap provision without the promise of quality. We cannot afford to promote health care predicated on profit, and we will not accept quality of life dictated by quantity of wealth. That is what private insurance would mean to the poor, the elderly and the disfranchised of this country.

Mrs. Gorman: What would the hon. Gentleman say to an elderly person going into one of our national health hospitals whose card is marked "not to be resuscitated" when, under the previous Government, that person could at least have taken out private medical back-up because tax relief was allowed on it? Such a situation is deplorable.

Mr. Harvey: I am sure that everybody deplores what the hon. Lady describes, but it is an issue of clinical practice and needs to be addressed as such. To suggest that it is pre-eminently a matter of resources is wrong. The situation that she describes is scandalous, but it is not principally driven by resources.

Let me make it clear that the Liberal Democrats have no difficulty with the private sector playing a growing role on the supply side. If those in the NHS who commission care or subcontract it think that they can, in particular circumstances, get better value for money from some element of private sector provision, or if there are temporary capacity problems with which they think that the private sector can help the national health service, so much the better. There is no problem with that. However, that is a world apart from diverting resources that could be used in the national health service into subsidising private insurance for those who, in most cases, already have it.

Over the past year, the Australian Government have offered a rebate to all those taking out private health insurance. In the first nine months, they spent $2.2 billion—nearly £1 billion—on a population a third the size of ours. At the end of that exercise, the number of people taking up private insurance went up by all of 0.9 per cent. For goodness sake, that money could have been used in the Australian health system. The Australian Government have done the equivalent of going into the street, picking up a drain hatch and pouring the money down it. If they had wanted to spend that money on health, they could have done it by subsidising the supply side of the private sector. At least they would then have had something to show for it.

The situation in Australia is no different from the situation here. During the 1990s, when the previous Government offered tax incentives to people above retirement age to take out insurance, that had barely any impact on the numbers doing so, and when this Government removed that provision, there was barely any drop-off. This is a dead-weight subsidy to people who already have the insurance.

The Conservatives maintain that that money would not come out of the national health service. I am not about to pre-empt or judge what their costed manifesto will say at the next election. However, wherever the money is coming from, it could have gone into the national health service. There is no way in which the British taxpayer or the NHS patient will get better value for that money by diverting it into private health insurance for people who already have it.

The Liberal Democrats are perfectly relaxed about private sector involvement on the supply side, but we do not believe that taxpayers' money should be used artificially to stimulate the growth of private health insurance. We do not believe that that will give the British taxpayer value for money.

Sir Raymond Whitney (Wycombe): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the majority of countries in western Europe and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries have health outcomes—as they are called in the jargon—that are significantly better than those that we achieve? If he accepts that, does he agree that it is worth considering the funding methods adopted by those other countries?

Mr. Harvey: It is fair to say that many other countries have better health outcomes. In our view, that is because they spend a greater proportion of their gross domestic product on health than we do. We believe, for the reasons that I have just outlined, that the way for us to get the British spend as a proportion of GDP up is through greater investment in the national health service. That will secure better value, pound for pound, than using it artificially to stimulate the private insurance market. That is our firm belief, and the hon. Gentleman is perfectly at liberty to disagree with it.

Dr. Stoate: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that America, the largest economy in the world, which spends almost twice as much of its GDP on health as we do but almost entirely in the private sector, has rather worse outcomes than us in most health measures? Does that not illustrate the point that he was making earlier?

Mr. Harvey: The amount that the Americans spend is extraordinary. They spend more even on their state-funded health system than we do, but the fact that so many people in the USA still choose to invest in the private market does not seem to bring about the improvement in outcomes that the hon. Member for Wycombe (Sir R. Whitney) suggested that it might.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that the position of his party on value

for money, as articulated by his leader, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy), is simply to pour more and more money into the health service, with no regard for modernisation or change? The right hon. Gentleman has made that clear on many occasions and the hon. Gentleman is making it clear now. Is he not simply talking about putting in more and more money, not about modernisation and change in terms of best delivery and equal access?

Mr. Harvey: I have never heard our party leader say anything of the kind. I have made it clear on innumerable occasions that Liberal Democrats want modernisation, investment and, indeed, reconstruction for the national health service. The consultation that is continuing and the formulation of a national plan are a sensible way to try to do that and Liberal Democrats are contributing ideas in a submission to the Government as to what the national plan ought to be about and ought to do. I will say something about that in a few minutes.

Dr. Brand: Does my hon. Friend agree that one reason why we criticised the Government was that they did not take an opportunity to evaluate what may or may not be useful initiatives. NHS Direct is a good example. There was no report on its pilot stage until it was rolled out across the country. We do not know the effectiveness of £80 million of public expenditure.

Mr. Harvey: That is right. Clearly, we need a combination of additional investment, modernisation and reform. As I have said, we are largely in agreement with many aspects of the modernisation that the Government have undertaken. We think that the reforms in primary care were basically right. We do not necessarily agree with some of the details—we might not have given doctors a majority on the boards—but nevertheless we agreed with the general thrust of the reorganisation.

Again, barring the point that the Conservatives made earlier about affordability seemingly being added to the criteria after the event, we were broadly in favour of the formation of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, ditto the Commission for Health Improvement. Therefore, it is absolute nonsense to say that we have not been addressing modernisation, or that we are not willing to continue to do so.

Our principal argument is that it is investment that is needed, and that lack of capacity is the biggest single problem. As money goes into dealing with that, it is only right and proper to pay attention to modernisation.

Mr. Hammond: Does the hon. Gentleman also agree with his hon. Friend the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge), who said in a debate in Westminster Hall two or three weeks ago that the national health service needs more money than the Liberal Democrats have ever proposed?

Mr. Harvey: The Liberal Democrats put forward a manifesto at the election with some commitments to moneys that we wanted to go into the health service, which we stipulated were over and above inflation. As the economic circumstances have improved three years into this Parliament, the state is clearly now able to afford a contribution that is greater than anyone would have thought possible at the time of that election. When we make a commitment at election time it is for the minimum that we think that we can do. It does not preclude our coming back later and identifying that, with rosier economic circumstances, more money can be put in.

The long and short of it is that, as we publish our alternative Budget each year and publish our costed manifesto, we will commit Liberal Democrats to putting extra funds into the health service and we will say how much and from where it will come. Like the Conservatives, we will no doubt be poring over the comprehensive spending review when it comes out shortly and taking stock of what we think that the nation can afford in the light of that.

Increasing capacity has to be the first priority. We also think that there are problems with accountability and transparency within the NHS and that those should also be part of the reform process. Patients ought to be able to expect a high quality of care on which they are well informed, and to have access to their medical notes and to the decisions made about them. Patients also have the right to expect prompt and safe treatment.

The complaints procedures need a considerable overhaul. Yesterday, in my speech to the conference of the NHS Confederation, I talked about the need for a review of the compensation procedures used in the NHS. At the moment, about 70 per cent. of the money that has to be spent on compensation is swallowed up in legal costs. Reforms there could also help.

Prevention and diagnosis are also worthy of attention. A huge technological advance is taking place in diagnostic equipment and early treatment procedures. In many cases, British science is at the forefront. We need as a matter of urgency to consider how the NHS can take advantage of that. We have been rather too slow and too luddite about adopting new technologies and have sometimes insisted on trialling things that have already been comprehensively trialled in other industrialised and developed countries. We ought to be more willing to move faster to put some of those procedures in place.

A modernising NHS faces many challenges that it has not had to meet before. A growing population with an increasing number of elderly patients presents new problems and opportunities for existing and prospective NHS facilities. It is crucial that many of the old challenges are met more effectively. Clearly, heart disease and cancer treatments and the provision of mental health services need to be radically modernised. It is right that the Government have identified those as priorities.

The development of primary-led care, joint budgets, cross-disciplinary initiatives and a focus on alternatives to hospitalisation are necessary features of a modernised and capable health service. Some are also aspects where private sector provision might reasonably play a part.

At this exciting and challenging time, it is disappointing and regrettable that there are those who wish to destroy the fabric of the NHS by encroachment and neglect. As the debate has progressed, it has become increasingly clear that the official Opposition no longer believe in the NHS as it has existed until now. It is all too obvious that the familiar reassurances belie a party that underfunded

[Mr. Harvey]

the NHS for 18 years and now wishes it to be sidelined—a last resort NHS for the uninsurable, the elderly, the chronically sick and the marginalised.

Mr. Hammond: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Harvey: I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman. Clearly, that policy would be a betrayal of the NHS, and the British people do not want it. Liberal Democrats will continue to expose those plans for what they are.

Conservative spokesmen have talked several times in recent months of the increasing role for private insurance and the fact that they want to divert funds into it. This very afternoon, the Conservative spokesman drew a distinction at the Dispatch Box between the services that one and the same patient might expect to get in the NHS and those that he or she might look to private insurance to provide.

I am sorry that the Conservatives do not see that policy for what it is. The debate underlines the principles of the NHS as they have always existed. We will continue to take on the Conservatives on that issue in the next few months and into the election. Those are the facts of the matter. The Conservatives may not like it, but that is the meaning of their policies and we will continue to explain that to the British people.

Mr. Hammond: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Harvey: I will not give way. The hon. Gentleman has already made his point at the Dispatch Box and we have heard enough of that.

Liberal Democrats remain committed to the NHS. Clearly, if sustainable reconstruction can improve the quality of health care, the funds ought to be made available to the NHS to do so. Our party remains committed to reform and modernisation, welcomes much of the general direction of what the Government are doing with the help of doctors, nurses, the professions allied to medicine, managers, patient groups and others. There are signs of the beginnings of an emerging consensus on the matter. The Liberal Democrats welcome that consensus of all the stakeholders in the NHS about its future and what it might achieve. Only by going forward on the basis of consensus can we deliver what the majority of the people want and all the people need.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the next speaker, I remind the House that Madam Speaker has placed a 15-minute limit on all Back-Bench speeches and that that will apply from now on.

2.58 pm

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): I will try to be brief. There was little substance in the Opposition's attack today and more than a whiff of hypocrisy. The reality is that the Tories left us with a two-tier system—fundholding and non-fundholding—and now I am not sure whether they want a two or a three-tier system, with the private sector and, perhaps, a return to fundholding and non-fundholding too. They do not want a unified system; that is obvious.

We all know about the effects of the internal market. We all knew that it was unfair. I presume that all hon. Members have advice surgeries. In those, we learned of the problems that that market was creating. We also know that it was one reason why the Conservatives lost the election. We did not have enough staff in the health service, the buildings were poor and it lacked capital expenditure. I think that 50 per cent. of NHS buildings were built before the war, which is 50-odd years ago. Also, the number of doctors and nurses in training was at a record low.

The Tories believe that all that is forgotten. They believe that people have short memories, but that is not true. We had all those problems in my constituency. On top of that, we had been waiting for a brand new hospital for over 20 years. We were promised one in the late 1970s. We needed it for two reasons: first, our old one was in part of an old Victorian workhouse and was built at the beginning of the last century. It is now a listed building and will provide a very good campus for our new teacher training college, but it was inadequate as a hospital. Secondly and more seriously, the maternity unit was three miles away from the paediatricians and anaesthetists.

The Tory Government received a report saying that young babies in my constituency were dying because of the split site, but nothing was done. The right hon. Member for South–West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) is in her place. Perhaps she can explain why on one occasion when she was Secretary of State, her Government withdrew the contract for building Carlisle hospital a week before it was due to go out to tender. That is what my people remember about the Conservative Government's record.

Let us contrast that with what has happened under the Labour Government. They were elected on 1 May 1997. I went to see the Secretary of State in June and put the case for Carlisle being a priority. In July he agreed with me and announced the intention to build a new hospital. In September the contract was let. In November, on one of the happiest days of my life, I cut the sod to mark the start of the building of our new hospital.

It may take three years to train a nurse and five years to train a doctor, but it took fewer than three years to complete our brand new district hospital. It was delivered in April, on budget. One of the problems that we had with its funding was that it was delivered before time. There was not a precedent for that—nobody could remember a hospital being delivered before time. A fortnight ago my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister came to my constituency and opened the hospital.

The hospital was started under a Labour Government and completed under a Labour Government, and it is only the first of many. We are talking not just about a new building but about new operating theatres, new equipment, everything being brought on to the site, a new hydrotherapy pool and more intensive care beds—an extra £500,000 was invested in them. A new nurse consultant was announced during the Prime Minister's visit. That shows the contrast between what the Conservatives did not do and what a Labour Government have done in my constituency.

I know hon. Members on both sides of the House are looking forward to the happy day when their new local hospitals are built.

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): We have been waiting since 1962.

Mr. Martlew: My hon. Friend, who is the Chairman of the Select Committee, has been waiting since 1962, and I am sure that his constituents believe that a Labour Government will deliver where the Conservatives never did in 18 years.

Everything appears to be improving. The Labour Government have delivered on more than a district general hospital: they have built a new psychiatric unit and closed the old Victorian asylum. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) complained that NHS Direct had not been tested. We cannot win, can we? If we wait and double or treble check to see if everything works, we are accused of not delivering; when we go ahead with a good scheme, we are accused of being hasty. However, that is what we expect of the Liberal party.

We are looking forward to NHS Direct operating from my constituency from October. It will employ 30 nurses and provide a valuable 24-hour service to Cumbria and north Lancashire.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): As the hon. Gentleman has such a splendid situation in his constituency, what advice could he give to a Member of Parliament who now has one in 10 constituents waiting more than a year for treatment, and where the number of one-year waiters has trebled since the general election?

Mr. Martlew: Is the right hon. Lady saying that that is what is happening in her constituency? If so, she should take some of the responsibility, as she was Secretary of State for many years.

Mr. Hinchliffe: Go private.

Mr, Martlew: As my hon. Friend says, the Conservatives' option is: go private.

There is still more. On Saturday the *News and Star* ran the headline:

£345,000 to pay for GPs' late surgeries

and wrote about a Government boost for Cumbria health teams. It has nothing to do with the Prime Minister's visit, although the local paper did him proud; it shows what the Labour Government are delivering. People will see developments. Perhaps my constituency is ahead, but the Government will deliver. Developments will take time to come through the system, but it is working. The difference is that in 18 years the Tory Government never delivered. They had the opportunity; the economy was right; they could have spent the money—but they refused, basically because they did not believe in the NHS.

Everything is improving, but not everything is right. Hon Members would not expect me to speak without reminding them of what needs to be done. I represent a constituency in a rural county and we have been pressing the Home Secretary to give us extra money for sparsity. It appears that we will get that extra money for police funding. If the case has been made for the police, it must be made for the health service, too.

We have two district general hospitals, although in terms of numbers we probably justify only one. However, they are 40 miles apart: one is in Whitehaven in the Copeland constituency and the other is in Carlisle. That difficulty needs to be addressed if we are to attract top-flight consultants and maintain a first-class service. I am sure that Ministers are looking at that.

I want next to raise my concern about reorganisation. In the late 1970s I was chairman of the health authority. Since then there have been about six or seven reorganisations. The present one is reconfiguration. I have reservations about it for our acute trusts. That is not the real issue, however—it is the primary care trusts that concern me. Although we have a relatively small population, it appears that a decision is being taken to go for three of these trusts. There is no justification for it. We will end up with duplication of management: we will have three sets of management where one or possibly two would be right. That will take money away from patient care and create all sorts of confusions for community services. I will write to my hon. Friend the Minister, but I hope that he has noted my concern.

The choice is clear: it is between a privatised NHS where—let us accept what the Tories say; we do not want to scare people—people who need life-saving operations will receive them, but people who need cataract operations or hip replacements will have to go on an extended waiting list. [Hon. Members: "Who said that?] I thought that the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) had made his speech. People will go on an extended waiting list—that is what the Tories said—unless they have private insurance. The Tories will give away taxpayers' money, probably £1 billion, to subsidise private insurance for those who are employed or can afford it. Poor people who cannot afford it will have to go on an extended waiting list. There is no argument about that. Of course, the vast majority of people who use the NHS are of retirement age—they are over 65. What is the Tory message to pensioners? It is to go on an extended list because, as we all know, they cannot afford private insurance.

We have the option of a privatised service—[Hon. Members: "No."]—or, under the Labour Government, our offer, in my constituency and throughout the country, of a modernised, well funded health service that will serve the old, the sick, the poor and everyone else.

3.10 pm

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): I congratulate my Front-Bench colleagues on calling the debate—especially my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), who opened it by forcing the Government on to the defensive on health. The reason that he provoked such a weak, defensive and slightly irritable response from the Secretary of State was that my hon. Friend focused on positive proposals to improve the NHS, on which the vast majority of our constituents depend. He emphasised the importance of choice for patients in the NHS—a word not even mentioned by the Secretary of State in his contribution.

My hon. Friend brings to the debate the fact that he dedicated his professional life to working as a doctor in the NHS, treating patients. That gives us credibility as

[Mr. Peter Lilley]

members of a party which cares for and wants to improve the NHS. We field real doctors; the Government field spin doctors on their Front Bench.

Over the years, it is strange that our debates on the NHS have tended to revolve exclusively around how much money is put into the service rather than how much health care comes out. That process was carried to its ultimate absurdity by the Chancellor in his Budget, when he set the target of matching the amount spent by our European partners. It would make sense to set as a target matching and surpassing the health standards achieved in other European countries, but it is bizarre to use their spending as a target, when there is little correlation between the amount a country spends and its performance in improving the health of its people.

Despite the Government's wish to focus on inputs, the debate increasingly turns—as it should—on the quality of care delivered by the NHS.

Dr. Stoate: Does the right hon. Gentleman belong to that section of the Tory party that believes that we are reckless to put extra money into the NHS, or does he believe that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor was right to allocate those extra billions of pounds? That money is undoubtedly improving patient outcomes throughout the country.

Mr. Lilley: The important thing is to target improvements in standards. That may well require extra money, but that is what the target should be—not spending money as an end in itself. Surely no one would want to spend money if it did not produce a good result. If we can improve quality without necessarily spending money, then surely we would all want that. That is certainly what our voters and constituents want; their concern about quality is growing.

Last year, there was a record number of complaints in the NHS. Patients have an increasingly consumerist attitude to health care—although that is good in the long run. There is a focus on the specific shortcomings of a minority of clinicians—sadly, misused and abused by the Government, who try to put on the medical profession blame that should rightly fall on the Government.

Our focus should be on improving quality. There are two broad approaches to that end. The first is that adopted by the Government: to focus exclusively on the command and control approach to managing the NHS. It is to focus on centralising the service; on sending out detailed circulars, like a shower of confetti; on micro-managing from Whitehall; on aiming for uniformity; on turning doctors into functionaries rather than professionals; and on treating patients as pawns rather than as people with a say in where and how they are treated.

The second approach is to try to modulate by more decentralisation those aspects of the NHS that must inevitably be centralised to some degree; to delegate responsibility to local hospitals and trusts; to encourage a greater diversity of provision within the service; and, above all, to harness the desire of patients and doctors to obtain the best treatment from the NHS. I want to focus on that aspect.

In every other service with which we deal—including those that are most important to us—when users have choice, it drives up quality of service. When users have choice, service providers know that, if they do not match the quality of the best provider, they will lose users and resources. As a result, they will not be able to expand or to provide more of the service to which they are dedicated—whether for charitable or commercial reasons.

Where choice exists, comparatively marginal movements of users between suppliers produce major improvements in quality, as providers respond.

Mr. Hinchliffe: I am interested in the points that the right hon. Gentleman makes about choice. I am concerned that when choice is afforded to certain people, it is denied to others. It is something of a myth to suggest that we all have free choice in health care. One person's choice to queue-jump to see a consultant denies someone else access to that consultant. Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that point?

Mr. Lilley: The hon. Gentleman will realise that I want to extend choice to everyone. I hope he believes that is right; it formed part of the original conception of the NHS.

Unfortunately, patient choice has progressively been largely eliminated in the NHS. I acknowledge that there were some restrictions as the unintended consequences of the otherwise desirable reforms that we introduced. However, at least we allowed choice through extra-contractual referrals in exceptional cases. Since April last year, the Government have, in effect, abolished the last vestiges of patient choice in the NHS.

A patient cannot, with a GP referral, choose to go to a hospital with a shorter waiting list than the hospital selected by the local health care bureaucracy—the primary care group. A patient cannot choose to be treated at a hospital with a better record of success, at a cleaner hospital, or at one with fewer avoidable referrals—information about which is available.

The Prime Minister has quite an instinct for what people want—I acknowledge that. No doubt many people heard and applauded his speech to the party conference. He said:

> I want to go to the hospital of my choice, on the day I want, at the time I want. And I want it on the NHS.

That is what he said and he was right to offer it as a promise. The Conservatives should try to deliver that promise.

However—as is characteristic of the Prime Minister—he says one thing and does another, because his Government have abolished choice. It is not only I who realise that. The director of the College of Health said that, under the arrangements introduced last April:

> There is now less choice than ever in the history of the NHS.

We should be moving in the opposite direction, for which there are three requirements. First, we must give patients and their GPs the right of referral to any hospital in the United Kingdom—in practice, not merely in theory. Secondly, we should publish information—on waiting times, success rates, specialisation and the availability of single-sex wards—in GP's surgeries and on the internet, so that patients can make informed choices.

Thirdly, we should ensure that money follows patient choice. That may seem the most remote requirement, but it is the most important. If money follows patient choice

speedily and clearly, hospitals will be able to treat patients properly and we shall not simply lengthen waiting lists at the more popular hospitals.

Of course, that means that money will not go to the less popular hospitals. That will not tip them into a spiral of decline as some people imagine, but it will cause them to respond and ask why fewer patients want to go to them. If that is because they have a poor track record for a particular treatment, they will undoubtedly take action to change personnel. Hospitals will reassign doctors to operations that they are good at and not to those that they are less good at, or they will replace them so that the hospitals regain the confidence of the people living in the area.

If we do that, it will have three beneficial effects. First, it will drive up quality throughout the NHS. In my pamphlet "Patient Power", published by the Prime Minister's favourite think-tank, Demos, I quote details of a study undertaken in New York state which analysed the performance of every surgeon carrying out heart bypass surgery, and assessed their success rates. Under the American Freedom of Information Act, the study was forced to publish detailed information and the consequence was a dramatic improvement in performance. People had the knowledge and could choose which hospital to go to. As hospitals responded to that knowledge and choice, a dramatic improvement in the success rate of surgeons took place. In particular, that happened in the hospitals that previously had the worse success rates.

That example demonstrates that when one has choice, information and a variety of suppliers of health care, one obtains an improvement in quality. I want such an improvement for the people who depend on the NHS.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Before the right hon. Gentleman gets completely carried away with the argument about the American model and freedom of information, will he address the fact that in the United States, which has a largely private health service, many people are denied access to any health care whatever for the type of surgery that he has highlighted? Does that study refer to the problem of social exclusion that is caused by the type of private health services that he appears to favour?

Mr. Lilley: I am not advocating those aspects of the American system. I simply propose that, within the NHS, patients should have choice. The hon. Gentleman may care to tell his constituents that he does not believe that they should have choice. He can try to argue that if he wishes, but it has nothing to do with whether there is a large private sector.

Mr. Ivan Lewis: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lilley: Not now, because I wish to make progress.

If we move in the direction that I have described, it will have three beneficial effects. First, it will drive up quality. Secondly, it will facilitate the optimal degree of specialisation within the health service. The abolition of extra-contractual referrals last April is causing a crisis in specialist care in the NHS. As my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring said, 24 surgeons issued a press release to coincide with the publication of my pamphlet last week. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah."] I had nothing to do with it; I did not know that they were going to issue it. However, I am flattered that drafts of my pamphlet have circulated so far round the medical profession that they chose to do so. They point out that

> since the abolition of extra-contractual referrals no mechanism exists to transfer funds to follow the patients that urgently need our help. Consequently, our waiting lists continue to grow and we are unable to treat these patients with the procedures they need.

In the *New Statesman*, which may be read by Labour Members, the president of the Royal College of Surgeons criticised the consequences for the quality of care that resulted from the abolition of choice by this Government under their recent reforms.

The third beneficial effect of encouraging more choice and more information in the NHS is an improvement in its ethos. At present, the NHS is monolithic, centralised, secretive and producer-oriented. If there is more choice and information, the NHS will become more focused on satisfying patient needs and on providing the maximum quality of care. That must be in the interests of all of us who care for the NHS and the quality of service that it provides for our constituents.

Some people argue that we cannot have choice in the public sector, and they make the same argument about education. When money following pupil choice was introduced in the education system, that produced changes in schools, as I saw in my constituency. If we restore choice in the NHS and make money follow choice, not only will we bring about the degree of specialisation that people want and need, but we will see improvements develop in the future that have not occurred in the past.

We have had little specialisation in common treatments, such as for hernias and hip replacements. Specialisation has been limited to the most complex and difficult operations. If people had choice, some specialist centres would develop alongside general hospitals. People would have the option to go to those specialist centres or to go the general hospital.

A few days before my pamphlet was published, there was a leak that suggested that the Government were thinking of creating such centres—they wanted to get in first. However, what do they propose for the specialist centres? Will the Minister confirm that the leaks are authentic and that they are thinking of setting up such centres? If they do, who will decide which patients go to the specialist centre and which go to a local general hospital? Will it be the NHS bureaucracy? That would be wrong and improper. People should be given choice, and the proposal will work only if they are given choice. That will ensure that the specialist units stand and thrive alongside thriving general hospitals.

Mr. Lewis: The right hon. Gentleman has confined his remarks today and in the pamphlet that he published to the point that improvements to the NHS will improve the health care of the people of this country. Does he believe, as those on the Opposition Front Bench believe, that the expansion of the private health care sector has any place whatever in improving health care in this country?

Mr. Lilley: Yes, it has. However, my primary concern—like that of probably everyone in the House—is to improve the NHS. I do not suggest that choice within

[Mr. Lilley]

the NHS is the only solution, but if we introduce such choice it will reinforce all the other changes that Conservative Members have suggested and some of the changes that the Government have introduced.

People want choice; people have a right to choice; the NHS will benefit from choice, but only the Conservative party will give them more choice.

3.27 pm

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. In every debate on this subject since the election, I have been on the record praising much of what the Government have achieved in a short period to restore a collectivised state national health service. I am proud of what we have been able to deliver so far.

Bearing in mind that this is probably the last debate on the issue before we have the announcement on the national plan, I want to concentrate on the key matters that the plan should examine and those that need to be resolved and addressed before the next election and during the term of the next Labour Government. The relationship between the NHS and the private sector is at the core of the debate. It is crucial. Most colleagues are aware of my strongly held views. I am a believer in the NHS, and I am a member of the Labour party because I believe in the NHS. The NHS is only safe in the hands of a Labour Government.

I am aware of the comments made by the Conservative party yesterday and its commitment to "dramatically extending" the private health sector. I am interested in the comments made by the Government in recent weeks about making use of what they term as under-used capacity in the private sector. I may refer to that shortly.

The relationship between the NHS and the private sector is one of the great unresolved issues of the NHS. It has not been sorted out in the 52 years for which we have had a state health care system. The fact that the issue has not been resolved is at the heart of the failure to achieve the principle of equity that was one of the central principles that the nation aimed to achieve when the NHS was set up in 1948. I was interested by the fact that the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) used the term "equity" in his arguments for the Conservative party's new proposals. I would like to hear—I have not heard it yet—how his suggestion for extending the use of the private sector squares with the principle of equity. I do not see how the two match.

I wish to take up the point made by the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) on the issue of choice. I intervened on him to make a point about choice on health. We all know that it is common practice for some people who are waiting to see an NHS consultant who also has a private practice to pay to see that consultant privately and queue-jump. They are exercising their right to free choice but, by doing so, they deny access to an NHS patient on that same waiting list. The concept of choice therefore needs to be considered in far more detail than was done in the right hon. Gentleman's superficial examination.

The right hon. Gentleman made a comparison with education and said that we all have a free choice of schools. Of course some people have a choice, but to get access to schools that are not immediately on their doorstep, people need a car or access to public transport, and perhaps assistance with picking up their children. It is not quite as simple as saying that free choice means that someone can go from one end of the country to the other. By suggesting that that is free choice, we are automatically denying opportunity to vast numbers of people who cannot have choice in the way the right hon. Gentleman envisages.

The principle of allowing queue jumping is fundamentally wrong and undermines the equity principle. I hope that the Government will look at that in the national plan. Access to treatment should be on the basis of need: that is an ethical and moral issue. I recall taking part in a radio debate chaired by Boris Johnson with the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), who was previously on Conservative Front Bench. Mr. Johnson and the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton did not understand why I thought that access to treatment was an ethical and moral issue. A situation in which some people in need are denied access to treatment on the basis that they are unable to pay for it is fundamentally wrong in principle. I cannot understand how anyone can defend that kind of injustice.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) spoke about opting out of the NHS. The idea that people who opt out of the NHS somehow help others is utter nonsense, as they are all seeing the same doctors. Those doctors should be working in the NHS and dealing with waiting lists, which should be organised on the basis of clinical need, not ability to pay.

Mr. Hammond: The hon. Gentleman may be interested to know that, right now, under this Government, West Surrey health authority is circulating a consultation document which states:

> Everyone who has access to other forms of healthcare should be encouraged to use them.

The authority, which faces an £18 million deficit, obviously believes that that will leave more resources available to deal with other patients.

Mr. Hinchliffe: I am sure that Wakefield health authority is not saying that. If it did, I would want to know. As the hon. Gentleman obviously understands, the thing does not add up, as the same people are involved. I hope that the Government will address that.

Another private sector issue that I have picked up time and time again is a grievance that I hear, especially from elderly people who come to me as their local Member of Parliament. They are on a waiting list, usually for a hip replacement or an orthopaedic problem, and have to wait a certain length of time. They are told that, if they pay a certain sum, they can be in that much sooner. A couple of years ago, a gentleman came to see me about his elderly wife, who could not walk and needed a hip replacement. He faced the choice of her suffering with the problem for about a year or paying the consultant money. He was selling his car to pay to get his 81-year-old wife in. At that time of life, people do not have a lot of time left. That is a disgraceful situation, and it is about time that we addressed it.

Mrs. Laing: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hinchliffe: No, I am sorry, I must carry on.

The only way of addressing the problem is to believe in equity on principle. We talk blandly about that belief, but do not address it practically or deal with providing people with access to care in a fair, reasonable and decent way.

I am conscious that the Select Committee on Health is bringing out a report next week, and I do not want to stray into that. However, we in the Committee heard evidence that raised strong questions about whether it is appropriate for consultants with private practices to manage their own waiting lists. The evidence was along the lines that there are perverse incentives, as the Secretary of State said. One witness said that the arrangement was an "invitation to mischief." We should look at those areas.

Mr. Burns: I do not want to break the thread of the hon. Gentleman's speech. However, is it right for him to be telling the House about some of the evidence that we in the Health Committee received before the publication of the report next week?

Mr. Hinchliffe: The evidence is on the record. Written evidence was available when the Health Committee took evidence. Everyone has seen it, and it has been in the press and on television. I have not referred to anything in the Health Committee's conclusions. The hon. Gentleman knows what those conclusions are, and we can have a debate next week.

Our debate is about NHS priorities. Some weeks ago, when we last debated the NHS, I said that the biggest distortion of priorities in the NHS arose from private medicine. I stick by that and I strongly believe it. People may try to contradict me, but I believe that that is true and that, 50 years on, we should do something about it.

I have practical concerns about the relationship between the state and private sector which relate not only to what the Opposition have said today but to what the Government have said in recent weeks. The Opposition fail to understand the way in which the private sector recruits its staff entirely from the NHS. As we have said time and time again, expanding the private sector means that there is a contraction of NHS staff numbers, reducing the ability of the NHS to cope with the need that they are attempting to address.

The Government have talked about the possibility of entire NHS staff teams moving to use capacity in private hospitals. I appreciate that distinction, and my only problem with the suggestion is that the track record on the short-term use of the private sector is that short-term fixes lead to a long-term arrangement. We need only look at the pattern of mental health provision in different parts of the country to see that, where the private sector has been used as a temporary fix, the arrangements have stayed in place for many years. We must look at that area very carefully.

I am not giving away any secrets from the Health Committee's recent inquiry by saying that we received evidence of under-used capacity in the NHS. Witnesses told the Health Committee that there are empty operating theatres in the NHS, so I hope that, before we start going into the private sector, we will make appropriate use of that capacity.

In the time I have left, I want to touch briefly on other key areas with which I hope the national plan will deal. I have argued for many years that the fundamental problem in the NHS is the lack of a proper relationship between it and local government, especially local authority social services. I was around before 1974, when there were local government health departments, and I believe that that system worked much better than the system that succeeded it. The health and social care divide can be addressed by looking at organisational issues, as well as some of the issues that the royal commission has discussed.

Commendably, the Government have introduced the potential for common budgets under the Health Act 1999, and I welcome that. I honestly believe, though, that we must examine organisational integration in a way that the Government have not done so far. I hear whispers, and there is speculation in the press that there is a move to put local authority social services in the health service. That would not be going in the right direction, as public health is the other area that suffers from the lack of a connection.

I worked in local government as a young councillor at the time when public health was a local government responsibility. It makes much more sense to have public health in a local authority setting than to have it separated, as it currently is, in a health setting, remote from such policy drivers as health, environmental health and a range of other local government functions. I hope that the Government will examine that area carefully. The position of public health needs to be addressed alongside its relationship with social services.

I welcome the Government's emphasis on primary care. I certainly urge a much closer relationship to enhance the public health role within a primary care setting. At the moment, there is a distance between primary care and public health, which we must examine.

I shall conclude with a point made, I believe by the hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey), the Liberal Democrat spokesman. We need to make the system of NHS governance far more open. We have never had a democratic national health service. I am happy to argue that micro-management should take place on a local level, but it should be democratic. In areas such as mine, it would be possible to develop regional government by combining health and local government functions in a way that we have not yet properly thought through.

I hope that the Minister has listened carefully, and I wish him well in his work on the national plan. I am sure that it will be an exciting development, and I hope that some of my points will be taken on board.

3.40 pm

Mrs. Marion Roe (Broxbourne): The most important priorities in the national health service are not those of the Government, health service managers or doctors and staff, but those of the patients themselves. The Government gained power at the last general election on the crest of many promises, one of which was to restore the confidence that they said had been lost in the NHS. Yet we cannot open a newspaper or hear a news broadcast without learning, almost every day, of the latest NHS catastrophe. All areas of the NHS seem to be affected: general practice, paediatrics, obstetrics and pathology, to name just a few of the specialties involved in recent high-profile cases.

We have to ask ourselves why. I believe that it is because the Government have set the wrong priorities. They have, for example, produced meaningless waiting

[Mrs. Marion Roe]

list targets to tackle the wrong problems. As a result of inappropriate targets, priorities have been distorted. Hospital and primary care clinicians and managers have been told to focus on valueless directives and, as a result, they are failing to improve the services and care that really matter to NHS patients. The Government now stand indicted as the Government who destroyed NHS morale and snatched from patients the confidence that is so necessary to ensure that the patient-doctor relationship is effective and successful.

Primary care groups in general practice have disrupted the delivery of medical services to patients. Over a year ago, I warned the Government that the requirement that doctors should be involved in the management of primary care groups would have a devastating effect on patients' access to their own practitioner. There are estimates that 500,000 consultations by patients' own doctors are being lost every year, so the number of patients affected is equal to a population the size of Sheffield. That is a crucial reduction in the quality and availability of the service that patients demand and expect, and from which they benefit.

There are now greater administrative demands, with the Government focusing priorities on calling GPs away to lead ever more non-clinical activities. There are clinical governance leads, risk management leads, training leads, education leads, audit leads and more. It was reported recently that in one large general practice, the doctors have suggested that there should be a lead partner with the responsibility to see patients.

There are increasing examples of how the Government are full of hot air and waffle. The House should consider the report of the chief medical officer for England and Wales, Professor Liam Donaldson, which reveals spectacular failures in the NHS. It reports the deaths of 400 patients a year as a result of errors and failures in the health service. What uproar would there be if a jumbo jet crashed in the United Kingdom every year killing all the passengers and crew? The report goes on to say that there are 10,000 serious incidents in the health service every year. Can hon. Members imagine the Secretary of State or the Minister pontificating on all the actions that would have to be taken if, every year, every single passenger on a dozen rush-hour trains fell ill with a serious disease through no fault of their own?

Yet what has Professor Donaldson done? He has produced a complacent report that fails to set the necessary priorities. That goes hand in hand with a posturing Government who seek only froth without substance and who fail to solve, with encouragement and resources, the real problems that beset the NHS.

Dr. Stoate: I share the hon. Lady's concerns that there are far too many adverse and critical incidents in the NHS, many of which are due to poor training and to doctors failing to keep up to date. That is precisely why it is so important that GPs and hospital doctors take part in audit, training and continuous professional development. They must also take part in revalidation to ensure that the clinical skills that they learned when they were at medical school are maintained throughout their lives. Surely the hon. Lady is not arguing that GPs and others should spend less time in education, training and audit.

Mrs. Roe: The patients should also be considered in these matters, and their priorities must come first. I must tell the hon. Gentleman that my constituents are becoming a little sceptical about the word "modernisation", which the Government seem to use about every policy initiative. From my experience of the past three years, I believe that "modernisation" is being used instead of "destruction", and there is a destructive element to many policies that are being introduced without any new system to replace the old and to improve the service. Modernisation must equal making it better, and not destroying a system just for the sake of gimmick and political correctness.

Let us consider two Government targets; one is in community health and the other is in acute services. Unfortunately, mental health has always been a true Cinderella service, long starved of adequate funding. The Government propose the elimination of suicide by patients who have recently been within the mental health system by 2005. That tragic loss of life is entirely unnecessary now. Surely the Government can imagine the loneliness and despair of those who ultimately take their own lives. They can imagine the emptiness felt by those left behind, and the guilt and failure felt by the clinical staff who failed to provide patients with the support that they needed when they were desperate.

More than 3,500 people commit suicide every year, and a third have had recent contact with NHS mental health services. Little more than a fifth are women. Over the last 20 years, male suicides have risen by nearly 15 per cent. The average age of the victim has fallen. More men are killing themselves and more of those are young. The most common ages for suicide are adolescence and old age—the times when problems of loneliness, financial pressures, break-up of a relationship or loss of a partner, bullying and abuse of alcohol are rife. Mental illness is of high incidence and it is a key risk. A patient suffering from severe depression probably has a one in seven lifetime risk of killing him or herself.

This tragedy is not a problem for next month or next year; it is a huge priority now. Although I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has decided to do something about the problem, I do not think that the Government can luxuriate in the provision of five years to grasp the tragic problem that affects those who were recently mental health patients. It needs to be sorted out now, and those people at risk of suicide and not identified by the health system need to be recognised and incorporated in it now.

Let us consider the Government's position on obstetric complications. Again, they have awarded themselves five years to reduce the incidence of complications in the specialty by 25 per cent. That seems unbelievably casual, particularly given the two high-profile cases concerning senior obstetricians in the last few weeks. There are more than 700,000 live births in the United Kingdom every year—700,000 opportunities for disaster or mismanagement. Yet what is the Government's approach? They have given themselves five years to make a modest reduction in the problem.

There will be more than 50 million obstetric consultations in hospital, surgery and clinic during the next five years in primary and secondary care. Such a relaxed and casual attitude is unacceptable. How many babies will have to die or be damaged before the Government realise the true urgency of the problem? To be pouring money into a health system with the objective of producing a headline about taking a few people off the waiting lists when there is real work to be done urgently

to save life and reduce morbidity is, frankly, immoral. In any case, the Government priority of cutting waiting lists is a sham, and everyone knows it. They have simply rearranged the distribution of the patients waiting in that queue.

The number of patients at the front of the queue for their operation has declined a bit, but at the other end of the queue, patients in pain and discomfort with, for example, back, shoulder and hip problems are waiting longer and longer for their first visit to the specialist. In the past seven days, it has been reported that not only do those patients have to wait up to 18 months for surgery, but that they have to wait a year or more as well just to be seen by a consultant for the first time. That wait is nearly two years in Medway, well over a year at the Royal London, a year at the Royal Sussex and over six months at Guy's. Demand continues to rise and pressure in the system continues to increase.

I do not have time today to speak about the shambles that the Government have the effrontery to call an IT strategy. We listened intently as the strategy was announced in 1998. There was to be much progress in electronic records, data transfer and communication. The Government were to commit £5 billion and the programme was to have a seven-year roll-out. Yet it is now becoming clear that the IT strategy has collapsed and the likelihood of exciting electronic developments is receding into the distant future. A key priority is in ruins, and I look forward to a ministerial statement on that as a matter of urgency.

Those are the real priorities that the Secretary of State should address. He must not conceal unattractive features simply by applying more make-up. They must be addressed as the key priorities in the NHS. Sham must be replaced with substance so that the real losers in the NHS—the real sufferers from Labour's policies—have the opportunity to get the care that they need at the time that they need it.

3.52 pm

Ms Linda Perham (Ilford, North): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me at this stage in the debate. As some hon. Members know, my father suffered a heart attack late on Tuesday, and although he is making progress, I may be called away in the next few hours, so I hope that the House will forgive me if I am unable to stay until the end of the debate.

I begin by paying tribute to all those dedicated people in the NHS who have been involved in my father's care in the past few days. His GP, the ambulance crew and nursing and medical staff at Queen Mary's hospital, Sidcup are a testament to the NHS working at its best to deliver for patients. Unlike Conservative Members, led by the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), I want to praise our NHS, not to run it down.

Today is my birthday. [HON. MEMBERS: "Happy birthday."] I am 53—almost exactly a year older than the NHS, so I have grown up and grown older shielded and supported by the availability of and access to public health care. I am proud and fortunate to have been born under the pioneering post-war Labour Government, whose greatest achievement was to realise the dream of so many British people who were denied health provision because they could not afford it. This Labour Government are passionately committed to retaining and supporting the NHS, which was set up in the teeth of Tory opposition. We are the party that the British people trust to preserve and improve the people's health service.

Health is the big issue in my constituency. The neglect and divisiveness of the policies of previous Conservative Governments was a large factor in the decision of the electorate of Ilford, North to turn out the Tories three years ago. Labour's priority for the NHS in the past three years, and for the years ahead, is for a first-class, properly funded service. In March, the Budget gave the NHS its biggest ever cash boost. After the Budget, the chairman of the British Medical Association, Dr. Ian Bogle, said:

> We see this as the first major step to putting the health service on a sound long-term funding basis.

As a result of the funds made available in the Budget, my health authority, Redbridge and Waltham Forest, secured an extra £6 million. Although it is severely disadvantaged by the current funding formula for health authorities—a matter about which I and my hon. Friends the Members for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes), for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) and for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) continue to make representations to Ministers, as my hon. Friend the Minister well knows—the authority was pleased to receive that much needed extra cash to provide services for local people.

My health authority has also gained in the past three years from £800,000 and £1.1 million allocated respectively to King George and Whipps Cross hospitals to modernise their accident and emergency departments as part of a £15 million investment in London. It scooped further funding from the successful single regeneration budget bid, called the "Health ladder to social inclusion", creating or safeguarding 115 jobs and getting 300 people training or qualifications, 10 new business start-ups, 60 voluntary or community groups supported and 300 capacity-building initiatives to be carried out.

In addition, Redbridge and Waltham Forest health authority has benefited from the Government commitment to prioritising cancer treatment as part of their war against the killer diseases. Last May, I was pleased to join Baroness Hayman, then a Health Minister, when she opened the new breast screening and ultrasound department at Whipps Cross hospital, which also won part of the £93 million new opportunities fund award in September 1999 for replacement X-ray equipment for breast screening. In January, my health authority shared £91,000 of a £1.5 million boost to London health authorities, which funded a cancer referral co-ordinator and administrative support and systems management.

My own involvement in working for improvements in cancer treatment started with co-operation with Age Concern on age discrimination issues, pressing the Government to extend breast cancer screening to women over 65—the group most at risk. I am glad that, in March, the Government announced their commitment to extend that programme if the current pilot studies show that it would be beneficial. More recently, I have worked closely with the UK Breast Cancer Coalition, speaking at seminars and advising on its "advocacy in action" programme, in which volunteers from across the country share campaigning experiences and hear from experts.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe) for her involvement and work in the breast cancer campaigns, although I do not agree with anything that she said in her speech. I also pay tribute to several hon. Members who are active in those campaigns.

[Ms Linda Perham]

I actively support other cancer campaigns, including the work of the Orchid Cancer Appeal, set up by Colin Osborne—a survivor of testicular cancer who lives a few streets away from me in my constituency. I am a member of the all-party group on male cancers, which is ably led by my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East (Jane Griffiths).

Another local initiative is the HEAL cancer charity, which covers Hertfordshire, Essex and north and east London, including nine hospitals in the region. It was founded in 1993 by oncologist Dr. Neville Davidson, a Chigwell resident. HEAL is now focusing on raising funds for the Helen Rollason cancer care centre at the North Middlesex hospital. As some hon. Members will remember, Helen was the TV presenter and first woman to anchor "Grandstand", who tragically lost her fight against bowel cancer last August.

Mrs. Laing: I add my support to HEAL and all the work of Neville Davidson and his team; they do a lot of good in my constituency, too.

Ms Perham: I thank the hon. Lady for her support. Several hon. Members in our local area are involved with that charity; it has a particular resonance because of Helen's great fight against her disease, and I am pleased at the support it has gained locally.

I have also been involved in campaigns to raise awareness of human papillomavirus testing for cervical cancer and have added a personal contribution to the fight against ovarian cancer, which kills 4,000 women a year, by participating in the ovarian cancer screening programme at Bart's hospital. Therefore, I welcome the answer that the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), gave in February of this year showing that the Government spent £1 million in 1998–99 on directly commissioned research relating to ovarian cancer and another £1 million on supporting research councils and charities. She also promised the setting up of a major ovarian cancer screening study.

I am pleased that, as part of their overall commitment to modernising—if I can use that word—the NHS, the Government are prioritising patient care to ensure fast and convenient access and increased patient empowerment, which will give patients a greater say in their treatment.

I have been honoured, as a member of the all-party group on cancer, to be asked to chair one of the groups working on five pledges to develop a comprehensive cancer strategy. Those are to improve the prevention of cancer; to ensure equal access to higher standards of care; to provide patient-centred care through the NHS—the group with which I am involved is working on that—to increase Government spending on a national agenda for cancer research; and to develop better treatments and to implement them quickly. At a time when the world is coming to terms with the staggering potential of the human genome breakthrough, we cannot afford to wait for miracle cures while one in four people in the United Kingdom is dying of cancer now.

I have focused on the treatment of cancer because of my attempts to press for improvements in the fight against that killer disease, but I am equally determined, as are the Labour Government, to confront the challenges of providing health care to all our people in the new century, and vigorously to oppose the Tory party's agenda of privatisation and selection for certain services by the ability to pay. I want to protect, to support and to expand our NHS. That is what the British people want and that is what we are delivering.

4.1 pm

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): First, may I say that I think that the hon. Member for Ilford, North (Ms Perham) has shown a great deal of courage? That demonstrates not just her keen personal interest, but her wider political and social interest in health. I hope that all goes well with her family.

There are one or two irritating factors in the debate. One is the view that the NHS was created by just one party. It was not. It came out of a coalition that was developed during the war and it was finally put into practice with the support of Governments of both parties—*[Interruption.]* I do not want to argue about that because it is a fact.

Secondly, the question of expenditure is very important. When the NHS started, it had a budget of about £170 million. After two or three months, it increased to £250 million. Then it went to £374 million. The structure of everything being free at the point of demand was demolished when Mr. Bevan accepted—reluctantly—that there would have to be prescription charges. In 1951, he had to resign because he could not stomach the Government's view that there should be charges for spectacles and dentures.

Many advances are being made in the medical profession and in modern technology. Some are life saving; others we could deal with ourselves. Of course, we could embrace every illness and ailment—any pill that we want we can have—but that is not the reality of modern medicine, or of the problems that Governments have to face.

There may be occasions when a Chancellor of the Exchequer comes to the Dispatch Box and does not give the NHS the extra money that we all think it should have, because he thinks that there is a greater demand for housing, that there is some problem to do with defence, or that the economy is not quite as robust as it was the previous year and the forecast is not so good either. If we demand that the health service should always be financed to meet every demand, we refuse to face up to the reality of modern medicine, modern needs and social responsibility; we fail to recognise financial prudence.

Those are points that I would have thought could unite the House. Having come into the House in 1959, I have sat through a great many debates. I am astonished that we go on year after year having the sort of fights that we have. It is not true to say that—

Mr. Stephen Hesford (Wirral, West): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: Let me finish the sentence and then I will give way to the hon. Gentleman. It is not true to say that the Opposition want to rely on the private sector totally and to demolish the health service; that is such rubbish. After all, when we came into office the NHS had a budget of £9 billion. We ended up with a budget of just over £40 billion.

Now we are told that there will be another increase of about £20 billion from the present Government. Why is it that we automatically assume that, having poured that money in, we will have solved the problem of increasing expenditure on health? Of course we will not. We all know that there are many reasons why the burdens on health—the demands that are put on us—are increasingly greater and cannot always be solved with taxation. Some people say that they should be, but as I have said, there will be other priorities; there always are.

We can argue that the health budget is not always the one that will create a healthier society—I mean in a physical sense. Better education and looking after oneself can help, as can a better sense of individual responsibility. It is not always the doctor to whom one must go. We might consult our own consciences about whether we can provide for some of our own health needs. That is why the debate is at times disappointing.

Has any other country followed us? Not one has done so. The socialist Governments of Europe studied our methods, but not one of them has copied us. I have heard no contradiction on that point from any Minister, either. I have been to see them; I have talked with them; I have seen them struggle with their problems. My heart bleeds for them at times, because there is a recognition that, somehow or other, we can meet those demands, as the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) said. I have heard him say it before and do not doubt his sincerity. I ask him to get out of the mould of his experience and try to broaden it a bit.

In 1959, I fully supported the health service. Members of my own family have been involved in it. I was the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras, South, and I knew all that went on there. I have enormous respect for those in the health service; I know that many of them have to put up with tremendously long working hours—that is not something of which we should be proud—but they do so with enormous good will. Why, then, should I tolerate the existing situation, when Minister after Minister says, "Let us spend more."? Then there is always someone who says, "You should have spent more and you should have done it the year before."

In Germany, the Netherlands and other countries—we have all the statistics—they have more doctors, more specialists, more nurses and far fewer waiting lists. I am treasurer of a NATO parliamentary assembly. I must ensure that the assembly pays sufficient money to help our employees to meet their bills because they have to pay so much to the Belgian Government. They can get many other things very cheaply and, as I say, they have a better service. Not one of those people, some of whom are British, goes across the sea and gets it all for free in Britain. They would not touch it. They know that they have a better deal. Why do not we accept that? We have a lot to be proud of, but we will not be proud of it if we always have a spat year in year out.

I do not see any reason why we should resent the private sector having some part in the health service. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport said in *The Times* on 8 May 1996:

> Surely it is time to get away from the sterile battle lines of public and private and instead look to how the two can best work together in the interests of the citizen—and in the interests of all citizens, at that.

There are others. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Mr. Roger Liddell claimed the same in their book "The Blair Revolution." I will not quote it, but anyone can see what it says. They also talked about the need for diversity and innovation in the provision of public services, so what are we arguing about today? Where is the consistency? Then there is that venerable figure Mr. Steven Pollard, former director of the Fabian Society, who in a document entitled "Towards a More Cooperative Society" said on the role of independent health care:

> There is a myth in the Labour movement that any form of health provision from outside the national health service is by definition tainted by with capitalism or private profit. There is more to it than that.

He is right.

That brings us to the formidable problems that we have to face: rising demand for primary and secondary care, the rising number of elderly people, advances in medicine—one could go on and on. Ministers know about the shortage of consultants, but also that some who have been trained cannot find posts. In addition, as the BMA points out, it will take years for doctors currently attending medical school to emerge into general practice or senior hospital positions. Announcements that another 1,000 people are to be trained fill people with hope, as though the doctors will be turned out the next day, like rookies entering the Army, but that is not how medical training works. That is why we get disillusioned with Ministers—we know darned well that they cannot deliver just like that, but they give the impression that they can.

If we are to be true to ourselves, we have to recognise the facts, one of which is that private provision, in its place, has a role. It does not diminish the health service—after all, consultants and GPs work in both the NHS and the private sector. I know people who work under contract with the NHS and give of their time to the private sector, and why should they not? In my constituency, we have people who work in a charity-supported private hospital that takes NHS patients. Such skilled people are the strength of our health service. I see no reason why we should not examine the extent to which we can broaden that base, as those on the continent have done, with better results than we have achieved.

I welcome the comments of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) who, in a recent edition of our favourite *House Magazine*, advocated two longer-term reforms that might help:

> The first is to settle how the NHS raises its funds. We live in an age when most voters are not keen to increase income tax. Practically all voters see national insurance contributions as an insurance payment and not a tax. The Government should commit itself to transferring tax-based NHS expenditure to a national insurance base.

That would certainly give buoyancy to NHS revenue. People do not mind paying insurance and, as Lord Beveridge pointed out, if a service has been paid for in advance—that is one way of seeing insurance—people are more likely to respect that service. They are also more likely to take more personal responsibility. When I see the many people in this country who eat far too much, become bloated and suffer from a heart attack or some other condition while they are relatively young, I wonder to what extent the problem was the result of natural causes, or whether it was self-inflicted. We know that we are not a healthy nation and that we do not take sufficient personal responsibility for our health.

I hope that the House will take note of the views that I have expressed, which are not mine alone. They are the views of those who are progressive—workers at all stages

[Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith]

of the national health service who are dedicated to improving it. They recognise that team spirit in the NHS and the private sector, and among those with specialties and knowledge, is the answer. If we acknowledge that, we might have a better debate and, more important, we would, for the first time, be able to give the British people hope that they have a service that is manageable and meets their needs.

4.13 pm

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): When introducing the debate, the Tories drew a wholly inaccurate picture of the NHS—one that gave no credit to the hard-working staff of the NHS throughout this country. I mean all NHS staff, not only the doctors and nurses on whom we often focus, but the huge teams of people working together in the interests of patients. A more accurate picture is the one that I see in my constituency—a positive picture of people working together in the interests of the population. A new hospital is being built. Local dentists now accept NHS patients and thousands of people have been added to their lists; by contrast, when Labour was elected, not a single dentist in Swindon took adult NHS patients. That shows how far we have come in three years.

I remember, very soon after Labour was elected—it was not because of any legislative change, but because of the way in which Ministers spoke and the direction in which we said we wanted the NHS to go—NHS staff came to me and said, "We are so thankful that we can now work together, the community trust with the acute trust, to sort out what we need to do in Swindon." Before that, a new hospital was being built but the trust managers at that hospital did not even speak to the community trust, even though they relied on the community trust to deliver some of the services that would be needed in future. The atmosphere of competition that had prevailed before did the patients and staff who wanted to work together no service.

Significant additional resources are now coming into the health service in Swindon. Staff now tell me, "We've got the money now." In part because of the pressure resulting from years of cuts under the Conservatives, it took time for the new money to come through and have an effect. A bit of slack is needed before people feel that there is new money and that they can start to do the new things that they wanted to do for years. Managers now tell me, "You have given us the money. Now it is up to us to deliver for your constituents." That is welcome news after what we heard in the past. Doctors—GPs and consultants alike—have welcomed the Government's actions, saying, "At last, we are looking at the real problems." For instance, we are examining the wider problems of public health, such as cancer, and focusing on cancer services, which were previously ignored.

In the motion, the Tories have, rightly, raised concerns about political pressure in the NHS. I share some of those concerns, but the pressures started under the Conservative Government. In that time, I worked in the NHS for 11 years. At meetings, I was told that specific political targets had to be delivered; when I looked purchasers in the eye and asked, "Even if it means that a patient will not get his operation soon enough and might suffer—for ever—because of that?", the reply was, "You have to deliver the outcome." That pressure must be removed.

One measure that might have given rise to such problems is the abolition of regional health authorities and their replacement by civil servants. I worry that, sometimes, civil servants focus on a particular political objective and do not listen to the broad spectrum of Ministers' remarks. It is clear to me that Ministers always say that clinical priorities must take precedence—I hear that time and again—yet people working on the ground in the NHS say that, sometimes, it does not feel like that to them. To them, I have two things to say: first, listen to Ministers—the Secretary of State has said on several occasions that clinical priority is the important thing; and secondly, look at the things that Labour Members of Parliament are doing in this country. We visit our local hospitals and community units and talk to staff working there—[HON. MEMBERS: "So do we."] Good—I am glad to hear that.

Mrs. Laing: We have families too.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Lady must keep calm.

Ms Drown: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Those remarks enable me to tell Conservative Members that if, during those visits, staff raise the concerns that I describe, they should tell them to listen to Ministers, because Ministers always say that clinical priority is important. In that way, we can get rid of the worry felt in the middle of the chain of command. I would hope that everyone in the House agrees that clinical priority must take precedence. In addition, the Government have said that they will protect whistleblowers in the NHS and elsewhere. Staff should raise their genuine concerns so that they can be properly addressed.

The Opposition have also criticised our national consultation exercise. I took the opportunity to meet people in my local hospital who were responding to that consultation. They welcomed the opportunity to say what they thought was important in the NHS. The hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe) referred to the importance of patients' views. If their views are important, surely we should support a consultation exercise that gives them the opportunity to make their views heard. It would be wrong and arrogant to say that doctors, nurses and other NHS staff have all the answers. Patients' views are important too.

Another accusation concerns the manipulation of appointment systems and of waiting lists. There was definitely pressure and manipulation of systems under the Conservatives. They have such a cheek to say that there were no out-patients waiting when they were in office.

Mr. Hammond: Will the hon. Lady tell me whether I have this right? I thought that she was elected on a manifesto pledge to save the NHS within 24 hours. Is she now saying that if she can point to certain things having happened before 1997, it is all right?

Ms Drown: No. I am saying that it shows a remarkable cheek for the Opposition to try to claim that no out-patients waited under the Conservative Government. It is clear that waiting lists grew under the Conservatives by hundreds of thousands.

Mr. Burns: I shall be cheeky, in the hon. Lady's terms. Will she tell me and my constituents what she thinks of

the situation in mid-Essex? On 1 March 1997, 104 people in the area were waiting 12 months or more for hospital treatment. Today, 986 people are waiting. To be fair, I shall take the out-patient list. There were 555 people waiting more than 13 weeks in March 1997. There are now 2,946.

Ms Drown: I would say to the hon. Gentleman and his constituents that they should be glad that they have a Labour Government who are committed to reducing in-patient waiting lists, which was a manifesto pledge. However, we wish to go beyond that and to address out-patient waiting times, too. We will do more than the Labour party manifesto outlined because we believe that the NHS is important and that it is about in-patient treatment as well as out-patient treatment.

Nevertheless, it must be remembered that under the Conservative Government waiting lists grew by hundreds of thousands. That should not be forgotten.

Mr. Burns: My constituents who are waiting on out-patient and in-patient lists will be amazed and staggered by that reply. I have a weekly column in my local newspaper, so next Friday I shall be able to print her words. Will she answer the letters that will come to me as a result of her comments about what my constituents should think of having to wait for hospital treatment?

Ms Drown: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware of the strict parliamentary convention that would limit me in replying to his constituents. However, I am happy to tell them that the Government are committed to having an NHS on which everyone can rely. The Conservative party wants to have an NHS to which people turn for urgent treatment. However, if the treatment is not urgent and if the individual can afford it, he or she will go to the private health sector. Many of the hon. Gentleman's constituents will not be able to afford that. They will thus be faced with a two-tier system, and they will be the sufferers.

It was remarkable cheek on the part of the Opposition to raise postcode rationing in their motion. Undoubtedly such rationing came into being under the Conservative Government. There has been much support throughout the House for the National Institute for Clinical Excellence to deal with this problem. The Conservatives have agreed that NICE should examine costs and clinical effectiveness. There is no doubt that that is needed.

I have a couple of quotes from general practitioners who have said that far too much is done in the NHS by habit rather than design. The co-ordinator of primary care in London, Dr. David Colin-Thome, a practising GP, has said that too many treatments are initiated more by habit than design. He claims that only 15 per cent. of treatments have been tested in randomised control trials. Dr. Tudor Hart has said:

> We've tended to take a pride in how idiosyncratic we are. This is a very doctor-centred view of our function—it's as though we are entertaining ourselves rather than providing care.

In so far as that happens throughout the NHS in different specialties from time to time, there is a need to establish a national framework for all conditions so that all patients know what care and treatment has been properly tested and is the best for them and their families. NICE has been designed to do just that.

We have had the leak over beta interferon. Possibly, it will be the first negative decision to be made by NICE. It will be a test of how a mature democracy can deal with that. It will be easy for Opposition parties to say, "We agree with NICE and we agree with the general proposals. We agree when it comes out with favourable results, but when there is something negative we will jump up and down and say, 'Let's not go along with this.'" That is worrying because it will raise many fears and will not produce the NHS that we need, which is one where all patients know that they are receiving the best care, and care that has been properly tested.

We return to the idiosyncratic behaviour of some doctors. If patients have been told by their GP or another doctor that beta interferon, for example, might help them, or another drug or treatment might, they will want to go ahead with that treatment once they have been started on that path. That has led to expectations, and psychological effects can often have an impact on people's physical health. Against that background, it is important for the patient to start on his course of treatment and to ascertain whether it works for him as an individual.

I hope that NICE will in future lay out proper clinical pathways. If these care pathways can be agreed for everybody across the NHS, everybody will have the confidence to say, "Yes, this drug is right for me and I will have it;" or, "This drug is not, and I will not be given it." It is important to get the outlines of NICE known across the health service so that patients do not think different things when they see different doctors. We must ensure that there is confidence in the NHS. If we are to have a mature debate about NICE and about priorities in the NHS, we should move more towards trying to establish all-party agreement on NICE being the right way forward, and on supporting its decisions.

We must try to work as constructively as possible. Of course the Opposition will continue to try to make political points out of the health service. I regret that in so doing they often scare patients. We should take no lessons from the Opposition. When in government, they were destroying the NHS. There were 24 hours in which to save it simply because the Conservatives were doing nothing for it.

The internal market did not work. I spoke to finance director after finance director. One after the other told me, "This is not working. The Conservatives' internal market does not work. It does not help patients and it does not help staff." Labour is rebuilding the NHS with staff and with patients. I commend the Government on their work.

4.29 pm

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): I hope that the hon. Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) will forgive me if I do not take up her remarks, except to say that having heard them I now fully understand the meaning of the expression "Blair's babe".

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) on raising this important issue for debate. First, I shall take up the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith) about the allegations that have been made throughout the debate and at other times that the Opposition, when in government, would want to privatise the national health service. That is not true and is deeply offensive to all of us who believe passionately in the

[Mr. Simon Burns]

NHS. We have been in government for more than 50 per cent. of the lifetime of the health service. I am fair-minded enough to pay full credit to the Labour party for the establishment of the NHS in 1948 but it is a bit rich for the Government to make cheap party political points by spreading fears around the country that my party would privatise the health service. We would not privatise the national health service.

We believe in the NHS, in the way that the vast majority of people do. They want the national health service and they are content to pay their taxes to finance it. I wish that Ministers, Labour Members and prospective parliamentary candidates would stop this nonsense of suggesting that we would not keep the NHS on the basic premise on which it was established.

Such strands of propaganda are not unique in history. It is thought by some that if a big enough lie is spread often enough, the drip, drip, drip effect will convince people that there is some truth in it. I was outraged by a document that was put through my constituents' letter boxes two months ago, "Labour Rose", published by the Labour party at Millbank. It categorically tells people that, under the Conservatives

> If you need a hip replacement or other major operations you will have to go private. If you need to see a GP you will be charged under the Conservatives.

That is an outright lie. To show that Labour has learned the lessons of dishonest propaganda from others who are far better at it, Labour tries to give this document authenticity by incorporating a little box headed:

> This is how much the Tories want you to pay.

Hip replacement, hernia and cataract removal operations are all included, with price bands presented as though they were factual. To add insult to injury, it says:

> Health Privatisation. Guaranteed. The Tories would make patients go private for hip and knee replacements and other major operations.

That is a lie. There is no other word for it.

I assure Labour Members that the Tory party will not vote for privatisation because we do not believe in it.

Mr. Hesford: Which Tory party?

Mr. Burns: That was very funny. The hon. Gentleman tried to get a laugh but did not raise one.

The Conservative party believes in the national health service, as it has shown not only in every general election since 1948 but in the way that it put more and more money into the NHS during its stewardship and sought to raise standards of patient care.

Labour Members may, with total sincerity, disagree with some of the reforms that Conservative Governments have implemented, but they were introduced with the most sincere of motives—to improve and enhance patient care. Labour Members will say that we want an expanded private health sector to work with the NHS. If individuals wish to spend their money on private care, they are entitled to do so. I certainly do not believe that anyone should be made to do so and we have no such proposals. It causes me no problems if people want to spend their money on private health care—no more than if any Government, including the present Administration, want to spend some of the taxpayer's money on treatment in private hospitals because they want to deal with waiting lists. If that means that the patient will be treated more quickly, I have no problem with it, provided that treatment is free at the point of delivery to that patient and the NHS picks up the bill.

I hope that nonsensical claims about privatisation will stop, because we do not believe in it. Privatisation is not going to happen and it is not the sort of thing that hon. Members such as me would agree to or vote for in the Lobby in a month of Sundays.

Liz Blackman: The Opposition spokesperson on health stated in *The Sunday Times*:

> "Insurance companies could cover conditions that are not high-tech or expensive, like hip and knee replacements, hernia and cataract operations, which currently involve long waiting times. We could then leave expensive treatments like cancer therapy to the NHS."

That is on the record. Is the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) distancing himself from his party spokesperson? If so, is it not correct—as my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, West (Mr. Hesford) suggested—that there are several Conservative parties?

Mr. Burns: I will answer the hon. Lady's question in my own way. She will have to ask my hon. Friend but, not wishing to duck the issue, I will give my interpretation and understanding of his remarks. If private health insurance companies covered such operations for people who have voluntarily taken out policies, it would relieve pressure on the NHS for the more expensive operations. That is very different from saying that my party insists that individuals take out private health insurance to cover cataract and other relatively minor, non-emergency treatment to relieve the financial pressures on the NHS and fund major operations.

Liz Blackman: Does the hon. Gentleman support his party's proclaimed policy of introducing tax relief on private medical care premiums?

Mr. Burns: It would be perverse of me not to because I voted for that policy when Margaret Thatcher's Government introduced it in the late 1980s.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: For elderly people.

Mr. Burns: For elderly people. I do not have a problem with that policy if it would help more elderly people, for whom tax relief would make all the difference by allowing them to afford private care. That is a matter of individual choice.

The bottom line is that I could not under any circumstances support or agree to the privatisation of the NHS. I do not doubt that my party has no intention whatever of seeking to privatise the health service. I hope that Labour—and the Liberal Democrats, who have always enjoyed getting into the gutter to attack both the Government and the official Opposition—will stop pursuing that tack, as the hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey) was doing this afternoon. There is no truth in it.

A matter of particular concern to my constituents is hospital waiting lists. Notwithstanding the national figures, there are problems in parts of the country. Waiting lists in my trust area are probably among the

worst in Britain. My constituents are disappointed and confused when they hear that waiting lists have gone down elsewhere. They were promised by my opponents at the last general election that under a Labour Government, all waiting lists in mid-Essex would reduce dramatically. However, there has not been a single day since 2 May 1997 when the in-patient waiting list has dipped below the level at which it was on 31 March 1997. There are at present 1,600 more patients on the list than when the Government came to power, and the waiting list to get on to a waiting list has soared, as I said to the hon. Member for South Swindon, from 555 people waiting more than 13 weeks to 2,946 people waiting to see a consultant to get on to the waiting list.

That is unacceptable, particularly because of the promises that were made to my constituents by my Labour opponent, by Labour shadow Ministers at the time, and by the then Leader of the Opposition, the current Prime Minister. My constituents believed that the promised improvements would happen for them, but sadly, whatever is happening elsewhere seems to be passing them by.

I passionately hope that the Government are successful in getting the waiting list down in mid-Essex. I am sure that Ministers do not want my constituents to wait longer than most other people in the country for hospital treatment, if only because an improvement would shut me up and they would not have to listen to my speeches any more. I am united with them. I want the waiting list down because I do not want my constituents to have to wait so long.

Like the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), I hear tales at my surgery and in correspondence, of pensioner constituents of mine having to use their life savings for non-emergency private treatment of painful conditions, because they cannot face the pain while they wait nine months, 15 months or whatever for a hip replacement operation or other treatment on the NHS. It is unacceptable.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government are enormously politically partisan and that there has been a vendetta against the home counties? The appalling situation that my hon. Friend describes is shared by my constituency and many others.

Mr. Hinchliffe: Come on!

Mrs. Bottomley: I am amused to hear the hon. Gentleman's merriment. I know that he does not have one in nine people waiting more than a year for in-patient treatment. I know that the figure is only one in 50 in the Prime Minister's constituency. However, there has been a severe deterioration in the home counties because of the squeeze on social services and the changes to the funding formula. The problems in the home counties are very severe indeed. Labour Members laugh or say how successful—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The Deputy Speaker is not laughing.

Mr. Burns: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I thank my right hon. Friend for her intervention. My constituents and many others in Essex were extremely grateful to her when she was the Secretary of State for Health. When the resource allocation working party was ended, she gave a commitment to the now Lord Newton of Braintree, my hon. Friend the Member for Maldon and East Chelmsford (Mr. Whittingdale) and me that she would start using a per capita basis for funding. For five years, we started to catch up, after the problems that had arisen from our finances being drained into the east end of London. Sadly, one of the first acts of the present Secretary of State as Minister of State when he took office in 1997 was to fine-tune what my right hon. Friend had done. That means that my health area gets £1 million less a year than it would have got without that fine-tuning.

In conclusion, I hope that hon. Members will stop the party political denigration of our position on the health service by misrepresenting it as privatisation. It is not privatisation. Many of us passionately disagree with the idea of a privatised health service and could never support it. I also hope that more is done to ensure, especially in mid-Essex, that waiting lists come down, and that a reduction in waiting times is the next step, so that my constituents can benefit.

4.44 pm

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley): I must say to the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) that the history of the national health service over the past two decades and the debate about privatisation shows the Conservative party hoist by its own petard.

Everything that the Conservatives did when they were in office suggested that they would go down the road of privatisation. The introduction of the internal market and of fundholding made it clear what the line was at the time. Many speeches made from the Opposition Front Bench since May 1997, with talk of Trojan horses and assisting private health care, give every indication that if they could go down that road, they would.

The right hon. Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith) said that the Conservative party had always been in favour of the NHS. He was rewriting history slightly. When the vote was taken in the House of Commons in 1948, the Conservatives voted against the NHS coming into being, but I give credit to all Opposition Members for the fact that for decades after 1948, there was a consensus in the country that the NHS should remain and continue to give the wonderful service that it has given to generations of people in Britain—until the 1980s and the Thatcher Government.

It was then that the consensus broke up, not just in the public sector and in relation to health, but in many other parts of the public sector. If that causes Opposition Members embarrassment, it serves them jolly well right for what they did to the public sector during all the years that they were in office.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: I do not want to peddle history, but I do not want it thought that I did not report it correctly. Yes, there was that vote, but it was not a matter of principle. The proposal was agreed by the coalition Government and agreed right up to the legislation. We had no real opposition to it. If we look back at the records, we will find how events happened as they did. As for the business of moving towards privatisation, I have tried to convince many in the Labour

[Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith]

party to accept that there is a role for the private sector. That is shown by the social insurance polices that operate successfully in Europe.

Mr. Barron: I do not want to go down that road. The right hon. Gentleman said how wonderful the NHS was, then he listed six or seven countries where, I assume, he was arguing that the situation was better. On the question of social insurance, who uses our national health service? Elderly people and young children. How can the majority of people who use the NHS benefit from tax breaks—even if there are tax incentives, as there were in the past, which the Government rightly argued impacted badly on the NHS by taking resources away from where they were needed? That does not square, and it is time that the Opposition admitted it.

At the beginning of the debate, we heard from the Opposition Dispatch Box that the Government claimed to have dismantled the internal market, yet that Lord Winston said that it still exists. One or two of us shouted, "And what do you think?", but there was no reply.

Mr. Lilley: What do you think?

Mr. Barron: I think that the internal market has been dismantled, and a jolly good thing too. It was about time, because it was the vehicle whereby Baroness Thatcher's Government would have privatised the NHS, and it is about time that Conservative Members admitted it.

Mrs. Laing: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Barron: I will not give way; I must make progress. I have enjoyed listening to the debate, especially the opening speech of the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox). It is a pity that he is not present. I thought that the first 10 minutes of his speech were quite good. It was like watching "What the Papers Say", with one quote after another. However, he then advanced the fantastic and incredible argument that the Labour Government send people round the NHS looking for good news stories so that they can get them out into the media.

That comes from someone who supported the previous Government. For the last 10 years of their term of office, not one new hospital was built in the NHS. Presumably, the hon. Gentleman will now say that the announcement last week of the opening of the new hospital in Carlisle, or the announcement that another 36 hospitals are to be built by the Labour Government—

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Barron: No, let me finish my point. There is one of the culprits. I will give way to her in a moment.

The idea that the £3 billion to fund the 37 new hospitals is part of a Machiavellian plot by the Labour Government to try to pull the wool over people's eyes is nonsense, especially when we consider the previous Government's shameful record on hospital building. We ought to sing from the roof tops the Government's actions in improving the health service, and especially in building new hospitals.

Mrs. Bottomley: I invite the hon. Gentleman to come on a tour with me of the various plaques that I have opened.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): Hospitals.

Mrs. Bottomley: Yes, I meant hospitals.

Mr. Barron: A plaque is not a hospital. The right hon. Lady well knows that new hospitals were not built under the previous Administration—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Again, I appeal for calm. The points are matters of debate—[HON. MEMBERS: "Fiction."] Order. They are not fiction, but matters of debate. Opposition Members will be called to rebut the hon. Gentleman's case. We must have calm.

Dr. Brand *rose—*

Mr. Barron: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Dr. Brand: The right hon. Member for South–West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) reminds me that the previous Government opened a hospital on the Isle of Wight. Unfortunately, it needed repairs worth £15 million because it was built so appallingly by the right hon. Lady's cronies in the region.

Mr. Barron: We are time limited, so I shall move on.

I fundamentally disagree with the motion's suggestion of political interference in the day-to-day management of the NHS. It is not true. Ministers are probably examining the NHS in greater detail than they have done in the past. There are good reasons for that.

I have sat on the General Medical Council since the middle of last year. This morning, the British Medical Association conference passed a resolution that was hitting the headlines as I came to the House. It relates to the Government's actions. The BMA has passed a motion of no confidence in the GMC. Given that many members of the GMC are also members of the medical profession, and that it is a statutory, self-regulating body, members of the BMA have virtually passed a motion of no confidence in themselves, especially when we consider the way in which people are elected to the GMC.

I agree with some of the comments about the need for structural changes in the GMC. An internal paper is circulating about its governance, and we are considering the matter. I understand that the BMA wants delays in disciplinary procedures to be tackled. Next week, the House will consider a regulation, which the Government are introducing, which will assist with that. More lay members will be elected on to the GMC. That will mean that we can speed up the disciplinary process and reduce waiting times. The BMA is also worried about more regular testing and revalidation.

Today's headlines suggest a conflict: the BMA versus the GMC. That does a disservice to the issues. The real issue is doctors and patients' confidence in them. Revalidation is led by the GMC, but it complements the work of the Committee on Health Improvement, and other plans that the Government have put in train since May 1997. I compliment the Government on their proposals

for clinical governance and improvement. Improvements have to be made to help all our constituents to get better treatment from the NHS.

Revalidation was hotly debated in the GMC. A minority of people opposed it, but they were heavily defeated. I understand that a tiny minority opposed it at the BMA, but they, too, were defeated. My hon. Friend the Minister can take heart from that. We recognise the need for change. We also acknowledge that the Government's clinical governance and clinical appraisal proposals, and the GMC's changes, will ensure that patients have more confidence in doctors. In the majority of cases, such confidence is high; the proposals and changes will ensure that it is maintained.

Medical regulation must modernise to fulfil the public's changing requirements. The GMC, the Government, the BMA, the royal colleges and health service managers have a role to play in that. The public will not accept unnecessary delays by any of the parties. Modernisation is moving at a quick pace.

In view of media reports in the past few weeks, especially about one specific case, it is important to progress quickly. In years gone by—I do not place any party political blame on anyone—people in clinical practice have not been appraised. Sometimes they have run single-handed practices, and there has been no peer pressure to ensure that they keep up to date and provide a good service, as the majority of doctors do. Sadly, any shortcomings that come before the GMC are blazoned in the press, and people could be forgiven for believing that no control existed. The Government and the GMC are trying to put better systems in place for effective annual revalidation or reappraisal.

I hope that I have two minutes to mention not only the changes that have taken place in the past two years, but those that are imminent in primary care. My constituency has a primary care group; it is one of three in the borough of Rotherham. We are in a position to apply to become a primary care trust. A debate about that has taken place. It seems to most people that having one primary care trust is sensible. I do not know whether there are any guidelines about that.

I wonder whether there are guidelines about another issue that is up for heated debate in Rotherham: mental health services. Do the Government or the regional office of the NHS have any guidance about whether those services should remain in a primary care trust or whether they could be floated off into a bigger trust? There is a worry in our area that if we become a primary care trust, and mental health services are not part of it, they will go to a neighbouring trust somewhere in South Yorkshire and we shall lose our local influence on mental health services.

Earlier, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe) described mental health services as Cinderella services. That might have been true in the past, but such services are vital in our health service and our local communities. Will my hon. Friend the Minister tell us whether there is any guidance about including mental health services in primary care trusts?

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I did not want to cut into the time of the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) because I wanted to be courteous. However, page 386 of Erskine May states:

> Expressions which are unparliamentary and call for prompt interference include:
>
> The imputation of false or unavowed motives.
>
> The misrepresentation of the language of another and the accusation of misrepresentation.

The hon. Gentleman said that no hospitals were opened under the Conservative Government. Had we been given the opportunity, we would have given many examples of hospitals that had been opened.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Perhaps the hon. Lady did not hear me, but when there was much excitement earlier in the debate about the hon. Gentleman's comments, I said that there would be an opportunity for Opposition Members to rebut his case. All that needs to happen to put the record straight is for an hon. Member to say, "Hospitals were built at that time". That is why we have debates.

5 pm

Sir Raymond Whitney (Wycombe): In response to the misapprehensions about hospital building that have been distributed by Labour Members, let me advise the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) that the hospital building programme has been cut back only once in the 50-year history of the national health service and that was in 1976 under the Labour Government on the orders of the International Monetary Fund, when the accounts of this country were effectively under foreign control.

I begin by offering the House two predictions. First, just as we have heard nothing new yet from the Government on the future development of the health service, I predict that by the end of this debate, including the wind-up by the Minister of State, we shall have heard nothing new. For 50 years, Labour Members have had nothing new to say about the health service, so they are certainly not about to start now. My second prediction may seem a little presumptuous as it concerns my remarks. Either they will be totally ignored because the facts that I am about to offer will be too uncomfortable, or they will be deliberately and wilfully misconstrued.

For half a century there has been an intellectual blight on how we treat health care. We have heard it again today. It all starts from the assumption that, allegedly, the Conservative party was against the national health service. Hon. Members ought to know that that is absolute nonsense. During the Second Reading debate on the National Health Service Bill in the House of Lords, the then Labour spokesman said that the Bill was not the product of any single party or any single Government. He said that it was in fact the outcome of a concerted effort, extending over a long period of years and involving doctors, laymen and Government to improve the efficiency of our medical services. There is no doubt that it was a joint effort.

The health service was based on the 1944 White Paper which was produced by Henry Willink, a Conservative, who was Health Minister in the coalition Government at the time. Although Conservative Members, perhaps misguidedly, voted against Aneurin Bevan's Bill—just weeks earlier Herbert Morrison had spoken against its content—the Conservative health spokesman said in the

[Sir Raymond Whitney]

Second Reading debate that he was anxious to clarify the position of the Conservative party with regard to the principle of the national, comprehensive, 100 per cent. health service. He said that the Conservatives accepted that principle, as they had in 1944. Labour Members should accept those realities instead of continuing to perpetrate misinformation.

The intellectual blight that I mentioned occurred because we became used to persuading ourselves that the national health service was the envy of the world. I wish that it were. Sadly, that has seldom been the case. Had our national health service been the envy of the world, one would have expected country after country to have adopted the same system. As we know, that has not happened.

Sadly, evidence has steadily mounted that the structure that was put together in 1946 has not met modern conditions. Indeed, as long ago as 1967, the British Medical Association recognised that it was falling short and set up a committee under Dr. Ivor Jones. It reported in 1970 that

> performance . . . is shown to compare unfavourably with that of many other countries in several respects . . . there is inadequate finance both in regard to capital and running costs . . . the imperfections of our health service are clearly visible . . . staffing is deficient at all levels and many sections are underpaid . . . it appears probable that Britain must think in terms of additional expenditure on medical care of an order which no government has ever contemplated . . .

That was written 30 years ago and it is true today.

When I became a junior Health Minister in 1984, I did not accept that point of view. I took the point of view of every other Health Minister of both parties—that we had two jobs. One was to get as much money out of the Treasury as we could and the other was to spend it as sensibly as possible. At the time, I did not consider that there was any possibility of changing the basic 1946 structure. After one year of wrestling with the problem, I concluded that it had to change. That conclusion is increasingly being reached by people who know about the health service. As hon. Members may recall, it was voiced by Lord Winston for 24 hours before he was silenced by the Government machine.

There is now overwhelming evidence that our health service is not up to international standards. The latest league table puts us in 18th position. Let me offer hon. Members a few more statistics. I hope that they do not find them too unpalatable. On the basic challenge of mortality, in respect of life expectancy at the age of 60, the United Kingdom came 19th out of the 23 countries examined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. We are on a level with Turkey.

On health outcomes, in respect of heart disease and cancer survival rates we are at or near the bottom of the European league table. In the United Kingdom a person with stomach cancer has an 8 per cent. chance of surviving five years. In France, his chances are three times greater. In the United States, his chances are four times greater.

Mr. Hesford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Raymond Whitney: No. There is a time limit on speeches and I need to make progress. If there is time, I shall give way later in my speech.

In December 1998, the Economist Intelligence Unit survey placed us 14th out of 25 nations. It assessed that we were losing 200 million working days a year due to sickness, much of which was due to the deficiencies of the national health service. It estimated that that was costing the nation some £12 billion in lost production.

Those are the facts. In debate after debate in the House hon. Members representing all three major parties resolutely refuse to face up to them. In the United Kingdom we have 4.5 nurses per 1,000 people. The figure for Germany is twice that. We have 0.4 dentists per 1,000 people—half what they have in Germany. Of all the OECD countries only Albania and Turkey have fewer doctors per head of population than we have.

We all know that health service morale has never been lower. The medical profession especially feels under attack, and it is alarming to see the sensitivity among doctors. Some of my hon. Friends have already mentioned the deep damage that the juggling of the waiting lists has done to clinical priorities.

Those are the problems and we have to open our minds to them, instead of dwelling on misinformation about what happened in 1946. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith) said, under the previous Conservative Government, the budget went from £9 billion when we took over to £40 billion by the time we left office, so we have all tried. For example, we increased the number of people treated in hospital by 80 per cent. and the budget went up by 75 per cent. in real terms. The present Government are also trying, but the question is whether we can ever get the results we want using public finance.

In terms of total expenditure on health, the most recent figures available show that we spend 6.9 per cent. of our GDP on health, and of all the OECD countries, only Ireland spends less. The claim is that we will catch up with the Germans' spending. To do so, the Chancellor of the Exchequer would have to find a further £45 billion. That is an inconceivable figure. However, even if we did achieve that over five years, by that time the Germans would have moved on. They are not satisfied with their level of health care, even though they spend some $2,000 per person and we spend $1,200 per person.

Cash is not everything, and we can achieve more through our NHS than the Americans do with their vast expenditure. Even my hon. Friends on the Front Bench are, understandably—because of the rubbish we hear from Labour—scared of dealing with the facts that I am setting before the House. Many people do not realise what they are being deprived of, compared with what other societies—comparable to us in wealth and economic structure—provide for their people. For example, our waiting times are unheard of in continental countries. They would laugh at such waiting times.

We must ask, therefore, whether there is another way to run the NHS. I mentioned the BMA committee that reported in 1970, and it concluded that the answer was an insurance-based system. That does not mean pushing some of the work on to the private sector. Some of the arguments that we hear from the Government against giving greater emphasis to private insurance are valid. In my opinion, we need a totally new structure. It would not be revolutionary, because I could name 20 countries that have similar structures, and they provide much better health outcomes than we do.

An average of £915 is spent for every man, woman and child in the country. Under the insurance-based system that the Jones committee advocated in April 1970, we could offer everybody an insurance voucher of £700. I support that system and, indeed, I wrote a little book on it in 1988. The system would give us all the chance to contribute for ourselves, and that is the way forward. No Chancellor will ever be able to find that astronomical sum of £45 billion, and therefore we must have a new system.

That new system is obvious, when we consider society now and how much better it is than the one for which the NHS was constructed in 1946, when the decisions were taken. Then, we were impoverished, worn out and on our knees. Now, the average family is four times better off in real terms. It spends some £2,000 to £3,000 a year on its holidays and Christmas presents. Most people would want to supplement their health cover. If they did, they would feel involved in the health system, and that they had some ownership of it.

I realise that that is a difficult pill to swallow. Most of us have said for 50 years that the national health service would be wonderful if only we could spend another few billion. That is what the House and the Labour Government are saying again now, but it will not work.

There is money in the Exchequer. Of the £915 per head of population that is spent on the NHS every year, we could spend £700 on insurance vouchers. That would leave £215 for those who really need protecting—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman's speech is time limited.

5.15 pm

Ann Keen (Brentford and Isleworth): I shall begin by using my nursing skills, as a clinical diagnosis of the occupants of the Opposition Benches reveals that some Conservative Members are suffering from an outbreak of what I recognise as amnesia.

Like the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), I too worked in the national health service. I was a nurse for 20 years, and I was working the afternoon shift in a medical ward on the day that Mrs. Thatcher was elected. Her Government promised that they would not privatise the health service in the same way as they privatised the electricity, gas and other services—they knew that the British people would not let them get away with it. Instead, they set up a clever framework that allowed them to dismantle the system gradually by chipping away at it bit by bit.

The hon. Member for Woodspring is not in his place, but he is very worried about the cleanliness of our hospitals. I am too, as was the ward domestic with whom I worked for some years. I was a ward sister, and she worked permanently on my ward. She worked there every day and looked after the ward as if it were her own home. The evening cleaning shift were not just cleaners: they were domestic staff and part of the ward team. They cleaned the wards, looked out for patients' needs and ran errands for them—until the contracting-out process began.

The guidelines set by the previous Conservative Government required that contracts were awarded to the lowest tender. That meant that many low-paid health service workers had to accept short-term contracts at even lower rates of pay. Those rates did not equal today's minimum wage—which the Conservative party voted against, just as it voted against the inception of the health service. The Conservative Government were prepared to have a hospital cleaning force who were low in skills and poorly paid. That is not acceptable: hospitals must be clean if infection is to be kept down.

Contrary to popular belief, I did not work with Florence Nightingale, but she said that hospitals should do the sick no harm. The truth, however, is that they can do the sick an awful lot of harm. I urge my hon. Friends on the Front Bench to take note of the problem and to put measures to correct it into immediate effect. Permanent domestic staff must be restored to wards and hospital clinics and given responsibility for cleanliness there on a daily basis. That would contrast with what happens with people working on a contractual basis, who move on once they have done their stint with the cleaning fluid in any particular area.

I was working in the health service when the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) introduced his new version of the NHS. He travelled to the privatised Limehouse studios by boat along the Thames to make a video for NHS workers. The video's presenter was Nick Ross, who also presents a programme called "Crimewatch UK". I am sure that it is merely a coincidence, but I am convinced that the right hon. and learned Gentleman's innovations amounted to the biggest crime ever inflicted on the British people.

The internal market that was established set hospital against hospital. I worked in the London area, where research centres and famous hospitals competed with each other instead of doing what they do best—advancing knowledge by sharing results, which is the central ethos of research.

At my interview for the West Middlesex hospital in 1985, I was shown the plans for the new hospital in which I would be working in 1987. I am pleased to say that, under a Labour Government, we will at last have that new hospital. The project is on schedule, the contractors are in place, and work will commence at the end of this year or the beginning of next.

The sale of the South Middlesex hospital took place in 1985 and £12 million was raised to go towards the new building at the West Middlesex hospital. Alas, the then Government had got their figures wrong for the Chelsea and Westminster and seemed to be £12 million out—so the money was moved to that project. How interesting; markets have always produced winners and losers.

This time, I want the national plan to make sure that we are all winners. Much has been said about choice, but one does not choose to have appendicitis, to have cancer, to have an accident, to become frail or to have a chronic condition. People want a high standard of treatment in the hospital that is closest to them—unless it has a specialist element for which one may have to travel. We want the hospital to be of a high standard in terms of staff and resources.

Mr. Lilley: Does the hon. Lady accept that some people might want to go to a hospital that is some distance away, but is near their relatives; that some might want to go to a hospital that has single-sex rather than mixed-sex wards; that some might want to go to a hospital with a better success record than the local one; and that some

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might want to go to a hospital with a shorter waiting time than the local one? Should they be prevented, for ideological reasons, from exercising that choice?

Ann Keen: The right hon. Gentleman makes the point that, sometimes, we must look at particular aspects of individual patients. We always have done that and we will continue to do so. If specialist treatment is needed, there are specialist facilities.

Choice was not available under the internal market. The only time people had any choice was if they collapsed outside the hospital of their choice. However, one certainly did not enter the contractual system out of choice; that only ever worked for a small group of people. That fact is stated by professionals of no political persuasion.

For the future, we want everyone to have a national standard. Standards should be the same and there should be clinical governance throughout all professions. The hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) is rightly interested in his constituency waiting list, but he should discuss with managers why that list exists. In my local hospital we have looked at modernising the systems.

A patient with a suspected hernia goes to the GP, and GPs are very capable of diagnosing a hernia. There is no need, in most instances, to refer that patient to a consultant to have the diagnosis confirmed, and then for the patient to wait again for the hernia to be repaired. The GP should be able to use information technology, and set up an appointment for the day of surgery. That is happening in parts of Isleworth and west London, so the hon. Gentleman needs to ask why it is not happening in his area. That is where the money is going and what modernisation means.

Mr. Burns: I have meetings on a quarterly basis, and have done so now for two and a half years. As the situation is so bad, I have also had meetings with Ministers who, unfortunately, cannot tell me why my trust is worse than so many others. Part of the reason is lack of funding, despite the increases announced by the Chancellor.

Ann Keen: I cannot accept that funding is the reason. We must always look at the way in which we work.

I want to mention two aspects of care with regard to the national plan. The winter pressure, as it is described, can be felt at all times. So why are many older people admitted into hospital from accident and emergency departments when a skilled primary care team, along with people from social services, could care intensively for them at home? A 24-hour, community-led service is essential for many of our older people. They can have treatment at home as long as such a service is available. In that way, patients are not disorientated because they are not moved from their homes. They do not have to stay in hospital beds for weeks and then encounter difficulties in rehabilitating themselves when they are back home.

My final point about the plan is cancer care. We need to look at the prescribing of chemotherapy drugs. A professor at Hammersmith hospital has told me that the country's prescribing bill is higher for laxatives than it is for chemotherapy. We need to look into the causes of some of that prescribing, given that our position in the European league tables is very low for prescribing chemotherapy drugs, but our mortality rates are high. I want there to be a national cancer centre. There should be consensus on many of the cancer drugs, such as Taxol, about which the National Institute for Clinical Excellence has recently made an announcement.

I thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak in the debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I feel very positive about the health service. It will continue to be very demanding, and the skills of all the staff need to be taken into account. We should see a little more humility from Conservative Members because, without question, their short-term, market-led health service failed the people of this country. It will take all of us to ensure that we have a health service that we can be proud of in the future.

5.27 pm

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): One abiding memory of the previous election was of meeting some nurses at a charity fair in the town hall in my constituency. It was a couple of days before the election, and I was talking to half a dozen nurses, many of whom I had known for many years and many of whom I knew to be Conservative supporters. Their eyes were shining—they were so thrilled that, at last, the national health service was going to be saved.

The Labour party was incredibly successful in persuading people that it could save the national health service. It said in its manifesto:

> if the Conservatives are elected again there may well not be an NHS in five years' time—either national nor comprehensive.

It went on:

> Our fundamental purpose is simple but hugely important: to restore the NHS as a public service working co-operatively for patients, not a commercial business driven by competition.

We cannot let this debate pass without saying that the previous Government were extremely successful in reorganising the national health service. Nobody who studies the subject can doubt that, for the amount of resources that are put into the national health service, it is successful and efficient. We were successful in putting together a system of providers and purchasers; we introduced market forces, which were successful in producing a better national health service.

This Government, meanwhile, have imposed extra burdens on the health service. The pensions cost in the health service, for instance, is about £495 million more than it was when the Government came to power. The working time directive and the provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 will add extra burdens to the national health service too.

We all remember when, in July 1998, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced the amount provided for health in the comprehensive spending review for 1998–99. He announced an extra £18 billion, by double and triple counting the amounts in question. He added the £3 billion increase to the £2 billion increase to the £2 billion increase, and instead of arriving at a figure of £8.7 billion, he arrived at a figure of £18 billion. There has been a lot of double counting in the NHS finances.

What has actually happened? Notably, Lord Winston said that the national health service was

> gradually deteriorating because we blame everything on the previous government.

Another doctor working in the national health service—Margaret Cook, the former wife of the Foreign Secretary—said:

> The NHS is still grossly underfunded and Labour have done not a thing.

The King's Fund, talking of the changes in clinical priorities, said that the

> national waiting list diverts attention away from the issues that matter most to patients. By focusing simply on the number of people waiting for treatment after seeing a hospital consultant, the list ignores the time people are waiting and the severity of their need.

That is why, when the Government came to power, in June 1997, the percentage of people waiting more than a year for an operation was 3.9 and, after three years, it is now 4.9, which is a 1 per cent. increase. Those are the people who have to wait more than 12 months for their operation. They are in the same category as a constituent who came to see me about a year ago. She had been told in January 1999 that the waiting time for her triple heart bypass would be nine months. The operation took place 18 months later.

In my constituency, the waiting time for cardiac surgery has gone from nine to 18 months within a year. I see that the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), has rejoined us in the Chamber. In a written answer recently, he told me that the waiting time for cardiac surgery in my area was 15 months, but that the Government's ambition was to get it down to 12. That answer was not correct, as the waiting time is 18 months. Therefore this Government in action have not been successful nationally.

What about the local situation in the area that I represent, the Portsmouth-Gosport area? *The News*, the local newspaper, reported in January 1999:

> Relatives and friends of patients in Portsmouth hospital are being asked to help wash and feed their loved ones because of a drastic shortage of nurses.
>
> Notices are being handed out at Queen Alexandra Hospital, Cosham, and St. Mary's Hospital, Milton, asking for help to wash, shave and feed patients.
>
> It is the first time Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust, which runs QA and St. Mary's, has approached relatives, friends and carers for help in this way.

The newspaper also reported Doug Dann, the chairman of the patients' watchdog, the Portsmouth and South East Hampshire Community Health Council, as saying:

> This is the worst winter I remember in terms of pressure.

In the article, one nurse, who asked not to be named, said:

> Everybody's thoroughly fed up. Staff are leaving in droves because they have had enough.
>
> Patients and their relatives keep moaning at us all the time when we're struggling to make the best of a bad job.

A year later, in January 2000, *The News* reported:

> Earlier this week, there were only three beds free at QA and St. Mary's hospitals. Lin Kennett, operational director for medicine at the Portsmouth hospitals' trust, which runs both hospitals, said: "This is the worst I have known in the 25 years since I have been here."

The newspaper reports Keith Murray, the Portsmouth branch convenor of the Royal College of Nursing union, as saying:

> Staff are absolutely exhausted. I don't know how they can carry on at the pace they are. Some nurses are going off-duty in tears because they can't give the care they want to give.

In April, which is not a time of bad weather, *The News* reported a crisis in Portsmouth hospitals, saying:

> The news comes as new Patient's Charter figures for Portsmouth hospitals show the worst recorded performance in two-and-a-half years—

an interesting period, as it happened to be the time the Labour Government had been in power. The article continued:

> There were 251 operations cancelled at Portsmouth hospitals from last December to March. Earlier this year The News reported Portsmouth hospitals were suffering their worst beds shortage for 25 years . . . spokeswoman . . . Mrs Forsyth, said both hospitals were still on red alert—an emergency status to show a lack of beds. They have been on red alert since mid-December which is a record.

In January 2000 *The News* also reported that 50 patients had been transferred from the Portsmouth hospitals to the Royal Hospital Haslar because of a shortage of beds.

What are the Government doing about that? Colleagues will perhaps not believe this, but the Government propose to close my local hospital. The Royal Hospital Haslar serves as the district general for my area of Gosport. It is a defence medical hospital. In 1994, the Conservative Government chose Haslar as the only tri-service hospital and concentrated all the resources of Army, Navy and Air Force medicine there, together with small Ministry of Defence hospital units at three other locations in the south of England. Yet the Labour Government, to the disbelief of many people involved, in December 1998 announced the closure of Haslar and the intention to create a new centre of excellence elsewhere, at that time undefined.

Many people within defence medical services hoped that the new centre of medical excellence would be either at St. Thomas's and Guy's in London or possibly at the John Radcliffe hospital in Oxford. There was even some suggestion that it should be in Newcastle. It is going to be in Birmingham, which is probably the largest city with no particularly strong services connection. It has no strong connection with the Navy, the Army or the Air Force. The people in my area are incredulous that the Government are pressing ahead with this plan.

When the announcement was first made in December 1998, I announced a rally and march, thinking we might have a few hundred or, possibly, a few thousand people. I was staggered to find that we had 22,000 people marching to Haslar hospital, everyone dedicated and committed to maintaining its existence. That is just the civilian side of Haslar hospital—the demand by local civilians.

Within the armed forces there is a similar determination that the hospital must not close. Already defence medical services are losing many doctors and nurses who, in 1994–95, were told that they should move to the Gosport area to the only tri-service hospital and are now told that in the medium to long term they will have to move to Birmingham. They do not want to go; they are voting with their feet and leaving.

Sandra Gidley (Romsey): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that owing to a closure of wards at Southampton general hospital people are being transferred to Haslar? Does he agree that is further evidence that Haslar should remain open?

Mr. Viggers: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that important and effective argument. There are so many

[Mr. Viggers]

other arguments that one could make—for example, the links developed over the years between Haslar and Southampton and Portsmouth universities—that local people feel it is overwhelmingly important that the hospital should remain.

The alternative is to travel to Queen Alexandra hospital at Cosham, which is a journey of some 10 to 12 miles depending on which part of the constituency one lives in, along heavily congested roads. The A32 is the main road from Gosport to Fareham and is notoriously slow. There is deep concern that ambulances will not be able to get to Queen Alexandra hospital and that lives will be lost.

Admittedly, a minor accident treatment centre has been opened at Haslar, so to a certain extent the Haslar taskforce which I formed and chair has been successful in persuading the Government in all their manifestations to maintain an accident centre at Haslar. In addition, the Portsmouth and South-East Hampshire health authority has proposed that Haslar will remain open under NHS control, and that the main part of Haslar, which is called the crosslink block, will be transferred from the Ministry of Defence to the NHS and the local health authority will be able to run out-patient facilities there. That is good news. The number of out-patients will increase from the 55,000 currently treated to 60,000 in future.

That is not good enough. We in the Haslar taskforce are drawing up a paper which I have called, "Haslar hospital 2020—our vision for the future". We want to spell out what facilities can best be maintained at Haslar. Clearly, the world-leading MRI scanner and the world-leading hyperbaric unit should continue at Haslar. We also need beds. With the problems in Portsmouth hospitals that I have outlined, there is a dramatic shortage of beds which is not likely to improve.

There is a private finance initiative to expand Queen Alexandra hospital at Cosham and almost double it in size. During the time of its expansion, it will be a building site and top quality medical facilities cannot be run from there. Our proposal, therefore, will be that Haslar be given a surge capacity while Queen Alexandra hospital is being extended; and that having been increased in size to take the surge necessary to cope with the building work on a congested site, Haslar will stay "surged".

Nothing less than a continuation of the Haslar facilities will be satisfactory locally. My constituents feel strongly about that—as do a large number of people in the defence medical services and the armed forces. They believe that the Government have made a mistake and that it should be only a matter of time before the Government go back on their decision and keep Haslar open.

5.40 pm

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I am pleased that the Opposition have chosen the subject of priorities in the national health service.

I have been in the Chamber for almost all of the debate and have listened with care and interest to the contributions. However, I am disappointed. The debate was supposed to be on priorities in the NHS, so I hoped that the Opposition would lay out their stall for their policies to further and improve the service, but I have heard only a litany of complaints and moans and groans about the state of the NHS—how run down it has become; how low morale is and how patients are suffering. We have heard that time and again. We have not heard what the Opposition propose to do about it.

It took an intervention from me on my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to find out the true Tory intentions for the NHS. I was grateful to my right hon. Friend because, by quoting the statements of Opposition spokespersons, he was able to tell me what they had in mind. Perhaps the Opposition are embarrassed; perhaps they do not feel happy about what they are trying to do.

Mrs. Laing: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Stoate: I shall not give way just yet—I will do so if there is time.

Perhaps the Opposition do not want to tell the public what they have in mind. I am a charitable person, so I do not like to run people down unnecessarily. I am even prepared to admit that the Opposition have honourable intentions in that they really want improvements in patient care. I think they do. However, there is a real difference in the way that we seem to want to achieve that.

I believe that the health service needs improvement and that the Opposition want better patient care, but there is a fundamental difference—clear blue water—between the parties. Today's debate offers us an opportunity to examine that distinction. Both parties agree that the NHS is underfunded and that there are not enough doctors, nurses, hospital beds or facilities. Patients wait too long—waiting times and waiting lists are too great. Both sides of the House agree. I have no problem about that.

The problem arises over what the two parties intend to do about the matter. Labour have made it clear that we are wholly committed to a publicly funded NHS, improving every year as resources become available. We aim to meet the European average on health as soon as practically possible given the available resources. I am pleased that the Government are making real improvements in health care every year.

The Opposition, on the other hand, want to do something different. I do not accuse them of wanting to privatise the health service—I do not believe that is what they want to do. That is not on their agenda. However, they do want to increase resources by increasing the private element in the health service. They want to increase health resources, using private sector money, by encouraging people to take out private insurance. Even the Opposition probably agree that that is what they are trying to do.

Labour, however, want the health service to be almost completely publicly funded.

Mr. Hammond: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. Does he acknowledge that, in trying to reach average European health spending as a percentage of gross domestic product, there is a problem? In the European countries to which he refers, spending on privately financed health care is much higher than in the UK; on average, it is nearly double.

Dr. Stoate: I accept that we have a different philosophy from our European partners, but our philosophy is correct, as I shall explain. Let us consider the consequences of the Opposition's proposals to increase the number of people

who take out private insurance to fund their so-called non-life-threatening, so-called non-urgent operations, such as hip or knee replacements, or treatment for cataracts or hernias.

The hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) suggested tax relief on private health insurance; he said that he had voted for that under the Thatcher Government. What would happen if that were implemented? I quote the Baroness Thatcher. In her book, "The Downing Street Years", she stated:

> Tax relief for private health insurance would in many cases help those who could already afford private cover and so fail to deliver a net increase in private sector provision.

Tax relief will not increase the number of people who take out private health insurance.

Mrs. Laing: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Stoate: I cannot give way at the moment; I have already given way once and there is not much time.

What other consequences would flow from the Opposition policy? Many people—indeed the majority—who need hip and knee replacements do not pay tax because they are pensioners. The Government have taken the majority of pensioners out of the tax system. What advantage is there to giving tax relief to people who do not pay tax? None, so that will not help pensioners very much.

If tax is removed from private health insurance, premiums go up. Lord Lawson says:

> If we simply boost demand, for example by tax concessions to the private sector, without improving supply, the result would not be so much growth in private health care, but higher prices.

Those are not my words, but Lord Lawson's. Therefore, giving tax relief on private health insurance would not increase the number of people taking out insurance, but it would push up prices. I do not see the value of providing a huge public subsidy to the private sector if it does not even increase the number of people using private health insurance. There is no point in that.

Let us suppose that the policy worked and we managed to increase the number of people using the private sector. That would result in a scarcity of private facilities and resources. Where would the doctors, nurses and other staff in the private sector come from if not from the health service? The annual representatives meeting of the British Medical Association pointed out how overworked and overstretched doctors are. I know, having been closely involved in medicine, that doctors and nurses are overworked and overstretched. However, if those same doctors and nurses also work in the private sector, they will be even more overstretched and overtired. I do not understand how that will improve patient care. The only alternative is for doctors, nurses and others to leave the health service and work only in the private sector. Again, that would be to the detriment of the NHS and patient care.

So far, I have heard nothing in the Opposition's proposals that could conceivably improve patient care, improve the uptake of private insurance or improve the supply of medical care. The proposals would not work at all.

Pooled risk presents another problem. Private insurance companies do not want to take on high-risk patients. The principle behind the NHS is that it pools risk. Those with low risk effectively subsidise those with high risk and we have accepted that for 50 years. If insurance companies were to pool risk, people would rightly become upset by that. We would all be upset if we pooled risk on car insurance. If I paid the same premium as an 18-year-old driving a sports car, I would be fairly upset. I consider myself to be a lower-risk driver, so I do not want to cover the risk of someone who drives extremely badly and who is a very high risk. I do not believe that people would be prepared to pay enormously enhanced premiums for private health care to subsidise those at risk.

I can provide chapter and verse on what happens to medical care in the private sector. A friend of mine who is a consultant diabetologist had a patient who took out private health insurance in good faith. The patient developed diabetes and—fair enough—the private sector paid for his treatment. He then developed the common complication of eye problems; he needed laser surgery on his eyes. The private sector paid for his laser treatment, but he needed more laser treatment and—fair enough—the private sector paid for that. He returned a third time and the company paid again. However, when he returned the fourth time for treatment, the insurance company wrote to him to say, "We are sorry. Four episodes of treatment mean that you have a chronic condition by definition. Chronic conditions are not covered under your policy. We ain't paying no more." That is precisely what happened.

That patient took out private health insurance in good faith, but found that the treatment was ruled out of order because he had the bad luck and the temerity to develop a chronic condition. I do not see how such insurance benefits anyone.

Mrs. Laing: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Stoate: I am sorry, but I do not have time to give way. I apologise to the hon. Lady.

There is a way forward. There are enormous opportunities in the health service for the prioritisation and improvement of patient care. I have been working hard with my local health authority, local trust and local primary care group on how we can improve patient care. I want to give one or two examples of what can be achieved in the NHS by prioritising care to improve patient outcomes.

Many people do not need to be in hospital. They do not want to be in hospital; they would rather be at home. Among that group are people with chronic illnesses, and the Dartford, Gravesham and Swanley health care partnerships primary care group has provided an extra multiple sclerosis nurse as well as an extra epilepsy nurse. It is also currently considering providing an extra Parkinson's disease nurse.

Those nurses are able to care for people in their homes and it has been demonstrated that they reduce costs, improve patient compliance and reduce the risk of admissions. They give much better patient satisfaction. The nurses are excellent news for the sufferers of long-term illnesses in West Kent and reduce pressure on the acute sector. Nurses can make a real difference to the quality of care and they play an important role in keeping people out of hospitals where they do not wish to be.

I am also working with a group in my constituency that is trying to encourage telemedicine, which is medicine at a distance, and allows my local hospice to link up with a

[Dr. Stoate]

hospital 300 miles away and receive, three times a week, expert guidance from a consultant many hundreds of miles away who is able to manage the patients and give advice and help to nurses who run the wards day by day. The Lions hospice has managed to get that video-conferencing system running and has made excellent improvements in patient care.

That sort of initiative should be applauded, as it is the way forward. It demonstrates prioritisation in the NHS, which involves setting priorities, using money to the best advantage and making sure that the available money goes to the best possible patient benefit. The Kent cancer network, managed by the Mid Kent healthcare trust, is driving forward modernisation of the NHS to make cancer services fairer, faster and more convenient. It is at the forefront of creating an NHS better attuned to the needs of patients by reshaping services for people with suspected or diagnosed cancer. The Kent cancer network is the first such collaboration of health authorities and hospitals in the south-east, and will speed up cancer treatment and keep patients fully informed at all stages about what happens next.

The modernising cancer care projects streamline care of patients with suspected and diagnosed breast, lung, bowel, ovarian and prostate cancer, and provide patients with any suspected cancer who need to be seen urgently with an appointment with a specialist within two weeks, thus reducing waiting times for those with real illnesses. The Kent cancer care network enables patients to pre-book appointments, offering them a choice of dates and times, which takes away the uncertainty of not knowing when and by whom they will be seen. It also co-ordinates surgery with follow-up therapy so that patients know in advance what will happen after surgery. That will minimise delays, reduce patient anxiety and improve care.

Kent was chosen from 26 applicants to be one of nine networks running 43 projects covering 14 million people, which will modernise cancer projects from top to bottom as part of the Government's pledge to change the way in which the NHS organises care, and radically to change people's relationship with the NHS. About 250,000 cases of cancer are diagnosed in the UK every year, and there are 156,000 deaths from the illness. The Government have pledged to cut the death rate from cancer in people under 75 by at least a fifth by 2010. We should be carrying out that sort of initiative, which is about priorities in the NHS that really make a difference. Opposition Members go on about dissatisfied doctors and nurses and rundown services, but that does not equate with the health service that I am helping to shape and with which I work. I genuinely see improvements in patient care and reductions in waiting lists.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: The reason for that is self-evident. The hon. Gentleman represents a Labour area, and there is a distortion in the allocation of funding.

Dr. Stoate: I would love to believe that that was true and, of course, I look forward to the time when I am re-elected to represent the area that I serve. However, the truth is that West Kent has largely been a Tory-controlled area for many years. Kent county council is Tory controlled and all the constituencies in my area were controlled by the Tories until the election. Since then, however, there has been a real improvement in service under the Labour Government. That is a fact, and patients are benefiting accordingly.

I wish the same improvements to be seen across the country, and look forward to a time when the Government can continue to improve the NHS year on year, making a health service different from the one that we had previously. I am not accusing Opposition Members of privatisation, but of lack of vision, foresight and initiative. I was hoping that today they would give a coherent, rational strategy for their view of the health service. However, they said that they wanted more and that that should come from the private sector. I believe that that is a redundant policy that will not achieve the results that they desire. It will certainly not be very popular in my constituency or throughout the country.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. May I tell hon. Members that, in the short time that is left, if they take the full extent of the allocation to which they are entitled, there will barely be scope for two more speeches before the winding-up speeches? I therefore hope that we try to have short speeches in order to get as many Members in as possible.

5.54 pm

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): I have heard what you said, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Many Labour Members—in particular, the hon. Members for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ann Keen)—have spoken of the evils of a two-tier system, but I suggest that a two-tier system now operates in the health service. The problem to which I shall refer has not been mentioned this afternoon, but it has got worse since the election of the Labour Government and the introduction of primary care groups. In fact, we are really talking about a three-tier system, because there is no such NHS cover in some parts of the country. I refer to complementary and alternative medicine, which includes homeopathy, herbal medicines, osteopathy, chiropractic medicine and healing.

I shall declare an interest: for the past 14 years, I have been an officer of the all-party group on alternative and complementary medicine, during which time I have seen a sea change in attitudes to complementary therapy. Many therapies, such as osteopathy and chiropractic medicine, have come in from the cold and become mainstream. In fact, £1.6 billion is spent annually on complementary medicine; 75 per cent. of the public want complementary medicine on the NHS, and 20 per cent. of people use complementary and alternative medicine now. Excluding those who channel energy—the healers—there are nearly 50,000 complementary and alternative practitioners in Britain.

One of those practitioners works in the House of Commons gym, offering Members acupressure treatments, using the thumb. Hon. Members on both sides of the House may be interested to hear the endorsement of "a satisfied MP", who wrote last year:

> It's the only thing I've found that really unwinds me.

So there we are. That treatment is available in the House of Commons, but not in the nation as whole. I am glad to see the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) nodding; I do not think that he has ever nodded in favour of any of my speeches in the past.

Mr. Barron: What the hon. Gentleman says about his previous speeches is quite right. Did he see the BMA report on acupuncture? Perhaps we could hold a debate in the House on why that is not available on the NHS. I have paid for acupuncture privately for several years, and it is an excellent way of making people better.

Mr. Tredinnick: I have seen that report, and the hon. Member is absolutely right. The problem is that complementary medicine is not available on the NHS, despite the fact that 75 per cent. of people want it to be.

The situation has deteriorated since the Government came to power. The previous Conservative Government introduced GP fundholding, and many doctors worked in small units of two or three and understood complementary therapies. They could start to offer complementary therapies as part of their NHS budget. That initiative was approved by my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell). Primary care groups have a larger management structure and many of the doctors have no interest in complementary medicine.

Representatives of Glastonbury health centre in the west country recently held a presentation in the House to explain how they use different therapies, such as herbal medicine, homeopathy, massage therapy and osteopathy, in an integrated service. They explained how that reduces health service costs. I hope that officials in the Treasury health team are listening. The problem is that, under the primary care group regime, their funding is being reduced and they are seriously thinking of having to shut down. I know from the letters that I receive that that is a serious problem right across the country, and the Minister must address it.

There is a welcome development: the Government initiative, together with the Foundation for Integrated Medicine, the NHS Alliance and the National Association of Primary Care, to produce a complementary medicine information pack for primary care groups. That has gone quite a way towards developing knowledge in those groups. However, the Minister has not resolved a fundamental problem: there are no guidelines. We need guidelines, and the Department must set some. People expect that of this Government. I encourage colleagues to sign my early-day motion, which has attracted the support of 50 hon. Members. They support the publication of that booklet, but it is important to have guidelines.

I draw the Minister's attention to the fact that complementary and alternative medicine has been effective in prisons. Recently, I have visited Coldingley and Hollesley Bay, both of which use meditation and Reiki techniques and other types of healing to reduce the problems with disturbed prisoners and young offenders. The Prison Service is offering a useful measure of what is possible, and many of the therapies of which it has made use should be extended into the health service.

Finally, I should like to draw the Minister's attention to a problem that arose last week: the decision of the Charity Commissioners to remove the charity status of the National Federation of Spiritual Healers and to deny the UK Reiki Federation's request for that status. Both decisions are fundamentally wrong. The NFSH has always had charity status and many people involved in the healing professions give their time for free. It is also wrong that the Charity Commissioners have no clear guidelines about alternative medicines, what they are and how they should be categorised.

I understand that the Government are responsible only for the funding of the Charity Commissioners, but I urge the Minister to write a letter—perhaps marked "Private and Confidential"—setting out the Government's objectives and pointing out to the commissioners that the therapies that they are "derating" were listed in the Government's own advice to primary care groups, published only last week. We must secure a common approach throughout the country. We need joined-up government: the Prison Service, the Department of Health and the Charity Commissioners should all be working to the same guidelines.

Complementary and alternative medicine has grown exponentially and it is here to stay. Let us have greater support for it. I look to the smiling Minister of State to do something about it.

6.1 pm

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): I have listened to your entreaties, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I shall be as brief as possible.

The debate is welcome, because it gives us a chance to debate the fundamentals of the NHS. The speech of the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) makes it clear that the Conservatives now prefer the American model of bargain basement public provision, with everybody else paying for their treatment. In the long run, that would inevitably lead to a decline in the national health service and, therefore, a diminution in the opportunities for good quality health care for those who cannot afford to buy privately. It is essential that we continue to adhere to the principle of a national health service that is universally available and free at the point of use.

Not mentioned much during the debate are inequalities in illness and ill health. The outgoing 1974–79 Labour Government commissioned Sir Douglas Black to produce a report on inequalities in health care treatment and in health and life expectancy. It was suppressed by the incoming Conservative Government and later emerged as a Penguin book, which sold extremely well. It is to the credit of the current Government that they have taken an interest in and adopted many initiatives designed to tackle the problems of ill health in our poorer communities.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith), I represent an inner-city constituency. Our constituencies, compared with the rest of the country, have the dubious distinction of having higher infant mortality and shorter life expectancy, and a much greater incidence of mental illness and of notifiable diseases. In addition, to take up the remarks of the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe), we have the highest incidence of suicide in the country. There are many reasons for those tragedies, including a combination of poor housing, unemployment, stress, living in complicated inner-city communities and social exclusion. I have always been fascinated by the reports of the medical officer of health for my district, because they reveal a direct link between ill health and poverty.

[Mr. Jeremy Corbyn]

I was pleased when, in the second round of announcements of health action zones, the Government declared Camden and Islington to be a health action zone. That programme is under way, focusing on

> Early life . . . Social inclusion . . . Addiction.

Objectives include:

> Improving and integrating services, to increase their effectiveness efficiency and responsiveness;

and

> Developing the infrastructure to underpin the HAZ.

I welcome all those objectives and applaud and admire the work being done by those working within the HAZ, but I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to think further down the line. The HAZ does not currently have much money to spend; is there any proposal to increase the funding available to HAZs, or is there a proposal in the long term to integrate the undoubted enthusiasm of many local agencies in support of HAZs into the health service itself?

We obviously welcome any improvement in the health service, but it is important that that links in with the enthusiasm of ordinary people who are participating in trying to reduce smoking and improve fitness, travel-to-work areas, safety and school safety especially. There are many issues that need to be considered.

I hope that the health action zones will continue for some time. I hope also that in the examination of community health and future structures and configurations, the Minister will think extremely carefully about the size of the areas proposed, and especially the size of those proposed for mental health trusts.

I and my colleagues with constituencies in Camden and Islington represent an area with serious and acute problems, very different from the problems faced in suburban London, outer London or the rural hinterland surrounding London. If we have good working relationships developing between community groups, the local authority, the health authority, hospitals and many voluntary organisations, it is essential that we do not break them apart.

I hope that the Minister will thoroughly consider these issues before approving any reorganisation that could end up being detrimental to the interests of people in the poorest parts of inner London. It could lead in some instances to a flow of resources out of inner London. I am sure that my hon. Friend understands my argument because he must be well aware of the issues that have arisen.

The Government's amendment rightly refers to the need to continue the hospital building programme and expand it. That is something that we all welcome. Anyone who represents an area that has inadequate hospital provision will be well aware of the problems. The incoming Labour Government inherited a backlog of maintenance alone of more than £2.5 billion. A great deal has to be done in terms of capital programmes within the NHS.

The use of private finance initiatives in the funding of the future expansion of the health service has a number of effects, and not all of them are particularly good. I hope that the Minister will take that remark in the spirit in which it is intended. A trilogy of articles has been put forward by the health policy and health services research unit of the school of public policy at University college, London. It includes a contribution by Professor Allyson Pollock and others. It outlines the way in which hospitals funded through a PFI have been planned on the basis of financial and not clinical needs. In many areas, PFI hospitals will need to generate income from private patients. As a result, some hospitals have increased the proportion of private beds to pay the costs of PFI.

I ask the Minister to take seriously the concerns that many people have expressed about PFI and the long-term costs. I have an inadequate hospital in my constituency, as do many other Members. It needs rebuilding, expanding and new units, and all that goes with that. However, PFI can be regarded as a form of candyfloss. A shiny new building is provided quickly with PFI, but the long-term costs are extremely great.

The experience of PFI in many parts of the country has been that long-term costs for the local hospital and for the NHS itself have been considerable. For example, the fees charged on construction costs are much higher under PFI than they would be if the hospital were funded and built directly by public finance through the Department of Health, as I believe it should be. Also, when PFI hospitals are constructed, they tend to be somewhat smaller than existing hospitals. Research has borne out the fact that there tends to be a reduction in the number of beds in total because of the use of PFI.

The *British Medical Journal* states that the programme of hospital expansion

> is associated with reductions in acute bed provision of about 30% and cuts in operating and staff numbers of up to 25%. In the 11 first-wave schemes financed through the initiative over 2,500 beds will be lost over the next five years.

I welcome more money for the NHS and recognition of the needs of the poorest people in inner-urban areas. I look forward to a continuing increase in levels of expenditure and welcome any examination of the causes of poverty. I represent an area in which about half the population live in council or housing association property. Many households are grossly overcrowded and children miss school as they pick up illnesses from their brothers and sisters because they have to share a bedroom. We need to improve the health, housing and education of inner-city communities, and to cut air pollution.

I am glad that we have a sense of joined-up thinking, but it worries me that the use of the PFI in the Government's expansion programme will cost more in the long run. It is cheaper for central Government to borrow money for hospital building than to use the PFI—which gives rise to a democratic deficit as some control is lost over the building, running and management of hospitals. Many of us are deeply concerned and will continue pursuing that argument.

6.11 pm

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): I apologise profusely to the House for not being present for the opening speeches. I was attending a key governors meeting for the London Institute. The noble Lord Puttnam and I were equally late back for our parliamentary engagements. I shall read the Minister's comments with care.

As a former Secretary of State for Health, I find it extraordinarily exasperating to hear so many of the programmes that were lovingly delivered traduced in a

parliamentary debate—but that is inevitable. I know that in the constituency of the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn), giving GPs deprivation payments and extra payments for child immunisation and cancer screening, among many other measures, were part of a real effort to improve primary care in inner cities. It is difficult to tolerate the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron)—with whom I agree on many points concerning the General Medical Council—when he says that no new hospitals were built under the last Administration, although the Prime Minister was at Chelsea and Westminster hospital for the birth of his son, and that hospital was built during the time of the last Conservative Government.

The Economist Intelligence Unit's magnificent documents about health care, the King's Fund history of the NHS and Chris Ham's account of the past 10 years of change in the NHS show that the previous Government introduced many ways of making health care more efficient, effective and patient focused. The last Administration's patients charter, "The Health of the Nation" and mental health strategy—with almost the same targets as now—were first vilified but were then rebranded and incorporated into the present's Government's strategy.

The 1948 NHS model had a great many advantages and held its own on health outcomes; changes during the years of Conservative government brought a boost of efficiency gains—but that model is not good enough today. The UK is falling in all the international league tables. It is crazy for Labour, with its huge majority, to cling to reactionary policies that disappoint many people in the NHS. The worse the situation gets, the louder the Government's rhetoric.

My right hon. and hon. Friends are seeking to help the Government to be more constructive, responsible and realistic. In every debate on the NHS, Labour Members claim that the service has never before been so wonderful. My colleagues are telling the Government, who listen to no one, that the situation is not good enough.

I speak with great emotion about my constituency, because I have one in nine people now waiting more than a year for treatment. The number trebled after the election. In the Prime Minister's constituency, the figure is only one in 50. I understand why he might think that everything is all right, Jack, but it is not all right in my part of the world. One in nine people are waiting more than a year, even after all the Government's efforts to increase the waiting list to be on the waiting list, and the rise in the out-patient waiting list.

Week after week I deal with cases that are unacceptable. Many hon. Members despise the private sector, but I defy them not to ask people, as I have never previously done, whether they have private cover. I cannot tell them that I can do anything for them, because the situation is so bad. There is a crisis in the acute hospitals. What is the health authority doing?

I am delighted that the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), is winding up. I ask him to help me again, as he did before. Two years ago, in a debate, I told him that after months—indeed, years—of discussion and decision about Farnham hospital, a plan had been agreed for 42 beds for a day hospital and for stroke rehabilitation. That had been agreed by both trusts—it is a complex area on the fringe of two health authorities.

The plan was presented to local people as a good way through. I had worked hard to lower expectations to the minimum. Since then, according to Government rhetoric, there are too few beds, there should be intermediate beds, there is masses more money, and people have never been so lucky in their lives.

The health authority has now come up with proposals under which there would be no beds in Farnham and no beds in Haslemere, which is the town in Surrey with the highest elderly population. The health authority proposal comes at a time when there have never been more examples of inadequate care. In three cases at least—I say this particularly to the hon. Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate), with whom I often discuss such matters—if the people involved had been treated in the private sector, I would have advised the family to sue, because in all three cases, the people lost their lives.

Under the new proposals, £900,000 is to be taken out of the mental health budget in the Waverley area, and—surprise, surprise—£100,000 is to come out of the community nursing budget. The reason behind all that is that it is a costly area. There are 300 nurse vacancies because nurses do not get London weighting.

The changes introduced by the Government have meant more top-slicing. There are ministerial back-pockets for health action zones, accident and emergency departments and all sorts of other modernisation projects, but such projects do not come to areas like mine because the basic population is healthy. It may be healthy, but it is enormously needy and demand is high. It is wrong for a poor person in my area to have a worse service than a poor person in the constituency of the hon. Member for Islington, North.

Why should one in nine people in my area wait more than a year, when only one in 50 has to wait more than a year in the Prime Minister's constituency? In his area, for every man, woman and child, £115 more is spent on health care every year. I support programmes for additional health visitors and midwives, and prevention programmes, but the gap has become too great. Not only have the Government top-sliced more, but they have squeezed the formula to make it even harder for people in wealthy areas, and they have raided the social services budget and taken away the specific grant.

The cost of care is massive in an area such as Surrey. There are few volunteers because there is high employment. Public transport is poor because there is such high car ownership.

Mr. Denham: Does the right hon. Lady at least accept that this year her health authority has had an increase in funding of more than £30 million—a real increase of 5.7 per cent.—plus additional special funding? Will she tell me how long ago it was, under her Government, that her health authority received a real increase of 5.7 per cent?

Mrs. Bottomley: The Government have penalised Surrey when allocating resources. Durham has done much better. The position is deteriorating. It would help if the Government said that they were providing an increasingly unacceptable health service, and asked people—as my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond)—suggested, to use private health care if they could. If the Government were frank, open and responsible, they would do that.

[Mrs. Bottomley]

It is distressing for my constituents, my doctors, my nurses and my managers that the problem is worse than it has ever been. There has been a threefold increase in one-year waiters. That category affords one of the greatest tests for the health service. I have often been challenged by Labour Members about that. When I became a Health Minister, there were 200,000 one-year waiters; when I left the Department of Health, there were 4,000. I wish that none had been left. Waiting more than a year for treatment is the ultimate sign of an unacceptable service. I ask the Minister to step in and tell the people of West Surrey that the problem is out of hand. One in nine people wait more than a year for treatment in my area, whereas one in 50 wait more than a year for treatment in the Prime Minister's constituency. That is not equity.

I have made the local points, and I wish briefly to make a few general points about the motion and the Government's stewardship of the health service. An important development, which has been commended by almost every independent commentator, was the attempt by Ministers in the previous Government to distance the political process from the management of the service. The establishment of NHS headquarters in Leeds was a means of saying that, while the NHS could not be a separate agency, the chief executive should have the stature, dignity and independence to exercise authority in his own right, and not be at Ministers' beck and call.

It is widely understood that not only is NHS management too much under the political control of Ministers but, worse than that, No. 10 has undertaken a role that is out of all proportion to the role it has played in living memory. To anyone who saw the Prime Minister's performance on "Newsnight", the idea that the Prime Minister should chair a health committee is nonsense. I do not blame him for not being an expert on health care, but doctors, nurses and managers know that it is not a subject with which the Prime Minister is remotely comfortable.

Politicising the process, producing extra money and saying that it must be used in a programme about "partnership", "professions", "performance", "prevention", "patient access" and "patient empowerment" is trivial and insulting to serious people in the health service.

We now face a serious problem. It is proposed that the roles of the permanent secretary at the Department and the chief executive of the health service should be combined. I hope that the Select Committee on Public Administration will examine the matter and that Sir Richard Wilson will reconsider it. The role of the permanent secretary is to maintain the independence of the civil service, ensure propriety, and handle all Whitehall activities and overseas elements such as European Union and Council of Ministers affairs. A permanent secretary at the Department of Health therefore has a huge agenda.

I hope that my Front-Bench colleagues will be taking over as Ministers in future and I speak from that point of view. The permanent secretary maintains the independence and integrity of the civil service. That role is unlike that of the chief executive, who needs to be a hands-on person and a team builder. The chief executive must fulfil targets, set objectives, travel around the country, be seen in the hospitals and talk to the health authorities.

I am pleased that the Secretary of State is here. I want to give a small example that means a lot to somebody who has held his office.

My hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) telephoned the Secretary of State's office to ask whether Members of Parliament would be part of the consultation on "whither the NHS?"—with a costly £500,000, according to the King's Fund, going into an exercise in which the envelopes arrive too late to be returned by the due date. The person in the right hon. Gentleman's office knew nothing about the consultation exercise. My hon. Friend replied, "It has been in all the papers. Perhaps you could investigate it." He was then told that the special adviser was responsible for that.

Anyone who has been in government appreciates why Conservative Members are so sensitive about the degree to which the Government are not sufficiently respectful of the distinction between the political process and the independent process which has been safeguarded by having a permanent secretary.

As the Secretary of State is now in his place, let me stress that an equitable service does not have one in nine people waiting for more than a year in Surrey and only one in 50 people waiting for more than a year in Durham. Will he please reduce the rhetoric, improve the reality and engage in debate which achieves solutions that can be delivered? Will he please consider NHS managers, whom the Prime Minister would cross the road to insult for two years before the election and for one year afterwards? We now understand that the Prime Minister has read an article by the British Association of Medical Managers and now thinks that managers might be a good idea.

Combining the roles of the chief executive and the permanent secretary will make it very hard for anyone in the health service to believe that the independence, stature and dignity that Sir Alan Langlands has had will be reflected in his successor. This is my last opportunity to pay tribute to Sir Alan Langlands, who has been a remarkably distinguished, able, talented and honourable chief executive of the most important and complex, and the largest, organisation in this country.

6.26 pm

Liz Blackman (Erewash): I shall be as brief as possible. I am not philosophically opposed to private health care. We live in a free and democratic society and people have a right to make that choice. However, I am opposed to the Opposition making private health care central to their desire to expand health provision through what the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) described as less expensive, non-serious, low-tech operations which he defined as hip replacements, knee replacements, cataract operations and hernia operations. I am also against his proposal to use taxpayers' money to provide tax breaks to encourage that. Their policy is economically illiterate and grossly unfair.

Between 1990, when the Conservative Government introduced a relief for the over-60s, and 1997, when the Labour Government abolished it, the number of people with private health care insurance fell. It was a deadweight relief aimed at altering behaviour and it did not work. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) pointed out, even Lady Thatcher and Lord Lawson have now reached that conclusion. In her

post-Government reflective period, Lady Thatcher has realised that that logic is flawed. To introduce a relief funded by taxpayers for people who have already chosen private health care insurance is wasteful and will not alter behaviour, as has proved to be the case. It would cost £350 million to provide relief on existing employer health insurance before one extra person gained relief, and the total cost could be as much as £1 billion.

The Opposition have promised to maintain the investment that the Government have put into NHS services, but they have not said where the extra money would come from. They need to come clean on that. Pensioners are clearly the target audience for the Opposition's proposal as they represent a significant proportion of the population who are least able to afford health insurance premiums, as many of them are on fixed disposable incomes. They have paid taxes all their lives and they have paid for a national health service, and it is they who will need hip replacements, knee replacements, cataract operations and hernia operations. Such operations are essential and they deal with conditions that cause sufferers misery and distress.

The thrust of Tory policy would force them to do one of three things: to pay up, to take out insurance or to wait longer. It is worth reminding the House that a hip operation costs between £5,000 and £7,000, a knee operation costs a similar amount, a hernia operation costs between £1,000 and £1,500 and a cataract operation costs between £1,800 and £2,400. We should also remember that premiums for a pensioner couple are between £3,500 and £4,500. In the past 10 years, those premiums have risen on average by 10 per cent., and they are rising on average by 3.5 per cent. a year. Some insurance companies' premiums are rising by between 30 per cent. and 50 per cent.

It is also important to read the small print on insurance policies, because they have many exemptions. People are caught out because they believe that they are entitled to a level of health care that they are disappointed not to receive.

Finally, I wish to draw the House's attention to an evolving scam called dual pricing, which operates in health care insurance. A hospital will quote one price for someone who does not have medical insurance and another—up to 50 per cent. more—for someone who does. Some insurance companies suggest that their customers get round the disparity by initially paying for their own operations. Julian Stainton, the chief executive of the Western Provident Association, has said:

> We'll reimburse them within 24 hours and also split the difference with them of the higher insurance price we'd expect to be charged. But it's ridiculous that this system occurs. There's no doubt in my mind that many charges rendered for private medicine are excessive.

That quotation comes from *Good Housekeeping*. If private hospitals can afford to do the same operation at half the price, they are ripping off the health care insurers and, more importantly, the patients themselves through the premiums they pay. If tax relief were to be given, it would simply bump up the premiums. I urge the Government to look carefully at that practice, because further regulation would appear to be required.

6.32 pm

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): We have had many contributions from Back Benchers and I shall pick up some of the key points. I hope that hon. Members will forgive me if I do not mention every contribution, but I need some time to respond to the Secretary of State's misinformation campaign in his speech.

The hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey) seemed to be parroting the Government line, and claimed that the Conservatives see the NHS as a residual service only. He ignored totally the explicit commitment we made on funding—to match the comprehensive spending review figures that the Government have produced. I can state categorically to the hon. Gentleman that the NHS will be at the heart of the system that we intend to put in place.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) usefully drew the House's attention to the Government's attack on doctors. When the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) was Secretary of State, managers were responsible for all the problems in the health service. Now it is the doctors who are responsible. Perhaps the next Secretary of State will tell us that it is the patients who are responsible for all the problems in the health service. My right hon. Friend is passionately committed to the NHS and to the need for choice as well as access in the health service. He drew attention to the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) devoted the lion's share of his speech in Glasgow, which has been mentioned in the debate, to how we would improve the NHS. It is the Secretary of State who focused this debate on private health insurance.

The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) has the great benefit of consistency in his views and I know that his beliefs are genuinely held. He would like to ban independent health insurance and all forms of independent health care. However, I would be grateful if the Minister would reaffirm, when he winds up, that it is not the Government's plan to ban private health insurance or private treatment in the NHS. After all, as Lord Winston helpfully pointed out yesterday, it makes a significant contribution to the NHS. I agree with the hon. Member for Wakefield on one point: if there is any expansion of health care, whether public or private, it must be accompanied by an expansion of the real resources—the people who deliver the care, as well as the money. The two must go hand in hand if we are to achieve the effect that we desire.

My hon. Friend the hon. Member for Wycombe (Sir R. Whitney) gave us some telling and chilling statistics on where Britain stands in the world league of health outcomes. He said that no Government of either party would be ready to impose the tax burden necessary if, using taxation alone, we were to catch up with the amount spent on health in Germany. That example raises a pertinent question: should we therefore accept second best for the British people, or should we look for ways to supplement our national health service spending, while continuing to raise that tax-financed spending as economic conditions allow?

My hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) spoke passionately about his commitment to the NHS, and in doing so he spoke for the Conservative party. He nailed the lie that the Conservative party wants to privatise or abolish the NHS. He referred to the Labour allegation that we would charge for visits to general practitioners—a possibility that we have explicitly ruled out.

[Mr. Philip Hammond]

My hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford also made the important point that the lie that we would privatise the NHS is not new. The Labour party has said that for years. They said it before the general election in 1987, but the Conservative Government then elected went on to spend more than ever before on the NHS. They said it again before the 1992 election, and the Conservative Government that followed that spent even more than their predecessor.

The Labour party's cheap slur cuts no ice with anyone. If the Secretary of State thinks otherwise, he should look at the comments in the press.

The hon. Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) said that whistleblowers in the national health service were guaranteed a fair hearing and protection. I think that she lives on a different planet from the one that we inhabit. There is a climate of fear and a palpable atmosphere of oppression in the NHS. Earlier this week, an official of the NHS Confederation told me:

I've got to confess to you. In 1996, we really thought that things couldn't get any worse, but we found out we were wrong.

The hon. Member for South Swindon also mentioned the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. Its decision about beta interferon has exposed it for what we always said that it would be—a mechanism for levelling down, not levelling up.

In addition, the hon. Lady missed the point about Conservative policy. We are quite prepared to support an institute that looks at clinical effectiveness and cost effectiveness, but affordability must be an issue for politicians, based on the overall resourcing of the service.

The hon. Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) gave the lie to the Secretary of State's position. He knows my colleagues and me better than the Secretary of State does. He knows that the privatisation lie is just that—a lie. My right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) reinforced the point that the NHS depends on a consensus, which itself depends on the fact that the great majority of people in all parts of the country have confidence in the service.

However, the tone of the debate was set by the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), and the response from the Secretary of State. My hon. Friend set out a catalogue of the distortions that the Government have imposed on the NHS. He talked about the waiting list initiative, and spoke of spin and information management. He mentioned the threat to tertiary referral centres of excellence through the abolition of extra-contractual referrals. He described the systematic denial of choice, the bullying and the culture of fear that pervades the service, in which clinical needs are subordinated to political ones. He also recorded this country's dismal relative position in international league tables.

My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring continued on a more positive note, however. He told the House about the speech that he made yesterday, in which he set out a vision for health care delivery in the 21st century. He mapped out his objective of a patient-focused system appropriate to a modern consumer society. That system would draw inspiration not only from the traditional NHS values of comprehensive service and universality of access, but from the examples of our European neighbours.

The system outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring would be a mixed economy of health care, with the national health service at its heart, offering choice as well as access. We will have a national health service that is stripped of ideological baggage, puts the patient first and is determined to get the best health-care value for every pound that the taxpayer entrusts to it. Purchasing in the independent sector for the benefit of NHS patients, where that is the best-value decision, is a rubicon that the Secretary of State himself—at least in word, if not yet in deed—has crossed. We are delighted to endorse that step in the right direction.

We will have an NHS that acknowledges the finite nature of the resources available to it and the limits on its ability to deliver every want, instead of sticking its head in the sand. We will have an NHS that recognises that, in international comparisons, we do poorly; a service that prioritises according to clinical needs, not political ones. We will put the sickest first. Those with the most serious life-threatening conditions will be put at the top of the list and we will recognise that their needs must have the first call on the NHS's resources. That is common sense.

We are offering a guarantee—the patients guarantee—that, for the most important conditions—those which, in Bevan's words

cast a shadow of fear over millions of homes

the NHS will respond with the necessary treatment, using the best techniques and drugs available in a time frame that is clinically appropriate for the patient. That will allow the people of this country to be confident that, in cases of real need, they can be sure that the NHS will be there for them and their families.

The Secretary of State would have the world believe that priority for the most serious conditions means non-availability for others. That is just plain wrong. My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring and my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition have both made it clear that we have a commitment to a comprehensive national health service, free at the point of use. We have a commitment also to matching the Government's announced spending plans. There will be the same pot of money, the same total purchasing power for the national health service.

The question we are addressing is how we prioritise that spending. The Secretary of State's answer has been: according to his political agenda. He has played the numbers game, treating the hernias before the heart diseases because they are cheaper, easier and boost the throughput. Our answer is to allow doctors and NHS managers to prioritise according to clinical need and without political interference; without the dead hand of Richmond house on every decision and without the Secretary of State looking over their shoulders. That means treating the sickest first—those whose lives, livelihoods or life styles are threatened by disease—and asking those with minor conditions to wait, just as we do now. Indeed, we do that for some not-so-minor conditions.

Perhaps my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring's most important point is the strategic one; the role of the Secretary of State. What happens now is truly incredible. From Richmond house, the Secretary of State seeks to run centrally the largest organisation in Europe, with a command-and-control structure that would not have looked out of place in the old Soviet Union. His NHS is

subject to no independent or external inspection or checks to ensure quality and compliance with minimum standards. Instead, we have to rely on the organisation to police itself, and we all know what the result of that has been. We would redefine the role of the Secretary of State.

What was the Secretary of State's response? It was rather churlish, given our acknowledgment of the strides that the right hon. Gentleman has taken in our direction, in recognising at last the need for a partnership with private sector providers to deliver NHS objectives. He has come a long way since 1998 when, as Minister of State, he reportedly threatened NHS trust chairmen that he would

> come down like a ton of bricks on anyone who co-operated with the private sector.

The Secretary of State does not want to draw attention to that recent development in his policy because not all of his hon. Friends are entirely on side with it. Instead, he decided to make the cheap points, working on the principle of "the bigger the lie". He repeated the tedious and offensive lie that the Tory party wants to privatise the NHS. Who in the Tory party? Not me; not my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring; not my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition; not any of the Conservative Members who have spoken in the Chamber tonight.

The Secretary of State used his old familiar quotes, out of context as usual. However, if he looks at the press, he will see that, by and large, his campaign is not succeeding. The press and the people of this country want to talk about the real issues and about the future of the NHS. They recognise the reality of the mixed economy in which we live and operate, and they want to see a positive view of the future of the national health service.

The greatest threat facing the national health service today is the threat to the consensus that supports it. Many hard-working, relatively affluent taxpayers up and down the country are no longer confident that the national health service can provide for them and their families. The Labour party is forcing them into taking up private insurance or being self-payers—they are afraid that the NHS will not be able to help them quickly and effectively because of the distortions of priorities within it.

I will give an example from my constituency. A patient goes to the local hospital; he is told that he may have cancer and that he needs a diagnostic procedure. They cannot tell him when that will be—it could be at least two months, because the bit of kit that they need to do it is broken. So he spends his savings—£700—to find out that he does not have cancer.

Such situations are being repeated up and down the country, day after day. They damage the consensus that underlies the national health service. Our vision is of a national health service in which everyone can feel confident of prompt, first-class treatment for the most serious conditions. That is a cohesive principle, not a divisive one.

What we have heard from the Secretary of State today is a smokescreen of misrepresentations, designed to distract attention from the changes that he is making—some of which do not enjoy support from his hon. Friends—and the embarrassing fact that the majority of the British people believe that the national health service has got worse, not better, since 1 May 1997. The Secretary of State will know that, because his private polling will tell him.

The Government are obviously not prepared to fight this battle on the basis of a defence of their own record. Instead, the Secretary of State wants to fabricate a policy that he attributes to us and then shoots down. So let me spell it out unambiguously: we are committed to a comprehensive national health service, free at the point of need. We are committed to matching the comprehensive spending review funding plans for the NHS which the Government have announced. We are committed to a system that has the national health service at its heart, but that commitment alone is not enough. We need to prioritise the way in which the NHS works on the basis of clinical priorities. We will guarantee access times, through our patients' guarantee, on the basis of clinical need. In that way, we will restore the confidence of the great majority of the British people in the way our health service works, after the cynical manipulations of this Government.

Mrs. Laing: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether you have had notice that the Secretary of State wishes to correct an error that he made earlier this afternoon, undoubtedly inadvertently, as I am sure that he would not wish to mislead the House deliberately.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I do not think that the hon. Lady is doing the House a service. She will know that this is a matter for debate and not a matter of order for the Chair.

6.48 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): I apologise, in view of the time, that I, too, will not be able to refer to all the speeches made in the debate, including the many excellent speeches made by my right hon. and hon. Friends.

Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ann Keen), I have no clinical training. Although I am quite sure that she is clinically able to diagnose a state of amnesia among Conservative Members, my observation that they are in a state of denial must be purely a layman's point of view.

Let us take, for example, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Sir R. Whitney). If I had been a junior Health Minister in 1985 and I came here in the year 2000 and said that we do not have enough doctors in the United Kingdom, I might have made some connection between that and the decisions that I took in 1985. For the record, I say here and now that, should I still be a Member of this House in the year 2015, and should I wander into the Chamber and make a speech saying that there are not enough doctors in England, I hope that someone will feel free to point out that I, along with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and our ministerial colleagues, were taking the decisions about how many doctors to train.

Sir Raymond Whitney: The Minister may recall that in my speech I predicted that what I said would be wilfully and grossly misrepresented. He has proved the accuracy of that prediction.

Mr. Denham: If the hon. Gentleman checks the record, he will find that he referred to the number of doctors in this country.

[Mr. Denham]

The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) spoke about the wonders of the reforms of the previous Government although, to be fair, he accepted that there had been some mistakes. However, the idea that the system of extra-contractual referrals allowed all patients to see whichever doctor they wanted is simply not true. For 15,000 GPs, if they wanted to refer to anyone outside their area they had to go through a set of bureaucrats in the health authority—bureaucrats imposed on those patients by the Conservative party. By getting rid of extra-contractual referrals we have restored to GPs the freedom to refer. Doctors collectively decide where their patients are treated and the health authority no longer has the veto power. That is a significant and important change.

Although I cannot develop the argument about neurological services today, those issues are important. However, a closer look will show that they are fundamentally to do not with the system of extra-contractual referrals, but with uncertainty about the clinical and cost-effectiveness of some of those treatments. It is an important issue and a number of hon. Members raised it. We need to resolve it as quickly as possible and I am determined that we should do so.

Finally, in a debate about responsibility, the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley), knows as well as I do that while there has been a record of increases in funding for her health authority, her area has a major problem—the debts of £18 million that were run up under the stewardship of the previous Government. That problem has to be resolved, but there comes a point when those who were in government a few years ago have to take responsibility for the things that happened then.

I do not think that anyone here would describe Dr. Ian Bogle, the president of the British Medical Association, as a poodle of the Government. He has criticised Ministers and the Prime Minister. This week, however, when opening the BMA conference across the road from here he said:

> Following the Budget announcement in March, the Prime Minister offered to include us in the policy-making process . . .

He continued by saying that there had been a

> fundamental shift in government thinking that has given us the opportunity to help shape policy and have a say in how the significant extra investment in the NHS pledged in the Budget will be spent.
>
> Tony Blair has challenged us to deliver change in return for extra investment. We are more than willing to meet that challenge.
>
> Mr. Blair, your plan is eagerly awaited by every doctor in this conference hall and every doctor on the NHS frontline.

The picture that hon. Members have tried to portray of an entirely alienated national health service—an alienated profession—is simply not true. People are working astonishingly hard and giving an enormous amount to the NHS, I recognise that, and they are stressed and tired through doing so. However, it is not merely the BMA that is involved in drawing up the national plan; it is the royal colleges, the trades unions, the professional organisations of other staff, NHS management, patients organisations and thousands of NHS staff at local, regional and national level, as well as patients and users of the NHS.

Whether or not those people support the Government as voters, they all believe that this Government are right on two key issues. The NHS needs more money, and they know and believe that this Government are doing what the Conservative party never did, never wanted to do, never dreamed of or believed was right, which is to deliver more money to the NHS at unprecedented levels. Those people also agree with us that money alone is not enough. We have to change the way the NHS operates, the way we organise our services around the needs of patients, the way we train and use our staff, and the way we manage the NHS.

A huge national debate is taking place on the future of the NHS and all that debate is shaping the national plan, which we are drawing up. What gets up the nose of the Conservative party is that it has chosen to be outside that debate—because of its past record, its opportunistic attacks and its obsession with private medical insurance, and because Conservatives are more interested in drumming up business for Abbey National than in facing up to the challenges of delivering a better national health service.

Not everyone who is taking part in that debate supports the Government. The hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey), who made an excellent speech, is not a supporter of the Government, but he made it clear that he wants to be part of the national debate and his views should be listened to. We have listened to patients, we are listening to staff. Many Opposition Members have attacked us for waste in doing so. They say that listening to patients' views is not a good idea. If they want to talk about waste, let us talk about waste. One of our first actions when we came to power was to abolish the internal market—the bureaucratic, inefficient, unfair, internal market. By doing so, we will save £1 billion; £1,000 million will be saved over the lifetime of the full Parliament and spent on patients because we abolished the ideological, wrong-headed waste created by the previous Government. So let us not have any debates about waste and inefficiency in the NHS.

The hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) is a pleasant gentleman. I understand that by repute he has an excellent bedside manner. He is, of course, a doctor. But when I look at him he strikes me not so much as a 21st century doctor as a 19th century quack, touring country fairs on the back of a wagon and looking for gullible people.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Denham: No, I will not give way to somebody who has just wandered in off the street.

I say that the Opposition spokesman is like a 19th century quack, because whatever symptoms and problems the NHS patient faces, the prescription is always the same: a strong dose of Doctor Fox's patent private medical insurance. *[Laughter.]* A bad knee? Better buy some insurance. Bad hips? Better buy some insurance. Trouble with the eyes? Better buy some more insurance.

This evening the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) tried to put all this behind the Tories and say that what he had said on Sky television or what the hon. Member for Woodspring had said in *The Sunday Times* was all in the past. I have sat here, as have several of my colleagues, and listened to speech after speech from Opposition Members, every one of whom has said that the only answer to the problem is more private

medical insurance. It is no use the hon. Gentleman saying that that is not their strategy. Clearly, back in January he convinced all his colleagues that it was, and they are continuing to say that it is. I believe them rather more than I give credence to the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge.

One of the flaws in what we have heard this evening is the Tories' claim that they will match our spending plans. The final judgment about whether they are telling us the truth should rest with the voters, who are a good deal less stupid than the Opposition hope. Before the Budget, when my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced record increases in NHS spending, not once had there been a single indication that any Tory Member thought that an increase in spending at the level that we are proposing was either possible or desirable.

In the middle of the winter flu epidemic, did we hear calls for more money? In our debate in early January, did hon. Gentlemen call for money for the NHS? No, they called for more private medical insurance. What did we hear on the eve of the Budget from the shadow Chancellor on "The Money Programme"? Did he say, "If I were the Chancellor, I would put a bucketload of money in the NHS"? Did he say, "The NHS needs more money. That must be the Chancellor's top priority"? Did he say, "Give them the money, Gordon"? No, he said:

> He—the Chancellor—can either reduce taxes or he can increase public spending. What I would recommend is that he use the money to reduce taxes.

Not once, not ever, did the Tory party call for the sort of increases in spending which we will deliver.

The Tories have made a claim born, as always, of opportunism and expediency. Voters will know that that type of promise has less value than commitments that are made from conviction and determination. It is worse than that, because the promise has a gaping hole in it: this afternoon, £500 million for private medical insurance, and a year-on-year tax guarantee that means cuts in health expenditure to pay for tax breaks for the rich—

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 122, Noes 278.

Division No. 243] **[6.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Baldry, Tony
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Cash, William
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Shepherd, Richard
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Yeo, Tim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Peter Atkinson and
Mr. Keith Simpson.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barron, Kevin
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann

Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gidley, Sandra
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mudie, George
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Graham Allen and
Mr. Tony McNulty.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 261, Noes 97.

Division No. 244] **[7.11 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barron, Kevin
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*

Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gidley, Sandra
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Southworth, Ms Helen
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Graham Allen and
Mr. Tony McNulty.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Cash, William
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Collins, Tim
Cran, James
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Malins, Humfrey
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm

O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Yeo, Tim

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. John Randall and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the decision to prepare a National Plan for the NHS in England, bringing together doctors, nurses, patients' organisations and others working in the NHS to set out priorities for the modernisation of the NHS; welcomes the largest sustained increase in funding in the history of the NHS; and rejects the use of taxpayers' money to subsidise private medical insurance.

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved,

That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Keith Bradley.]*

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-two minutes past Seven o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 20 June 2000

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

Okinawa G7 Summit

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Miss Melanie Johnson.*]

10 am

Valerie Davey (Bristol, West): I am especially pleased to introduce this debate before the United Nations social summit in Geneva later this week, the G7 Finance Ministers' meeting and the G7 Okinawa summit in Japan next month.

Many hon. Members and thousands of our constituents, while congratulating the Government on the lead that they have taken internationally in reducing debt and poverty in the world's poorest countries, are urging the Government to do even more. The millennium announcement that Britain was cancelling 100 per cent. of the debt owed by the poorest countries made many of us feel good, but we are increasingly aware that those who should have been the main beneficiaries of that decision are still largely unaware of any change. I hope that this debate will clarify the reasons for that and what can now be done.

This time last year, hard work and commitment on all sides—from voluntary groups, churches, Ministers and officials at the Department for International Development and the Treasury, nationally and internationally, and especially from Jubilee 2000—culminated in the Cologne summit. There, the world's seven richest countries—the G7—promised to write off $100 billion of the $260 billion owed to the west by the most indebted countries. The G7 promised that 25 of the 40 countries identified by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as the most indebted would receive help by the end of the year, provided that the lenders were satisfied that the borrowers had policies to ensure that funds were used to reduce poverty.

I understand that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer anticipated that 11 countries would get through the programme's hurdles by Easter. I use the word "hurdle" advisedly, because it illustrates one of the several blocks that prevent implementation of the G7 promises.

By mid-June, just five countries—Bolivia, Uganda, Mauritania, Mozambique and Tanzania—had received a reduction in debt repayments. Only Uganda is anywhere near having its debt cancelled. The average reduction in the group is 35 per cent., but Tanzania's reduction is as low as 7 per cent., which means that it still needs to spend $150 million a year servicing its debt and can afford to spend only $87 million on health. About one third of children in Tanzania are malnourished, and less than half the children of primary school age are actually in school. The Tanzanian Government's budget is distorted by that $150 million debt repayment.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I am sure that the hon. Lady is aware that the World Bank has agreed another loan to Tanzania of £3 billion, even though it is struggling to pay off its existing debts. Does she have a view about the responsibility of the World Bank in taking that action at this stage?

Valerie Davey: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I will show my concern about the World Bank later in my speech and I hope that she will contribute again.

A similar situation exists in each of the highly indebted countries. One third of Bolivia's population has no access to safe water. Adult illiteracy in Mauritania is 62 per cent. Mozambique faces the daunting task of reconstruction following the worst flooding in living memory, yet it is still expected to repay $45 million every year.

Despite all the promises of $100 billion-worth of debt cancellation, only $13 billion has been cancelled so far, $11 billion of which had been agreed to before the Cologne summit. A community worker in Bristol recently shared with me two of the most often heard phrases among young people, mostly black, in his area. They were "Keep it real" and "We're not going to believe the promise". I was reminded of that as I reflected on the debt crisis. The reality for children, especially those in the most indebted countries, has not changed. Why should they believe the promise?

Often, the reality in areas of deprivation is that even more exploitation takes place. A Christian Aid photograph in my office at home shows a simple cross and a Nestlé dried milk tin containing a few dead flowers marking the grave of a baby, somewhere in Latin America. Did the mother know that, without pure water, the contents of that tin would cause her child's death? The most poignant aspect of that photograph is the picture, on the side of the tin, of a European mother and child smiling, full of good health.

A Christian Aid report published last December shows that a baby's birthplace determines a millennium lottery. For example, Grace, born in Africa, has a one in 10 chance of dying before her first birthday, but for Sarah, born in the United Kingdom, the chance is one in 166. Grace has only a 54 per cent. chance of being immunised against measles. For Sarah, the figure is 95 per cent. Grace has only a 50 per cent. chance of access to clean water, but Sarah has a 100 per cent. chance. Grace will have only a 60 per cent. chance of going to primary school. Sarah's chance is 100 per cent.

Consistently, charities have responded and individuals have given generously. I congratulate the Government on giving tax relief on all charitable donations, which enhances their value. However, such giving is still not enough. Many years ago—when a first class stamp cost 5½ old pence—Frank Judd, who was a Minister responsible for overseas development and a director of Oxfam, urged everyone at a third world conference to invest in a stamp and urge the Government to raise the level of overseas aid, as it was the best form of investment for the third world. His message was that individual giving was great, but Governments could do more.

The Government are committed to doing a great deal more. I congratulate my right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for International Development on leading the world on debt repayment

[Valerie Davey]

and poverty reduction strategies. That initiative helped to persuade the other members of the G7, and countries outside it, such as Norway and Sweden, to promise 100 per cent. cancellation of bilateral debt. Given that promise, why has so little changed? The process by which the heavily indebted poor countries gain entitlement to bilateral debt relief is the first hurdle. Of course, strategies for poverty reduction and plans for future sustainable development must be in place, but how much of that can be achieved while debt repayment is draining HIPCs?

In response to a debate led by the hon. Member for Northavor (Mr. Webb), my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, who I am delighted to see will respond to the debate, said:

> The UK argues that a country need not have a full poverty reduction strategy in place when a decision is made.—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 12 April 2000; Vol. 348, c. 101WH.]

I trust that others are persuaded by that approach.

Another hurdle is the fact that the HIPC initiative is administered by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, both of which have their own complex agendas. The Government's initiative in suggesting that the fund and the bank set up a HIPC initiative implementation unit to oversee the HIPC timetable was welcome. The acceptance of the proposal was even more welcome. Can my hon. Friend tell us what effect that has had on the timetable? Has it led to an improvement and a shortening of the time that we can expect for the debt to be cancelled? The financial contribution of the United States is another major hurdle. Congress has still failed to honour the commitment of the US Administration. Has there been any further reassurance on that crucial issue?

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): Does my hon. Friend agree that the refusal of Congress to support the initiative makes a mockery of the US's claim to lead the free world in modern democratic values, and that we should urge our colleagues in Congress to move forward on this?

Valerie Davey: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. Jubilee 2000, which now has a worldwide remit, is urging its members to write to members of Congress. Indeed, the last information pack that I saw had a letter in Japanese to send to Japan. I respect the point that my hon. Friend makes. If Congress is not committed to cancelling debt, the rest of the western world has an uphill struggle to improve the position for HIPCs. It reflects increasingly well on our Government that they have taken such a strong lead and have taken all the other western countries with them.

Even if the HIPCs overcome all the hurdles that I have described, the multilateral debt still remains. For some of them it is as much as 35 per cent. of gross domestic product. It is owed for the most part to the IMF and the World Bank and in some cases to commercial transnational banks. While both the IMF and the World bank discuss debt relief and world poverty and, thanks to the British Government, accept that success should be determined more by the number of people lifted out of poverty than how much debt is cancelled, neither is considering cancelling the debt owed to them. That is strange as the same G7 countries are the most influential in those two bodies.

There is a special concern about the IMF. It seems to have policies affecting countries, especially in southern Africa, that result in deep cuts in health, education and employment which are completely contrary to the poverty reduction policies necessary to qualify for the HIPC bilateral debt relief. It is almost incredible that we should find ourselves in this position. It is to the credit of the leading members of Christian Aid, Jubilee 2000 and other non-governmental organisations and voluntary sector groups that they have highlighted that discrepancy.

The IMF and the World Bank seem remote and unaccountable. The poorest and the most indebted countries have the weakest voice there. How high on the agenda is the reform of both those institutions, as that is necessary before further progress can be made to support the poorest countries? It has not been on the agenda and although Jubilee 2000 in Okinawa is concentrating on the work that the G7 countries can do to cancel bilateral debt, the issue of multilateral debt must come higher on their agenda, and on ours.

That leaves the debt owed to the commercial banks. In east Asia and Latin America new debt problems are emerging, as debt owed to private creditors is destroying national development efforts. I have neither the time nor the expertise—although perhaps I should have the time—for another important debate on the need to regulate the repayment of debt to private companies so that a country's basic services, such as health and education, are not undermined.

People must come before profit. That is an obvious statement that has added significance after the tragic deaths in Dover at the weekend. There is a prophetic message; the words of the Old Testament prophets, especially Amos, ring out across nearly three millennia. Amos said that it is wrong to sell the innocent for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes, and it is wrong to grind the heads of the poor into the earth and thrust the humble out of the way. The principles of justice, respect, respect for others and the fair use of resources remain the same; what has changed is the extent of the extremes of wealth and poverty and the global nature of the causes and the remedies.

We expect great things from Okinawa; Jubilee 2000 members and others will be holding summit vigils around the world, starting in Geneva. There will be a vigil in Bristol cathedral as dawn breaks in Okinawa, but before that the letters will flow and, as I said earlier, they will flow internationally. In Parliament, Ministers will be asked three questions. First, why has so little of the $100 billion debt cancellation promised at Cologne been achieved and why has so little reached the HIPC countries? Secondly, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said that the $100 billion debt cancellation was a step on the road to a real solution. Is that still his view? What further action has he in mind? Finally, what further reforms of the International Monetary Fund are possible to strengthen the links between debt relief and poverty reduction? Millions of people around the world want their elected representatives to take action, and we must not fail them.

10.18 am

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol, West (Valerie Davey) on introducing the debate and express sadness and disappointment that those who joined us in the campaigns run by Jubilee 2000 last year are not present this morning.

It is unusual for me to do so, but I congratulate both the Government and the previous Tory Government on their efforts on debt relief. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) made one of the first moves when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer. I am delighted to acknowledge the work of the present Government—particularly the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for International Development, who have taken great strides and raised the issue in many international contexts. Unfortunately, the hon. Member for Bristol, West is right that we all share a sense of disappointment that what was supposed to happen—forgiveness on account of the jubilee and the millennium, for example—has not materialised and little debt relief has been achieved.

I shall not make a long speech because the arguments are already well rehearsed. The World Bank, however, has just issued a report called, "Can Africa claim the 21st century?" Coming from the World Bank—responsible in the past and, regarding Tanzania, in the future—it is a sick report, which highlights a great deal of irresponsible lending. It is disturbing to pose the question whether Africa can survive in the present century and I wonder how far we have managed to assist its survival. We were promised a reduction by half of the number of people living in extreme poverty by 2015, yet the World Bank estimates that there are now 70 million more people living in poverty than there were a few years ago. We are obviously going backwards in the poverty stakes.

Universal primary education in all countries by 2015 is a worthy aim that was heralded by the White Paper on development. Eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005 is another, yet the World Bank found that the average schooling level of African women has increased by only by 1.2 years in the past 40 years. Clearly, education is scarcely moving forward either.

People who have visited sub-Saharan African countries are often struck by the effect of AIDS there. In many African countries, as many as one in four of the population are stricken with AIDS—one in four of a population whose work is desperately needed for the economic viability of those countries. Sadly, many economically active people are dying. In the past, diseases such as gastro-enteritis and malaria devastated African countries—attacking newborn babies, young children and the elderly—but AIDS is unique as a disease in that it strikes at the young, fit, healthy and active members of the population. The health targets in the White Paper are likely to be seriously compromised by the AIDS epidemic.

In 20 of the 48 sub-Saharan African countries there are civil wars, which are fuelled by the arms trade. The Government promised to do more, especially regarding arms brokers, but they have passed no legislation. Civil wars are also fuelled by the avarice for oil, diamonds and other raw materials that are used in western countries to make money. They represent yet another factor that will prevent the proper development of African countries.

The most indebted and aid-dependent countries in the world have to pay around 17 per cent. of their gross domestic product in debt repayment—the African average is three times what the World Bank says is a sustainable level. The annual gross rate averages 3 per cent. We can only look aghast at those economic figures, which explain why we are so depressed by the lack of progress.

What is the reason for that lack of progress? We must examine the international community and point the finger—particularly at the USA and Japan. Throughout the campaign, it was made clear that those countries constantly stalled on debt relief. Their actions made it more difficult for other G8 members to do anything about the problem. As the hon. Member for Bristol, West, said, Congress is blocking the money that is needed for the HIPC fund. I suspect that Congress is brave enough to do that because it is not a big issue in America but, as part of the international community, we should be hard on the United States for taking that approach.

The search for the perfect poverty strategy has been much delayed. All campaigners and G8 Governments agreed last year that the structural adjustment programmes were doing more harm than good. Health and education projects in some countries were suffering because of their efforts to bring their economies into line with the programmes that the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund insisted on if they were to qualify for debt relief. Last year's approach was positive. We understood that poverty reduction targets were going to be more prominent and that health and education projects were going to be insisted on as part of the structural adjustment.

As the Secretary of State for International Development said, there is no perfect scheme to ensure that money is spent in the right way. We could spend the rest of the 21st century looking for the perfect scheme, but we must get on with that process and allow for the fact that there will be defaulters and mistakes. I understand from her response to the report on debt relief by the Select Committee on International Development that the British Government have established a HIPC implementation group within the IMF and the World Bank. I look forward to hearing from the Minister what progress has been made.

What is the European Union doing about the unspent money in its aid budget? Some countries that were earmarked to receive money from the EU budget for aid projects do not have the capacity to take on those projects. As it is so difficult to raise money for the HIPC trust fund, why cannot the aid money be used for the HIPC debt relief fund? It is pointless to have that money sitting there doing nothing. Can we put pressure on the EU to get its act together?

Last but not least, recommendation 14 in the Government's response to the Select Committee report on debt relief states:

> We welcome the commitment by the UK Government to go beyond what is required by the terms of the HIPC Initiative and to write off all aid debt, and up to 100 per cent. of export credit guarantee debt.

[Dr. Jenny Tonge]

That worthy and much heralded pledge followed a similar announcement by the United States. It was welcomed by everyone. However, the Government's response raises some questions. It states:

> The Government strongly supports the strengthening of the HIPC framework at the G8 Cologne Summit and is grateful to the Committee for its endorsement of the UK's policy on bilateral debt relief. The Government has already cancelled all aid debts to HIPC countries.

What other debts are we owed that are not aid debts? They go on to say that they are providing

> 100 per cent relief on export credit debt, owed to it by individual HIPC countries, from the time they reach Decision Point under the HIPC Initiative,

which means that we have not relieved 100 per cent. of those countries' export credit guarantee debt. We have relieved only Uganda, which is the only country to have reached decision point. We need an answer. I question the much-heralded announcement that Britain had cancelled all bilateral debts including export credit guarantees. If only Uganda has reached decision point, only Uganda has so far received 100 per cent relief.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): On a point of correction, Mauritania and Bolivia have also reached decision point.

Dr. Tonge: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. She is right. However, an awful lot of countries need debt relief and it was claimed that the Government had given them 100 per cent. bilateral debt relief although they had not. The process is extremely slow.

I would like to question another claim made by the Government. We were told early on that tied aid was finished and that we would not continue with it. However, although they were not established under this Government, tied aid projects are still running. Many projects set up under tied aid involved countries paying inflated and uneconomic prices to British companies for the services that they received. The hon. Member for Bristol, West highlighted the iniquities of the payments of debts to private companies. I should like to be assured that highly indebted poor countries are not paying inflated debts to private companies in this country as a result of past tied aid projects.

It is important to clarify the matter. I want the Government to be squeaky clean. They have every reason to be proud of what they have done on the debt issue, as have the previous Government who started the process, and I am prepared to commend them. However, I do not want there to be loopholes, as there are in so many parts of Government policy, whereby what we hear is not what is happening on the ground. I seek the Minister's reassurance.

10.32 am

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, West (Valerie Davey) on initiating the debate. It is important that we have an opportunity to press the Government on a vital topic. The debate is timely, with the G7 summit coming up next month.

In recent weeks, I have been inundated with cards and letters from constituents who are calling for further action on debt cancellation in poor countries. The momentum and profile of the excellent campaign continues to make a big impact on all MPs and politicians in the United Kingdom and in other countries, creating more pressure for radical action. My constituents share the views of many in the UK and across the world. They welcome the progress that has been made and recognise the leading role that the Government have taken on debt relief. However, serious concerns remain about the pace and depth of change.

More delay will cost lives. My constituents do not want us to get bogged down in the mechanisms, processes, rules, diplomacy, frameworks or strategies. They want us to get through those matters and produce real results—the provision of better health care, better education, clean water, food and decent housing to the poorest people in the poorest countries.

The heavily indebted poor countries initiative was supposed to achieve good results and the alleviation of poverty through debt relief. When I think about the process, I picture a golden road. Countries that are sufficiently poor and indebted and are judged by the west to have unsustainable debts are allowed on to that road, which should glide them smoothly and simply to debt relief. However, the process is not like that in practice. Millions of people are still waiting to get to the end of that golden road, but there are obstacles in their way.

I should like to consider the impact of debt and of the HIPC process on three poor countries: Mauritania and Guyana, which are involved in that process, and Nigeria, which is not. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, West gave some background information on Mauritania, which is one of the few countries on the golden road of the HIPC initiative. It has reached the first major obstacle, which is known as the decision point, when western Governments judge whether a country has reformed its economy to a sufficient extent to deserve debt relief. It is only at that stage that debt relief is given. Mauritania has reached that point, but it has not been a smooth road. As my hon. Friend said, its debt has been reduced by less than a third. It is still spending more money on debt relief than on health and education combined, even though its literacy level is low and few of its children go to school.

The United Kingdom deserves congratulation, as we write off the bilateral debts that are owed when the decision point is reached. However, countries such as Japan and America do not write off debts at that stage. Instead, they wait for the next obstacle, or until the very end of the golden road is reached. That is outrageous. The United States and Japan are much wealthier than us. If we can afford to do it, so can they, and if our economies are sufficient, so are theirs. I urge the Ministers to get that message across at every opportunity, whether it arises during the coffee breaks or on the main conference floor. If the UK can take such action, so can the United States and Japan.

Guyana is also in the HIPC process, but it is failing to help its poorest people. Ministerial pressure is needed for results to be achieved. Guyana illustrates the problems of the HIPC process and it was one of the first countries to participate. Indeed, it also came through

the earlier process, so we expected that by now it would be getting all the help that it needs. However, it was pushed off that road because the IMF said that the Guyanan Government had missed their budgetary spending target. The reasons why that happened are extraordinary, and originate in a public-sector pay dispute in Guyana. Although the Government wanted the public sector to keep working, they knew that they had to keep on track with the IMF and their budget targets in order to obtain debt relief and also to achieve their poverty alleviation objectives. They explained their problem to the IMF and asked what they should do. They pointed out that the independent arbiters that had considered the pay dispute had advised them to pay, but had told them that if they did pay, the IMF would consider that they had overspent their budget. The IMF said, "Go ahead. You should settle this pay dispute. Go along with the independent arbiters and pay your public-sector workers." The Government did that, but then what happened? The IMF turned around and said, "You are off track. You are off the road and you have not achieved your targets." It appeared to take no responsibility for its actions and no proper account of the issues that countries face. Who suffered? It was the poorest people in Guyana.

That is why we are having this debate; we want to tell Ministers that that is not good enough. If Guyana goes to the IMF to explain its problems and follows the IMF's advice, it should receive its debt relief and receive it sooner, in recognition of its acute problems. I have given examples of two countries in which poverty eradication is being stopped or held up by IMF processes and procedures and by engagement in ridiculous debate rather than in getting on and doing what needs to be done.

The third country to which I shall refer is Nigeria, which is not even included in the HIPC process. It was dropped in 1998 for technical reasons, but they were spurious, because the country far exceeds the HIPC eligibility thresholds. Nigeria is the largest country in west Africa and it is still recovering from decades of misrule and a corrupt military dictatorship that left behind enormous unpayable foreign debt. All but a tiny minority of Nigerians live in poverty. This is an especially important time to help Nigeria because the country is trying to establish itself on a course of economic and social reform.

In Nigeria, life expectancy is 53 years and falling as a result of AIDS. Some 36 per cent. of children under five are underweight, and 51 per cent. of the population do not have access to safe water. The problem is massive. Jubilee 2000 has calculated that even if Nigeria's debt were written off entirely, it would still need additional aid of more than $1 billion a year in order to reach the internationally agreed poverty reduction targets for 2015. Conversations about debt are only the first stage of the process; we must consider how those poverty reduction targets can be achieved.

We must remember that most of the debt results from money lent to corrupt military dictators, and people in the west did not press sufficiently hard to get that money back. Nigeria is now trying to introduce economic and social reform, and is bearing the pressure in trying to alleviate poverty. Our Government deserve congratulations because they have been at the forefront of helping to support Nigeria, but we must ask them to do more. We must take responsibility for the bad loans that have been advanced in the past and we must argue for Nigeria and other countries to be included in the HIPC initiative. If we press for that, I hope that other countries will become involved, including Germany, Japan and the World Bank, who are the major creditors.

The situations in those three countries illustrate some of the problems that need to be tackled and on which the Government must take action at the Okinawa summit. I welcome the progress that has been made, but my constituents have made it clear to me that more must be done urgently because lives depend on it. Therefore, I ask Ministers, in July, to deliver the $100 billion that was offered at Cologne and to consider the inclusion of many more countries within the HIPC initiative, or, preferably, within a replacement system, because many impoverished and indebted countries are not covered by the HIPC initiative. We need determination to get rid of the obstacles along what should be a golden road to debt reduction and poverty alleviation. Instead it is more like an obstacle course that is being tackled in the dark, and in which the obstacles move every time that one believes that they have been surmounted. The poorest people suffer as a result.

We need to do some straight talking, like the straight talking for which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development is well known, and we need the determination to tackle all those problems and save the lives that depend on us doing that. I ask the Government to consider a new process of dealing with debt, which was called for by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan. We need a system that is transparent and fair and brings real benefits to the poorest people in the world. Will the Minister say whether the Government support that initiative? We have come a long way, but we need to do more, and it would be tragic to falter at this stage. We must do all we can to ensure that the phrase "debt cancellation", which is firmly imprinted on the consciousness of so many people in developed countries, has real meaning for people in less developed countries; in Mauritania, Guyana, Nigeria and other impoverished countries. Those people must be able to feel for themselves the enormous benefits that debt relief can bring, so that the elimination of poverty can be addressed in their countries.

10.44 am

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): I am delighted to be able to participate in the morning's debate and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, West (Valerie Davey) on raising it.

The Jubilee 2000 campaign has taken off because of the support of many ordinary people. I received more than 1,500 letters asking me to press my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and others not only to take action to write off debt, but to adopt a strategy to help the world's poorest. Last Saturday, I had the privilege and the pleasure of starting a five-mile bike ride from St. Michael's church in my constituency, organised by Paul McGinlay. Fifty young people aged between four and 14 were involved. Before the event we showed the Jubilee 2000 video and explained simply that education and health were very important to young people in other countries. The important point was made that in an age of great advances in medical technology more than

[Dumbarton]

12 million children die every year from easily preventable diseases. That is a scandal and collectively we must do something about it. Great advances have also been made in computer technology, but more than 800 million adults cannot read or write. Those challenges are not just in far-off lands. The economic and environmental effects of globalisation mean that our future is tied up with that of the world. We have a moral and a pragmatic obligation to convey that message.

Initiatives in the heavily indebted poorer countries have been mentioned and I congratulate my right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for International Development on what has been undertaken. I remember a speech by the Chancellor to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland two years ago, the kernel of which was that we needed to do something on the international stage to alleviate poverty. He was congratulated and I join in that response. However, we now have the problem of encouraging other countries to ensure that debt is written off. It is symbolic that next month's summit will be in Okinawa. Japan has a long way to go in the process of writing off bilateral debts.

For too long, we have tied international debt and loans to trade. We must get away from that. As the Government have said, we need a poverty reduction strategy and it is important that it should be separated from trade. The five heavily indebted poorer countries mentioned have not yet jumped over that barrier. The progress that has been made on a global scale is pretty much a minimum. We must push on that issue.

Great initiatives are being pursued. A couple of years ago in Zimbabwe I came across something called the Blair toilet—there is nothing domestic about it—promoted by Oxfam, to bring sanitary conditions to villages and thus improve health. I am proud to say that the Oxfam shop in Helensburgh in my constituency, which has been going for 25 years, has contributed directly to that. Christine Thorburn, the manager, and another 40 volunteers keep that shop open for six days a week, reminding people about the bigger outside world.

I congratulate the Government on what has been done, but we cannot rest there. We must have an efficient poverty strategy. We owe it to those young people who now die so needlessly. Morally, we owe it also to ourselves. We should take a lead from those ordinary people who have encouraged us and our constituents so that, by 2015, our target of halving the number of people living in extreme poverty will have been achieved. That is a noble aspiration, and people of every party and none should sign up to it. I am proud that we are embarking on that road, and I wish everyone well, particularly the Government in Okinawa.

10.51 am

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): I start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Bristol, West (Valerie Davey) for winning this debate and for the way in which she spoke. She rightly asked why so little has been done to provide for international debt relief. Many hon. Members have touched on that theme, which I shall develop in a moment.

We shall think of the hon. Member for Bristol, West on the day of the Okinawa summit, when she undertakes her vigil in Bristol cathedral. I am not sure whether it will be dawn in Bristol or dawn in Okinawa when she starts, but as someone who has attended many services in Bristol cathedral—I was brought up in the city—I have a vision of what it will be like.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) spoke incisively. She is no stranger to the subject, and takes a keen interest in it. I shall turn to what she said later in my speech. The hon. Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) said that many people sought to travel down what she described as a golden road, but tellingly said that it was not like that in practice, which is the truth of the matter.

The hon. Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall) made me feel rather unfit; he went on a sponsored run at the weekend, but I confess that I was sitting in a boat. I congratulate him on his efforts. He rightly said that we cannot rest, and that an all-party approach is needed.

With population growth in the third world easily outstripping economic development, it is no surprise that the crisis continues. If a country's population is growing faster than its economy, it is effectively going backwards, particularly in respect of economic growth per capita. That is why the Conservative party has taken a close interest in the subject for many years. It should come as no surprise that we welcome any steps taken to reduce debt for those countries for which it is an intolerable burden.

The Conservative party has a proud track record on debt relief. The previous Conservative Government wrote off £1.2 billion of debt—the single largest contribution to solving the debt problem. I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Richmond Park acknowledge the steps that were taken by the previous Government, who initiated the heavily indebted poor countries initiative. My right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) was the principle architect of its forerunner, the Trinidad terms, which reduced by two thirds the debt owed by the poorest and most indebted countries. Again, it was my right hon. Friend who pressed for full implementation at the Naples summit of the Paris Club of creditor nations. As Prime Minister, at the 1994 G7 summit in Tokyo, my right hon. Friend gave much momentum to the Cairo conference on population and development—a not unrelated subject.

In opposition, the Conservative party continues to support debt relief as an effective tool in development policy, and has proposed new ways to take the issue forward. Hon. Members have spoken about the excellent work carried out by Jubilee 2000 to which we pay tribute. We support its campaign to cut debt in those countries for which it is an intolerable burden.

We welcome the Government's initiatives in the reduction of bilateral debt. We said in September 1999 that the Government should cancel 100 per cent. of bilateral debt and we welcomed and supported the subsequent announcement of the cancellation of bilateral debts for the world's poorest countries, subject to a rigorous audit, with the money saved to be spent on health and education. Those are important caveats.

We support the Government when they act with organisations such as the World Bank and the IMF to promote well-thought-out multilateral debt reduction

programmes that offer the prospect of sustainable economic growth in the long term. We support the main features of the Cologne debt initiative.

It is essential that debt relief is delivered quickly, to benefit the poorest members of society. However, if the Government are taking credit for the success of the campaign, they must take responsibility for the unsatisfactory progress in the reduction of multilateral debt. As I said earlier, the HIPC initiative was originally agreed by the previous Government in September 1996. According to the World Bank, the 40 most heavily indebted poor countries have external debts totalling some £194 billion. Last year, at the G7 summit in Cologne, the total debt relief was increased from £52 billion to £100 billion and the Prime Minister told the House that:

it is an issue whose time had come——[*Official Report*, 21 June 1999; Vol. 333, c. 763.]

Sadly, the reality is lagging behind the rhetoric. A year later, only five countries have received debt relief and only about 15 will have qualified by the end of 2000, instead of the hoped-for 24 or 25. Only two extra countries, Bolivia and Mozambique, will reach completion point in 2000. As the hon. Members for Bristol, West and for Richmond Park said, in the five countries that are beginning to receive debt relief the debt service payments have fallen by an average of only 40 per cent. Reference was made to Uganda; the United Nations website yesterday said that relief to Uganda has currently been suspended because of the military activities there.

Progress is slow and bureaucracy is one of the culprits. The hon. Member for South Swindon mentioned Guyana, which was expected to be one of the first beneficiaries. As the h Lady said, the Guyanan Government sought IMF advice last year to reach agreement in a pay dispute with public sector workers. They took the IMF's advice to settle on the basis of independent arbitration, which resulted in the Government exceeding their budgetary targets. The IMF is now using that overspending as a reason to delay debt relief. I agree with the hon. Member for South Swindon that that is not an acceptable way for the IMF to behave. I also agree with her that countries such as Nigeria and Haiti, which are among the poorest in the world, are not even being considered.

There are many other reasons why the initiative is faltering; much has been made of the United States Congress proving obstructive. The World Bank argues that its credit rating could be damaged; the Inter-American Development bank has so far refused to provide its own funding and the European Union is refusing to release funds until the United States provides its "fair share" of debt relief. The introduction of poverty-reduction strategy papers is being used as an excuse to delay relief still further. Japan is pressuring some countries not to apply for relief.

In short, we are witnessing political wrangling, conflicting agendas, lack of consensus, rather than the delivery of the modest debt relief on offer to those most in need. We recognise that the Government are trying to cut through that and have set up a joint World Bank/ IMF committee to oversee the implementation process. I am sure that the Economic Secretary will give us an update on what is happening in that committee.

There is an important point here, however, that has bedevilled the Government since the day they got elected: the delivery lags behind the spin that has been put on the initiative, not just by President Clinton or the Prime Minister, but by the Chancellor of the Exchequer who said in September last year that:

if we are successful it will be a matter not of years or months but weeks before the first country will benefit from debt relief.

The firm belief was that others would follow thereafter. It comes as no surprise that the UN Secretary-General said in March this year that:

the deeper, faster and broader relief promised last year has yet to materialise.

My strong advice to the Government is not to raise expectations to a level where they cannot deliver and, indeed, it is not within their gift to deliver. They face a big challenge. We are behind them in their efforts, but they should get on with it quietly and not let their spin doctors anywhere near the subject. Otherwise, perish the thought, they might be accused of being all mouth and no delivery. We need a more disciplined approach to international borrowing and lending. We have a new century and a new era in global finance. Let us make sure that it succeeds.

11.1 am

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, West (Valerie Davey) on securing this Adjournment debate on an important subject. I welcome the recognition that hon. Members have given to the Government's role and the progress that has been made. We always want progress to be faster, but we are achieving a great deal. I shall argue that case and try to answer the key points that have been made this morning.

This is clearly an important issue and one to which the Government remain deeply committed. Our track record demonstrates our commitment. We called for and got a review of the original heavily indebted poor countries initiative. We pressed our G7 and international colleagues to adopt challenging targets on debt reduction and the numbers of countries receiving debt, relief and we have made a commitment to give 100 per cent. debt relief to every country that qualifies under the HIPC initiative.

I obviously recognise the contribution of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) in starting the process off, but when the Government came into office in 1997, not one country was receiving debt relief under the HIPC initiative that had been agreed in 1996. I therefore take exception to the tone and one or two of the remarks made by the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway). The previous Government had not made progress and the vicious cycle of debt, poverty and economic decline was trapping more and more people.

The scale of human tragedy that is involved is difficult to accept. More than 130,000 children die in Africa each week. That is a terrible statistic, and it moved a number of my hon. Friends and the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) to contribute to the debate. It has also moved huge numbers of the population of the UK to send us cards and to put pressure on both us and, I am

[Miss Melanie Johnson]

glad to hear, other Governments. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, West told us about letters being sent in Japanese.

Under the historic agreement secured in Cologne, the HIPC initiative was enhanced to provide more debt relief to more countries. Five countries are already receiving enhanced debt relief and another 15 are expected to do so before the end of the year. Today, the board of the World Bank will discuss the issue and we hope that a decision will be reached soon thereafter. We are still on course to meet our G7 target of helping three quarters of eligible countries through to decision point by the end of the year.

So far the HIPC initiative has given out $14 billion in debt relief—representing an average stock-of-debt reduction of about 45 per cent. for each of the countries—on top of debt relief mechanisms such as the Paris Club reschedulings, which reduced debt stock by a further 67 per cent. At its decision point, Tanzania received commitments from its creditors to provide debt service relief of more than $3 billion, which will translate into an overall halving of its debt service obligations over the next three years.

Several points about Tanzania were raised in the debate, so I shall try to answer them in greater detail. The World Bank loan agreed with Tanzania is on highly concessional terms. It is preferable for the country to receive such concessional lending rather than borrow from the private sector at competitive rates. We do not want to starve countries of new lending for productive projects. We cannot prevent a country from borrowing: it needs to take on new debt to support projects and spending that contribute to poverty reduction. Such debt is not inherently bad if the money is being put to productive use, so we must ensure that all new lending is productive lending.

Tanzania's poverty reduction strategy paper, which provides the basis for all new lending and support from donors such as the UK, is constructed around actions that will benefit the whole population. The Government are committed to setting the poverty reduction targets in each of the priority sectors—agriculture, education, health, rural roads and water. The interim poverty reduction paper highlighted the need to increase school enrolment rates, to improve the quality of primary education and to raise the coverage of immunisation against diphtheria, polio and tetanus. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development was recently in Tanzania and was impressed by the progress that the country was making on all those fronts.

Dr. Tonge: I should like to press the Minister a little further. To what extent can the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund monitor how the funds are spent? A great deal of debt was incurred during the 1980s and much money went into the pockets of dictators: it never benefited the people of those countries. Has anything changed? Are the institutions monitoring more carefully what happens or can we expect exactly the same story 10 years hence?

Miss Johnson: We constantly try to improve performance in those regards. We have made progress, but more remains to be done. I can tell the hon. Lady that the Government are not complacent about these problems. I shall return to her points about the World Bank in a few moments.

Earlier this year, the UK Government were concerned about slippages in the timetable of countries coming forward. We have continually pressed for the revised HIPC initiative to be implemented quickly, so those in need feel the effects of debt relief quickly. That is why my right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for International Development wrote to the acting managing director of the IMF and the chairman of the World Bank, urging them to set up a HIPC implementation group to oversee progress. We were delighted when those organisations announced at their spring meeting that they were setting up a joint implementation committee on HIPC. That group is charged with overseeing the implementation of the initiative and has already had its first meeting, the outcome of which was a timetable which should result in at least 20 countries reaching the decision point by the end of the year. The group will manage the implementation of the timetable and we hope that as a result there will be greater progress in those countries.

Valerie Davey: Many of us are sceptical about committees, which are sometimes set up and then kicked into touch. Can my hon. Friend tell us more about the nature of this important committee? Why are expectations for the future so rosy? The two important bodies needed to be brought together, but given our anxiety about them individually, what is to be gained from the committee unless there is a new impetus, or, indeed, new members of the committee?

Miss Johnson: The first meeting was encouraging because it produced the timetable. I agree that there is a danger that meetings are not as productive as they might be, but the committee brings together the two institutions, sets timetables and reports directly to the boards. Progress is made only by battling to move forward; we are pushing as hard as we can to make progress, and receiving support from others in that respect.

We hope that 20 countries will reach decision point by the end of the year. Of the 41 HIPC countries, 16—the number varies—are at present suffering from the disruption or the aftermath of conflict. Therefore, most have not begun to draw up poverty-reduction strategies to show how debt relief can release resources to reduce poverty. Five further countries are likely to be deemed to have sustainable levels of debt, which means that they will not require further debt relief under HIPC once they have received such relief under the Naples terms from the Paris Club. We expect the remaining 20 countries to reach the decision point under the HIPC initiative and to start receiving debt relief this year.The United Kingdom is at the forefront of international efforts to assist poor countries and we encourage others to match our efforts.

Hon. Members asked about conditionality, poverty reduction strategy papers and other matters, and I shall answer one or two questions now. I confirm what I said in a previous Adjournment debate: it is not necessary to have a full poverty reduction strategy paper in place at decision point. I assure my hon. Friend the Member for

Bristol, West that that continues to be our view. An interim paper is needed, but we are prepared to be flexible about it and we have encouraged others to be flexible, too. We want good poverty reduction strategy papers in place by completion point, and we want countries to take as long as they need to achieve a good strategy that has broad support. However, we argued for being reasonable in considering how progress can be made so that a country is not held up.

Uganda's debt relief was mentioned; it will be used to reduce pupil-teacher ratios from 100 to one to 50 to one—that is good progress, although we hope that the ratio will be reduced even further—and to build new schools to allow the Ugandan Government to meet their goal of universal primary education. Good progress will be made in Uganda as a result of that.

Dr. Tonge: The Minister may not be able to answer my question, so I shall ask it in the hope of receiving a written reply. When we were in Uganda, we found that, as a result of qualifying for debt relief, the structural adjustment programme had imposed the need to charge a small fee for primary education. In our view, that was a step backwards. Can Uganda now drop those fees and make education free?

Miss Johnson: I understand that such action is not possible at the moment. The hon. Lady invited me to write to her, and I am happy to do so and to copy my letter to other hon. Members present. In any case, the World Bank is leading in Uganda on social spending, on which it has expertise. As I said, progress is being made.

Others have been persuaded by our approach to the interim poverty reduction strategy papers, and that has been adopted in the HIPC modalities, so we have made an impact on the processes and on some countries.

Ms Drown: The language of the debate is often about assisting developing countries. How much does the debate focus on not only the moral argument, but the economic argument? We have suggested that some countries may be lagging behind Britain. Would that situation change if the economic argument were pushed forward? If the economies of all the countries that had debt lifted from their shoulders really grew, new markets would open up for the US, Japan and the European Community. Would such arguments help to bring more countries on board?

Miss Johnson: The economic issues must always be considered, but some of them are the primary responsibility of other Departments, so my hon. Friend will understand if I do not comment in detail on the issues that she raised.

Mr. McFall: I will follow the question from the hon. Member for Richmond Park about the structural adjustment programmes. My experience of some of the African countries in the 1980s was that programmes focused on only one part of the economy and brought the rest of the economy down. A refined structural adjustment programme is needed. I mentioned earlier that I had visited Zimbabwe, where the structural adjustment programme had a negative effect many years ago. Will the Minister examine that aspect of those programmes and perhaps write to hon. Members? Our constituents are keen to advance that important issue.

Miss Johnson: I am happy to add some remarks about that issue to the letter that I promised earlier, if it will help hon. Members contributing to this useful debate.

Our policy has been of bilateral 100 per cent. debt forgiveness, which has underlined our commitment to debt relief. Since we made that announcement, we have encouraged other creditor nations to adopt the same view. Our initiative is generating results. All the G7 countries have now announced 100 per cent. debt relief policies. Some hon. Members asked about the 100 per cent. level and the relationship between debt and aid debt. Perhaps it will help to remind hon. Members that we are committed to 100 per cent. relief for all countries qualifying under the HIPC initiative. That includes 100 per cent. relief on debts owed to the Export Credits Guarantee Department.

Dr. Tonge: The Minister is being generous in giving way. Does that mean that countries receive 100 per cent. relief when they reach decision point? There are many difficulties in reaching decision point, because of the structural adjustment programmes and other requirements. Is not the problem the fact that the countries will not get 100 per cent. relief because of delays in reaching decision point?

Miss Johnson: We are trying to make progress on those issues. The countries will receive 100 per cent. debt relief when they reach decision point, but we want to be sure that the cancellation of debt will go towards the reduction of poverty. All five countries that have reached decision point are benefiting from it.

Let me give the overall figures. Some $100 billion was pledged in the Cologne agreements. That was broken down into $50 billion through the initiative HIPC on multilateral relief, $30 billion on overseas development assistance relief and $20 billion on Paris Club bilateral relief. Of the $50 billion multilateral relief, $12 billion has been delivered. I am afraid that I do not have information on the other sums.

Progress is being made. The focus is now on next month's G7 Okinawa summit. The Government will continue to keep up the momentum in the run up to the summit and beyond. The G7, international financial institutions and debtor countries together must ensure not only that debt relief is delivered, but that the released resources are used to eradicate poverty in HIPC countries. The UK is reassured that the United States Administration remains committed to securing funds for HIPC. Larry Summers, the United States Secretary of the Treasury, recently made a strong speech urging Congress to approve the necessary funding. The lobbying efforts of non-governmental organisations such as Jubilee 2000 are important in getting the message across to Congress. I welcome their activities in that regard. Indeed, the Chancellor will meet one of the Senators with responsibility for that matter next month to discuss the issue of HIPC, so additional work is taking place.

We continue to push Japan to be more generous and to deliver its relief from decision point. At the moment, it delivers relief from completion point and looks only at

[Miss Johnson]

pre-cut off date debt. There are issues to address, but pressure is being exerted and discussions are taking place.

As for Nigeria, the Government have been at the forefront of offering it support so that it helps itself. It has a troubled recent history. We have expressed our determination to harness its resources for economic reform and poverty eradication. We have offered help in all areas, including debt management, privatisation and asset recovery. Contact between the UK and Nigeria has taken place at every conceivable level of government. We have worked hard to persuade other countries to take a similarly supportive attitude towards Nigeria. Larry Summers made a positive statement last week on debt cancellation for Nigeria, which shows that our approach is paying off.

The most effective way to help Nigeria is to work collaboratively within the multilateral framework. We believe in a two-stage approach: first, to implement a generous rescheduling of debt during the IMF programme which is under negotiation, and, secondly, to ensure that Nigeria's debt receives a new treatment in 12 months' time. That will allow Nigeria to build up a track record of reform and re-establish relations with the international community. In light of its recent history, that is an important part of the economic setting, and one on which we have been working positively.

Questions were raised about the reform of the IMF and the World Bank. The G7 Finance Ministers will discuss the topic again at their meeting next month. The new poverty reduction and growth facility signals a new chapter in joint working between the bank and the fund. We want the IMF to remain involved in developing countries and working with the bank. Academic debate acknowledges that stable economic growth is a necessary precondition for development. The countries need a stable macro-economic framework as well as the others measures that we have discussed. Africa is estimated to need to achieve growth rates of 6 to 7 per cent. if it is to reach international development targets. Between 1990 and 1997, growth rates in Africa averaged no more than about 1 per cent. Considerable progress must be made in terms of the economic setting.

A question was raised about the position of Guyana. Briefly, the objective remains to work for an enhanced HIPC decision point in September. We hope to be able to convert the interim poverty reduction strategy paper into a full paper. Work continues on several fronts and progress continues to be made.

A question was raised about EU money. As hon. Members know, the EU agreed more than 1 billion euro to go to HIPC from the European development fund underspends of last year. Of that sum, 680 million euro will go to the HIPC trust fund. The first tranche of the money will be delivered at the beginning of next month and will be vital for giving debt relief to the first countries coming through the process. The Government agree that underspends of European development fund resources can be used weil by being put towards HIPC. That has been the thrust of much of our argument.

I will continue to assure hon. Members that progress on all fronts is important. It is obviously important that the subject is on the agenda at the Okinawa summit. I assure hon. Members that debt relief will be discussed in the context both of progress on the HIPC initiative and of the wider development agenda. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor have informed the Japanese presidency of the G8 that we would like to use the opportunity of the summit and of the meetings of G7 Finance Ministers running up to the summit to review and to encourage progress on debt relief initiatives.

We must remember that debt relief is only the first link in the chain that can help countries to establish a virtuous circle of debt relief, poverty reduction and economic development. We have touched on all those subjects this morning. There is still much to do. We want to see developing countries playing their full role in the world economy and to see aid targeted and used to its maximum effect. We want developing countries to play their part in the world trade system.

We have an ambitious agenda but we must achieve it. The Government will continue to press our international colleagues for action on the issue. As several hon. Members have said, we have reasons to be proud, but we are by no means complacent about the challenges that face us. I assure all those who have contributed to the valuable debate that progress is being made. I hope that they will understand that we are doing as much as we can to see that even greater progress is achieved in future.

Road Safety (Derbyshire)

11.30 am

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): I am grateful to have the opportunity to debate road safety in Derbyshire, a matter which causes me serious concern. My constituency covers 350 square miles of Derbyshire and has in it some of the most attractive countryside in the United Kingdom. The number of tourists attracted to the county and especially to the peak district is an associated problem. It is no exaggeration to say that some 50 per cent. of the United Kingdom's population live within an hour's drive of Derbyshire.

Over the years, successive Governments have concentrated on giving road safety top priority. I know that the present Government do, as did the previous Government. For some years, I was a junior Minister at the Department of Transport, and we launched a campaign—I am glad to see that it is still running—with the slogan, "Kill your speed, not a child." Although speed is not necessarily a factor in every accident, it is often a significant factor.

The previous Government presided over the safest roads in the European Union. Between 1979 and 1997, dramatic improvements took place in road safety. The number of deaths and serious casualties fell by 43 per cent.; drink-related road deaths decreased by about 68 per cent.; and the number of fatal accidents involving motor cyclists was 62 per cent. lower. I remember being fascinated and puzzled by the fact that the number of road deaths was fewer in 1995 than in any year since records began in 1926, despite there being 14 times as many vehicles on the roads. A number of measures were taken to try to improve road safety, one of which was to lift its profile. In an effort to make the roads safe, we wanted people to think about how they drive.

I am disturbed by the dramatic increase in the number of fatalities on Derbyshire roads this year. I am grateful for the help that Chief Superintendent Bateman of the Derbyshire constabulary has given me during the past few weeks in preparing for today's debate. He confirmed that in the first six months of last year, until 19 June 1999, there were 20 deaths on Derbyshire roads. I was disturbed to hear that in the same six months this year, there have been some 40 deaths. I was aware that the number of deaths had increased greatly, and we must carefully consider the reasons for that increase.

The last year for which the county's casualty report is available is 1998. One of the problems is that casualty reports are, by their very nature, complex and detailed documents. They are often not published until a long time after the year's end. The 1999 report is not likely to be available for another eight to 10 weeks. In 1998, 66 people were killed on Derbyshire roads and 716 people were seriously injured. The estimated cost of those accidents was more than £250 million. That is a huge sum of money for the community. That year showed a slight improvement over 1997, casualties being about 2 per cent. lower.

I am concerned by the dramatic rise in the figures this year. It is disturbing to see such regularity in the numbers. I hope that the Minister can reassure me that what we see in Derbyshire is not happening in the rest of the country and that, for whatever reason, it is happening only in the one county. If those sorts of increases were happening everywhere, the Government would be heading in the wrong direction to meet the targets that they have set themselves.

The other issue that I want to raise this morning is the devastation that such fatalities have on the families. During my time as Minister, I met the families of those killed in the Pan Am 103 bombing and in the Marchioness disaster. Those were the most difficult meetings that I ever had. The Minister should be aware that the same devastation is suffered by the families of those killed in road accidents, but the families do not always receive the same publicity and help.

Kevin Delaney, a spokesman for the RAC Foundation, said:

> The trouble is that we have a rail crash and 20 or 30 people are killed, whereas there may be as many as 10 road deaths a day but they don't happen in the same place at the same time and they happen for a variety of reasons, which, more often than not, are related to human error.

In 1999, David Skinner, a road traffic management officer for Derbyshire police, said:

> If the same number of people who die in these accidents were murder or manslaughter victims in Derbyshire then there would be a public outcry. But, because they are road accidents it seems to be accepted.

On occasions when I have had to visit the families or relatives of people who are involved in fatal accidents, as I am sure other hon. Members have, I am often asked why the accident occurred, what happened and what measures can be taken to improve overall road safety. The Government have set themselves some tough targets on road safety and on accident reduction figures. I welcome that, but I have to tell them that they have not put their money where their targets are. They said at the time of the accident reduction announcements that an extra £100 million would be invested, but they did not say that that was new money. In fact, they were granting to authorities their approval to borrow. One can sometimes speak about the figures in too much detail, but they clearly show overall a decline in the amount of money spent by the Government on road maintenance, which is an important part of the old question of how road safety should be dealt with.

The last three years under the previous Government saw an average annual investment of more than £2 billion. That does not compare well with the investment made by the current Government, who have spent an average of £1.5 billion a year during their first three years in office, which is a substantial reduction in road spending. One of the ways in which the previous Government made progress was by building major new bypasses. We built 160 such roads, as well as many smaller ones. Bypasses have made a major contribution to the reduction of fatal road accidents in this country. More than £26 billion—at 1995-96 prices—was invested in motorways and trunk roads. Our investment achieved the completion of more than 400 major road improvement schemes and the building and upgrading of about 1,300 miles of trunk road, which is 13 per cent. of the motorway trunk road network.

We understand from press reports that the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is to change its overall view on the building of new roads. Such roads are often bypasses, which can make our towns and villages safer places and better

[Mr. Patrick McLoughlin]

environments for the people who live and work in them. I hope that the Minister will give me some reassurance on that point.

One of my most serious concerns about west Derbyshire is deaths involving motorcyclists. Last year, 16 motorcyclists died there, and, by 1 June this year, a further eight had lost their lives. Motorcyclists are extremely vulnerable, and I do not want to give the impression that they are always at fault in accidents. In any collision that involves a car and motorcyclist, it is usually the latter who sustains the worst injuries, irrespective of who is blameworthy. Matlock Bath has a great attraction for motorcyclists, and on some Sundays, 300 to 400 of them might visit the location. Anybody who goes there on a Sunday will see that that is not an overestimate. Motorcyclists tend to congregate on Sundays, but they also congregate at other times of the week.

I want to mention a few roads in particular. I was immensely pleased when the A50 was finally upgraded. Perhaps naively, I used to call it the Doveridge bypass because people in Doveridge wanted that road to be upgraded. However, it was a mistake to call it the Doveridge bypass because it is basically a link road between the M1 and the M6. It is a major road, all of which is a dual carriageway, and it has made a tremendous difference to the road structure of the east and west midlands. Certainly, I know of many colleagues who no longer drive up the M6, but take the M1 and cut across on the A50 to pick up the M6 further up the network.

Much of the road goes through open countryside and has a whisper concrete surface. However, concrete has been used on a small section of the road, which goes through Doveridge, and the noise increase in that area is amazing. As soon as one hits the concrete surface, the noise level rises. It seems unbelievable to me that Connect, who built the road, was allowed to lay a noisy road surface on the most populated stretch of the A50. I want the Minister to send a strong message to Connect that the current road surface is unacceptable for environmental reasons and because of the noise, which is now constantly heard in Doveridge, as well as in places like Marston Montgomery and Somersal Herbert, which never used to be affected by any noise from the A50. Connect should be told to resurface that section of road. Construction companies have been instructed to resurface other stretches of road on which concrete has been laid.

As a result of the A50 being built, several people now use the A515 from Sudbury to Ashbourne. However, on certain sections of the A515, it is virtually impossible for two lorries to pass, and the number of accidents on that road has increased. An investigation needs to be carried out because the A50 upgrade has led to a substantial increase of traffic on the A515.

I want to revert to the A50 and to mention the Sudbury-Aston roundabout. A few people live on one side of that link road between the M1 and M6. However, during construction, no provision was made for people to cross to the other side of the road to catch buses. That is a problem because pedestrians must dodge traffic on an especially busy dual carriageway. I have asked Connect to make the necessary changes, but such matters seem to take an inordinate amount of time and reports have only just been prepared.

I also want to make a plea for the completion of the Ashbourne bypass. The Ashbourne bypass, on the A52, which is a trunk road, was completed some years ago. Unfortunately, at that stage, the county council did not include the completion of the Ashbourne bypass in the plans that it submitted to Government. Therefore no money was made available. If the scheme had been included, it would, I was reliably informed, probably have fallen within the Government's plans to improve the bypass network. Now, given the Government's new approach to bypasses, I hope that the A515 Ashbourne bypass can be included. It will make a tremendous difference to the town.

Several measures have been taken to improve the safety of the A6 and I welcome them overall. One stretch has been changed from dual carriageway to single carriageway on both sides of the road. That was the only stretch between Matlock and Bakewell where it was possible to overtake safely and the change was a mistake. I hope that the agencies that now manage the A6 can examine the issue. One of the problems arising in connection with the measures taken to improve road safety on the A6 is traffic leaving it to use minor roads. The need that that creates for policing of those roads as well as the A6, with its high risk of accidents, has resource implications for the Derbyshire constabulary.

Pressure has been put on the county council to consider road safety and calming measures on the A623, which goes through Calver. I hope for a sympathetic reaction from the county council, and perhaps the Minister will encourage that. A great deal of traffic uses the road on its way through the peak district.

I have raised road safety because I am very concerned about the number of fatalities in Derbyshire in the first part of the year. I hope that that rate will not continue, because those fatalities cause devastation and ruin to families.

11.47 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) on securing this important debate and I thank him for his help in advising my office of the key issues that he intended to raise.

I was saddened to hear of the recent fatal accidents in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. It is a real tragedy that three lives were lost last month in a single accident in Matlock and that two of those killed were only 18 years of age. My sympathy goes to the families and friends of those involved, whose lives will have been devastated.

Each year more than 3,400 people die on British roads and more than 40,000 are seriously injured. In Derbyshire alone on average 85 people are injured on roads each week—11 of them seriously—and one is killed. That is an enormous toll of human suffering that we can and must reduce. That is why we have developed a new 10-year road safety strategy, entitled "Tomorrow's roads: safer for everyone", which was launched by the Prime Minister on 1 March. The strategy includes tough new casualty reduction targets.

In the first four months of the year there were 22 fatal accidents in Derbyshire compared with 10 for the same period in 1999. The hon. Gentleman's latest information shows that the accident rate continues at twice that of last year. That is an extremely alarming increase. There is no simple explanation for it, but the authorities in the area are responding vigorously to that most serious challenge. Derbyshire, as the hon. Gentleman said, is an extremely attractive county to visitors—particularly the Peak park and rural areas. There is clear evidence of increasing car-borne visitor traffic. The area around Matlock in particular is enjoyed by hundreds of motorcyclists each year, but that adds to the county's safety and environmental problems.

The authorities responsible for the roads in Derbyshire—the county council, which looks after the local roads, the Highways Agency, in respect of the trunk roads, and the police—place enormous importance on road safety and road casualty reduction. This year, the county council is spending approximately £1.6 million on schemes to improve safety. We are giving local authorities more freedom than ever to develop their transport priorities through the new local transport plan process. That enables them, for the first time, to plan over a five-year period, working with local people, businesses and other agencies to ensure that their policies meet local needs. Road safety is, of course, very high among them.

Derbyshire county council has been proactive in improving safety. Road safety implications are considered at every stage of the council's transport planning. Its proposals are set out in the local transport plan and aim to reduce the number and scale of accidents by tackling areas with accident problems and by reducing vehicle speeds, which are a major contributory factor in many accidents and affect the severity of injuries.

There will be more resources. In addition to the £5.8 million transport settlement for Derbyshire for 2000-01, which represented a 25 per cent. increase on the previous year, we were able to allocate an extra £302,000. That money has been targeted at schemes to improve child safety and safe routes to school, as part of the transport fund announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Budget. Over the past two years, resources for Derbyshire have increased by some 90 per cent.

However, we are going even further. The total amount of money available to local authorities will rise again from about £755 million in 2000-01 to well over £1 billion in 2001-02. That money will be allocated to local authorities on the basis of the priorities set out in their local transport plans. The new funding takes the form of credit approvals, because that is the method of funding that local authorities prefer. I emphasise that that is real money. It represents real increases in funding by central Government for local transport and road safety improvements.

The hon. Member for West Derbyshire raised detailed concerns. I can assure him that the Highways Agency also attaches the highest priority to road safety. For instance, the A6 and A52 trunk roads in Derbyshire have been subject to accident reduction trials. Those projects are aimed at reducing the number of accidents that occur on the A6 between Derby and Stockport, and on the A52 and A523 between Derby and Leek.

Blanket 50 mph speed limits have been introduced along those roads, with sections of 30 mph or 40 mph through towns and villages. Gateways with coloured surfacings and carriageway roundals have been introduced. Additional pedestrian facilities have been provided, together with visibility improvements at certain junctions and improved signing and road markings throughout. The implementation of those measures was completed as recently as April, so it is too early to say how successful the schemes have been, but early signs are positive. Indeed, some evidence suggests that the schemes have contributed to a reduction in traffic flows on the A6 and the A52.

The A515 between the A50 Derby southern bypass and Ashbourne is narrow in parts, with similarly narrow or non-existent verges, which means that there is no simple means of widening the road. The county council estimates that traffic has increased on the road by 29 per cent. since the opening of that bypass in 1996. The council plans to resurface the worst sections of the road and undertake a signing and aligning review, which will improve safety. However, it is fair to say that that will not address the safety issues fully, so a topographical survey is also being undertaken with a view to including an improvement scheme within the 2001-02 programme. I hope that that reassures the hon. Gentleman and his constituents.

I am aware of the situation in Calver, which is on the A623. I understand that the county council has reviewed the current 40 mph speed limit in the village and does not consider that a lower speed limit is warranted. However, it has agreed to extend the 40 mph limit towards Baslow to ensure that the speed limit signs are visible to drivers coming into the village. The council is currently processing the necessary traffic regulation orders. In addition, the county council is investigating the A623 as a whole. A capital allocation has been made for route enhancement measures to improve signing and carriageway delineation. The A623 has also been identified as a route that may benefit from mobile speed cameras.

I come now to the problem of noise on the A50 at Doveridge. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Highways Agency has a programme to quieten particularly noisy stretches of road. The A50 Doveridge bypass was not included in the list of most pressing cases, but in view of local concerns, there is no reason why it should not be assessed retrospectively in line with the original criteria. The Highways Agency is considering whether the circumstances at Doveridge warrant further noise analysis as a precursor to early maintenance work, which in turn could reduce the levels of noise from the road. The hon. Gentleman has made a strong case and, in view of his close interest in the issue, I will ensure that the Highways Agency continues to keep him fully aware of developments.

As can be seen, much work is being done at the local level to improve road safety, but what of national road safety policy? We are fortunate to be building on a relatively good track record in casualty reduction since the targets set by the previous Government in 1987. I am happy to acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's role in that as a Transport Minister in that Administration. The target was to reduce casualties by one third by 2000. By 1998, we had achieved a 39 per cent. reduction in the number of fatalities and a 45 per cent. reduction in the

[Mr. Keith Hill]

number of serious injuries. That must be set against a significant rise in traffic over the same period. Moreover, Britain's road safety record is relatively good compared with that of other countries in Europe.

The new road safety strategy and targets for the next 10 years are even more challenging. By 2010, compared with the average for 1994-98, we want to see a 40 per cent. overall reduction in the number of people killed or seriously injured on our roads, a 50 per cent. reduction in the number of children killed or seriously injured and a 10 per cent. reduction in the rate of slight injuries.

To achieve the radical improvement in road safety that we wish to see during the next 10 years the Government must, through Government offices, the Highways Agency and others, work in close partnership with other bodies. We will work in partnership with local authorities that are developing local road safety strategies and targets as part of their local transport plans. We will also work with the police who make a substantial contribution to road safety by enforcing road traffic law. In addition, we will work with road safety organisations, such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety and road user groups. Most importantly, we will need to work with individual road users themselves.

Obviously, in the remaining time available I cannot describe the full range of measures in the strategy, but I should like to focus on two key issues. First, the strategy has child safety at its core. Although our overall record for child road safety is good, unfortunately the same cannot be said for our record on child pedestrians. We are determined to improve our record and we will need to take a multi-pronged approach. That will include more traffic-calmed 20 mph zones. We also need to make improvements in the way in which we educate our children to be safer when using the road. That is not only about drivers taking care or slower speeds, but about helping children and others to understand better the risks that they face and how to deal with them. Finally, we must aim to have more children wearing seatbelts and to have more child restraints in cars.

Speed is another priority area. It used to be socially acceptable to have a few drinks and then drive, but once people understood that drink-driving kills, it was seen as irresponsible. Currently, many people do not see it as a great sin to drive at 40 mph in a 30 mph zone, but 85 per cent. of pedestrians hit at 40 mph will die compared with 45 per cent. at 30 mph and 5 per cent. at 20 mph. Speed kills. It is dangerous and antisocial and we must get that message across. The issue is driver responsibility. We will make it a major theme in road safety during the next 10 years.

Once again, I thank the hon. Member for West Derbyshire for allowing us to discuss these important issues by means of this Adjournment debate.

Welsh School (London)

12 noon

Ms Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): I first heard of the Welsh school in London, Ysgol Gymraeg Llundain, when I arrived here as a new Member in 1997. Many right hon. and hon. Members have known and helped this Welsh school for many years. I am sorry that more of them cannot be here today because of the clash with the meeting of the Welsh Grand Committee, but I am grateful to have this opportunity to put its case. They have supported the school by lobbying and fundraising.

I first heard of the school when I jointly set up a Welsh language class here in the House of Commons for hon. Members who wanted to improve their Welsh. When we came here as new Members from Wales after the 1997 election we all felt an obligation to get to know the language of our country better. Our teacher was Glenys Roberts, who also taught at the Welsh language school in London, and she enlisted our help to keep this well established school going. Some of us visited the school in Willesden Green and children were shown around the House of Commons. It was then that I became a supporter of the school.

Ysgol Gymraeg Llundain is the only Welsh-medium school outside Wales and it has been providing a Welsh-medium education here in London for more than 40 years. It has been based nearly all that time in the vestry of Willesden Green Welsh chapel. The present crisis in the school was precipitated by the closure of the chapel last summer because of a dwindling congregation. I went to see the premises and saw how the once beautiful chapel had fallen into decline. The chapel had only five members remaining when it closed.

The chapel and the vestry have now been sold and the school must find alternative premises in four weeks' time. The new owners of the chapel allowed it to stay until the end of the summer term although the chapel has been empty for the last year. No suitable permanent premises have yet been found, although temporary premises may be available. Suitable long-term premises are the key issue for the school. It has had many funding crises in the past and has always managed to keep going. It has many supporters in Wales, including some international Welsh stars, so it has always been able to appeal to someone to enable it to keep going. During the 38 years that it was based in the chapel in Willesden Green it could always rely on the support of the chapel, but that has now gone.

I have secured this debate to seek some commitment from the Government to help in this crisis. I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards is sympathetic towards us. She has been kind enough to meet me and other supporters from the Welsh group of MPs to discuss the issue. The school has 16 full-time pupils and 16 part-time pupils. The part-time pupils come on a Friday while attending schools in their local areas for the rest of the week. Some of the parents bring these children considerable distances to have the opportunity to keep up their own language. That is a fairly unusual arrangement, but it works.

Mrs. Betty Williams (Conwy): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. The Welsh Affairs Committee is currently examining social exclusion in

Wales. Does my hon. Friend agree that, if a solution to the problem is not found soon, the children whom she mentioned will indeed be socially excluded in London, which cannot be right?

Ms Morgan: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that it is important to have the opportunity to learn through one's native language and that language bears heavily on social exclusion issues. The Welsh Affairs Committee showed that that applies in Wales.

In addition to full and part-time pupils, there are 12 nursery children and 12 in the mother and toddler group. The school is small and I realise that concerns are often expressed about such schools. However, anyone who visited it and saw at first hand the range of opportunities available to the children, the commitment of the parents and the community spirit in the school would be impressed and would realise that any disadvantages regarding size are easily outweighed by the advantages.

Some children return to Wales to continue their education in the Welsh medium. Some families live in London temporarily and their children will return to Wales. Others will go on to secondary schools in the London area. The school is technically an independent school because it is outside the state system, but it has a policy of never turning away a new pupil. Parents pay what they can and generally help in the running of the school, which has a tremendous community commitment.

The school receives no money from Brent education authority. It wanted to gain voluntary-aided status, but was told that one of the conditions of gaining that is that it should teach the English curriculum at key stage 1. Key stage 2 is not a problem, because the school teaches the English and Welsh curriculum at that stage. However, the school feels that it would defeat its entire purpose if key stage 1 did not follow the Welsh curriculum. The problem of teaching an English curriculum applies only to children between the ages of five and seven.

I appeal to the Government to do what they can to find a way through a technical and bureaucratic problem. My right hon. Friend the Minister wrote to me after a meeting a few months ago. She said:

> As the Department sees it, the school would have difficulties in demonstrating that it could deliver the core subject of English in the infant years through the medium of Welsh.

We are, in effect, asking for the school to be treated in the same way as Welsh language schools are in Wales. English is taught at that stage of the curriculum and the children in Welsh language schools in Wales have a good knowledge of the English language and are able to progress in it.

Why is it so important that the school survives? The school in London is part of the general demand for Welsh language education in Wales. After the Education Act 1944, parents began to influence local education policies and the first bilingual school was established—largely as a result of parental pressure—in Llanelli in 1947. In the 1950s, demand for secondary education, nursery schools and play groups—Ysgolion meithrin—in the Welsh medium grew. The development of Welsh medium education has resulted from public demand and it has been a popular grass roots movement, particularly the play groups. These are not top-down, but grass roots, bottom-up developments that greatly influence the sort of education that people want in Wales.

Since I became a Member of Parliament I have opened three new nursery units in my constituency that teach in the Welsh medium. Local authorities generally cannot keep up with the demand in Wales for Welsh-medium education. My constituency contains Ysgol Glantaf, one of the largest Welsh-medium secondary schools in Wales. It is a successful school and its pupils regularly visit the House to discuss issues with me.

As in Welsh education, a similar growth has occurred in the status of the Welsh language. It has moved steadily forward since the Welsh Language Act 1967, which gave Welsh equal validity with English, albeit in a slightly grudging way. Since then, many developments have increased the status of the Welsh language in Wales.

As I said, the school in London is part of the demand for Welsh education that exists in Wales itself and it reflects the enthusiasm there for the Welsh language. The school has become a lifeline for families moving temporarily to London: the children can easily move back to Wales when they go to secondary schools or carry on with their education in London. There are half a million Welsh speakers in Wales and a proportion of them have inevitably been drawn to living in London. Despite a steady decline in the language between 1911 and 1981, by 1981 the number of Welsh speakers had stabilised and by 1991 an increase was visible, attributable, in part, to the growth of the playgroup movement and the grassroots revival of the language in Wales.

Today there is considerable enthusiasm for the Welsh language in Wales and many non-Welsh speaking Welsh people born in Wales, as well as English people who have moved to Wales, send their children to Welsh-medium schools. Parents often send their children to Welsh playgroups and nursery schools and it is common for mothers and fathers to learn the language with their children when they attend Welsh-medium playgroups.

London itself has an ancient Welsh community: the honourable Society of the Cymmrodorion is celebrating its 250th anniversary. A Welsh school was founded in Clerkenwell 300 years ago as a charity school for poor Welsh children in London. That school has developed and moved to Ashford, but its Welsh origins have been lost. It remains significant that 300 years ago, the Welsh in London were organising schools for Welsh children. Welsh people are, of course, some of the oldest communities of immigrants in London.

The establishment of the Welsh National Assembly has also increased awareness and pride in the Welsh national identity. Its proceedings are carried out bilingually. The only time that the Welsh language can be used by Members of Parliament is when the Welsh Grand Committee meets in Wales. Some of us are concerned about that restriction.

The growth of Welsh institutions and Welsh identity has been strongly supported by the different ethnic groups in Wales, who are aware of the importance of the preservation of language and culture. Many ethnic minority communities in Wales have helped to support the Welsh language and the establishment of the Welsh

[Ms Morgan]

National Assembly. The Welsh Affairs Committee also found that it was important for young people to be given opportunities to discuss issues such as social exclusion in their own language.

I know that the Minister is sympathetic to our cause. I appeal to the various institutions to work together to bring about a funding solution. Before devolution, the Welsh Office agreed and committed support to the Welsh community in Patagonia, and the Welsh Assembly has also given a commitment to such support. If we can support the Welsh community in Patagonia, there must be a way of supporting a Welsh school in London.

The school has gone straight to the National Assembly with a funding proposal for its running costs. It awaits a reply. In the past, the Welsh language board helped the school. Surely the Government can take a lead in London to help overcome the problems with the curriculum so that the local authority can help with the building and grant voluntary-aided status to the school. It will not establish a dangerous precedent because there is only one Welsh-medium school outside Wales. The circumstances are unique. The school has kept going for so long because of the parents' and the Welsh community's commitment. Now is the ideal time to provide a lifeline and to boost the school and the commitment that it has been given for so many years. With the establishment of the National Assembly, we are all much more aware of Welsh identity and of the importance of language and cultural roots. Whatever we do, we must not sentimentalise Wales. People in other parts of the United Kingdom and abroad sometimes see Wales as a place whose residents dress up in local costume and eat Welsh cakes, and whose only industry is coal. Sadly, most of the coal mines have gone, but we have a vibrant, multicultural community of which the language is an important part. I hope that the Minister will help us in dealing with the problem and that we will succeed in establishing the Welsh school in London—Ysgol Gymraeg Llundain—on a permanent basis.

12.15 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, North (Ms Morgan) for securing the debate. I was pleased to meet her and other colleagues to discuss the matter, and I fully accept the reasons why hon. Members who represent Welsh constituencies are campaigning so hard to save the Welsh school in London. They support the school not only because it has a good tradition and an honourable history, but because it is part of their wish to ensure that everything possible is done to maintain Welsh culture, of which the Welsh language is a key part.

We explored possible avenues of support for the school at our meeting some five, six or seven weeks ago. It is fair to say that it was agreed that I might find it difficult to secure the routes that were discussed, whether they related to funding, relaxing the national curriculum rule or whatever else. Since our meeting, we have reconsidered the national curriculum and the rules for granting voluntary-aided or foundation status, and, as my hon. Friend said, approaches have been made to the Welsh Assembly. Having considered the three options, I am not optimistic that any of them will provide a way forward in the weeks that remain before the end of term. However, I should like to speak about those three options, explain any problems and comment on routes that might still be open, even at this late stage.

My hon. Friend was right to say that the school is independent in status. The two main routes of support that are open to me as a Minister are either to fund it directly as an independent school or to encourage it to seek entry into the maintained sector. I shall deal with the latter point first. It is still possible for the school to seek foundation or voluntary-aided status. The Government encourage schools to take that route from the independent sector to the maintained sector. Since the general election, we have admitted 11 schools from the independent sector to the maintained sector, many of which represent particular religious or ethnic minority groups. They range from Muslim schools in Birmingham, where my own constituency is situated, to Seventh Day Adventist schools. There has been an honourable and rigorous debate about the criteria that should be used in granting schools access to the maintained sector. Such access secures funding, ensures that the schools receive revenue funding that is based on the number of students that they have and gives them access to capital funding. I hope that my hon. Friends will accept the need for criteria against which judgments can be made on whether a school can have access to the maintained sector.

Until now, the decision on whether a school should become part of the maintained sector has lain with the Secretary of State, who took the final decision on all the 11 cases in which we have so far acted. As my hon. Friend knows, that will not happen from now on. Apart from dealing with tail-end applications where the wish to enter the maintained sector was published before the change in arrangements, the decision on any future wish to become a maintained school from the independent sector will lie with the local school organisation committee, and with the schools adjudicator when there are disagreements. I want to assure my hon. Friend that, even at this late stage, it is still possible for a plan to be published to join the maintained sector. That plan would be discussed by the school organisation committee in Brent, where the school is situated, and, in the case of a disagreement, it would go to the schools adjudicator. It would be less than honest if I did not emphasise the criteria that the school organisation committee would have to consider in deciding whether the school could be admitted to the maintained sector. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, North will accept that we need criteria and must be seen to administer the criteria as fairly as possible.

The school organisation committee would first need to consider whether more places were needed, although we would want to encourage the committee to embrace diversity and not to be fettered by a need for counting up places and bodies. However, we do not want to provide for too many surplus places. The committee would have to be assured that the funding currently received by Brent, both from revenue and capital, was sufficient to ensure the medium and long-term survival of the school, and that the school would teach the national curriculum.

As my hon. Friends know, most difficulties arise from the issue of teaching the national curriculum. I am delighted that the national curriculum now encourages the teaching of the Welsh language in Wales. If the national curriculum means anything, it means that there is an entitlement to a body of knowledge, skills and experiences in every school maintained by a local education authority. It is not bureaucratic to raise the objection that a school does not teach key stage 1 in English, because that goes to the heart of the national curriculum. As part of the standards agenda, the Government have shown great concern about the core subjects of English, maths and science, because we have been desperate to maintain an entitlement in relation to those core subjects, as well as flexibility in others. I emphasise that neither I nor the Secretary of State would take a long-term decision about whether English, a core subject of the national curriculum, could be taught at key stage 1 through the medium of Welsh.

Other schools that we have admitted to the maintained sector also want to teach in other languages. Many Muslim schools would like to teach in Urdu and many Jewish schools would like to teach in Hebrew. One of the sticking points has been that we have had to seek assurances that those schools would teach the national curriculum. Although a precedent would not be set, by allowing more schools to teach in Welsh, I ask hon. Members to accept that a precedent might be set that would lead other ethnic minority groups or groups of different faiths to ask why they cannot teach in other languages. Because of the entitlement for five to seven-year-olds to learn English as part of the national curriculum, I suspect that a school organisation committee might find such proposals difficult. If the London Welsh school is to persuade the local family of schools that it should join their number, it must address the issue of teaching English at key stage 1.

The second route would be for the Secretary of State to fund the school directly, because that power exists in law. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Aberavon (Sir J. Morris), a former Secretary of State for Wales, told me how the power to do that had been secured in previous legislation passed by a Labour Government. As hon. Members know, that element of the legislation has never been brought into force. I suspect that the present Secretary of State would be nervous about enacting that. My hon. Friend understands the politics of independent schools. Given our view of assisted places, direct funding for independent schools now comes only under the music and ballet scheme—MBS. I am not sure that I could say to the Secretary of State that the case was made for the money needed to make the school, which has 16 full-time students and 16 part-time students, the only independent school outside the MBS that we fund centrally.

The third route by which the London school could seek salvation would be if the Welsh Assembly used its powers to offer funding. The Assembly has that power—its functions for education lie within Wales but it has a power to support the promotion of Welsh outside Wales. It would legally be open to the Assembly to decide to offer funds for that purpose. That matter is clearly for the Assembly and we must observe what it wants to do.

I come to the debate with almost a sense of frustration. I understand that the school is important to the Welsh community in London, in terms not only of maintaining heritage but of ensuring an easy transition to learning in a Welsh school for children of families that move back to Wales. The Adjournment debate has focused my mind, as such debates do. The avenues considered so far have been seeking funding for an independent school or allowing a school that teaches in Welsh to join the family of schools in the London borough of Brent, which does not seem possible at this late stage.

I make this comment with trepidation because it is not for me to say—other communities in London and beyond value language and the cultural heritage of language. They want their children to learn and to do well in the education system in which they find themselves but want to ensure that there are opportunities for the children to continue to learn languages. In this case, the interest is in children learning in Welsh. I accept that there is a big difference between learning Welsh and studying the national curriculum in Welsh. If the community cannot secure the school's teaching the compulsory hours to the compulsory years, it might have to find another avenue or a different status so that the expertise in the community is preserved in the interests of the children.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): I speak as someone brought up in the Welsh community in London. I did not attend the London Welsh school but did attend one of the fine Welsh Sunday schools in London, which had a tremendous influence on me. Would it be possible for a minor amendment to be considered to the legislation governing the national curriculum to get round the anomaly?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): Order. Interventions must be brief.

Ms Morris: I have never known an amendment to the national curriculum that was minor. That is a real problem. I understand what my hon. Friend says—with his point about learning at Sunday schools, he put more bluntly and concisely the point that I was trying to make. The Government would be against removing the obligation on all schools in the English system to teach the core subjects of English, maths and science. We have done so much on the standards agenda in the three years since the election to ensure that every child in a school maintained by an English local education authority is fluent in English and has mastered the basic skills. Once we start to make an exception—

Mrs. Betty Williams *rose—*

Ms Morris: I cannot give way because I must sit down shortly.

Once we start making an exception and saying that children do not need to learn English as a core subject, we open up the floodgate to other people wanting to do the same.

[Ms Morris]

I understand where my hon. Friends come from and the heritage of the institution that they seek to save. I know that time is running out if the school is to continue in its present state. We will wait to see what the National Assembly decides, but if that fails, I very much hope that a different legal route can be found, other than a formal school, by which the expertise and the traditions of those Welsh schools can be preserved for the children of future generations.

Motability Finance Ltd.

12.30 pm

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): I am grateful to have this opportunity to draw to the attention of the House the rather curious case of Walter Kernick of Kingskerswell and his N-registered Ford Escort car. At first sight, it may not seem to be the most weighty matter ever to have been debated in the House of Commons, but once I have described the circumstances of the case, hon. Members will appreciate that it was difficult to see how else I could bring the matter to a satisfactory conclusion. I have a long and tedious tale to tell of the incompetence of Motability Finance Ltd. in its dealings with Mr. Kernick and me.

In September 1996, Mr. Kernick bought his car from Mr. and Mrs. Johnson of Newton Abbot. Last spring, almost three years after buying the car for £7,500, Mr Kernick took the car to a Ford main dealer with a view to part-exchanging it for another car. The dealer did the usual checks and discovered that the car was owned by Motability Finance. That was the first time that Mr. Kernick had any reason to think that there was anything untoward about the transaction with the Johnsons. He bought the car in 1996 in good faith; he did not know that Mrs. Johnson had obtained the car through a hire agreement with Motability Finance.

Any first-week law student would know—anyone who was old enough to vote might know—that one is not entitled to something that was bought on finance. The matter was therefore referred to the Devon and Cornwall constabulary, which wrote to me in due course to say that, although the sale of the vehicle appeared to indicate theft of the vehicle by Mrs. Johnson, the Crown Prosecution Service was of the opinion that there was insufficient evidence to show that at the time of the transaction Mrs. Johnson had carried out the sale dishonestly—a fundamental element in the prosecution of such a crime. The CPS said that Mrs. Johnson alleged that although she had signed the hire agreement document, the clause prohibiting the disposal of the vehicle had not been drawn to her attention. The burden of proof could not be satisfied, and the CPS was therefore not prepared to prosecute.

It is probably a matter for a future Adjournment debate, but it would appear that the Crown Prosecution Service's advice to the police in Devon—and, for all I know, everywhere else in the country—is that, providing a rascal is cute enough to say that he did not see that part of the contract, no prosecutions can be brought in Devon and Cornwall, or anywhere else, of those who buy cars on finance and then flog them off on the side. That is reprehensible, and I intend to return to the matter in due course.

On 27 May 1999, Mr. Kernick received a letter from Motability Finance telling him that he had 10 days in which to return the car or face court action. Motability was legally right. Mr. Kernick had fallen foul of the principle known to lawyers as "Nemo dat quod non habet", which loosely translates as "Rascals who do not have ownership cannot pass it on to others". The difficulty is that Mr. Kernick is not a lawyer and does not speak Latin. He thought that he might be given a degree of straight dealing when he dealt with Motability Finance, but that was not to be.

On 14 June, I wrote to Motability Finance saying that, although it might be legally in the right, it did not have a leg to stand on morally and that it should transfer ownership of the vehicle to Mr. Kernick without any more to do. I suggested that the firm carry out urgent inquiries to see how many other cars it had managed to lose track of over the years. I also wrote to the Secretary of State for Social Security. I was worried that it might not be an isolated case and that Motability Finance should look to its own records and procedures to find out how many more of its cars had gone missing.

On 15 July, I wrote again to the Secretary of State informing him that I had not received a reply to my letter of 14 June to Motability Finance. The right hon. Gentleman was kind enough to say that he would write to the chief executive of Motability Finance saying that outstanding correspondence should be dealt with urgently. On 13 August, I wrote another letter to Motability Finance expressing concern that my original letter had still not been answered.

At that stage, what might be called low farce entered. Three days later, Motability Finance wrote to me, saying:

> Unfortunately, we are only in receipt of one letter from you, a copy of which is attached.

That was my letter of 14 June, asking the firm to deal with the matter. It did not deal with the points raised in my letter; it simply said that it had come to an arrangement with Mr. Kernick, which consisted of him having his car taken back.

Motability Finance wrote to me on 3 September saying that Mr. Kernick had agreed to buy the car from it. He understood that to mean the auction value of the car and hoped that a process would take place in which they would be able to arrange a settlement figure. On 2 January 2000, Mr. Kernick told me that he had agreed to buy the car but that Motability was dragging its feet on coming up with an acceptable settlement figure. He contacted me again on 14 January to say that he had heard nothing from Motability and that it still had not produced a settlement figure.

Matters went on in the same vein until 10 May when Motability Finance sprung into life, although not to the extent of answering the correspondence that I had initiated in June last year. It wrote:

> Dear Mr. Kernick
>
> Settlement in the sum of £3500.00
>
> We have been reviewing our file and are disappointed to note that you have failed to respond to letter with reference to settlement or whether you will return the vehicle.
>
> Under the circumstances we confirm that we will accept the sum of £3,500 in full and final settlement ... Please confirm whether you are willing to pay the above amount or return the vehicle.
>
> Please confirm your intentions by 20 May...otherwise further action will be taken.

Mr. Kernick was not surprised and he passed the letter on to me. I was exasperated and wrote to Motability Finance on 23 May explaining that I had raised specific concerns as long ago as the previous June. I said that if it would not deal with those concerns, there was no alternative but to bring the matter to the Floor of the House.

I received a reply on 5 June, just nine days short of the celebration—if that is the right word to use—of the non-answered letter, which was signed by the fleet operations director. I do not know what type of fleet he directs or how many cars are in it—I suspect that he does not know that—but he said:

> I am sorry to read of your dissatisfaction and disappointment with us over this matter. I note that there have been many communications between this office and yourself—

yes, me saying to Motability Finance, "Will you please deal with the points that I raised on June 14 the previous year."

He went on to say:

> The HPI—

hire purchase information—

> register would indicate MFL to be the owners of the vehicle during those ... years. Had Mr Kernick checked with the HPI register, he would have discovered that the vehicle was not Mrs Johnson's to offer for sale.

That is almost surreal. Here we have a fleet operations manager, who, I assume, is paid a not inconsiderable amount for such weighty responsibilities, but who allows his cars to be stolen over a three-year period. He did not know about the theft until Mr. Kernick told him, but had the gall to say that Mr. Kernick—an ordinary, straightforward chap who has probably never heard of an HPI register—should have done something about it.

The letter gets worse. It explains why it is easy not to trace vehicles and offers a reassurance. It says:

> Due to changes in the Scheme, we are not in full control of the servicing, maintenance and buyback obligation of all new Motability vehicles since March 1999. This relieves suppliers of their obligations and allows us tighter control of Motability vehicles. We are confident that situations such as this would be identified and resolved much quicker.

There is then what I like to think of as a misplaced attempt at humour. The fleet operations director says:

> We have a responsibility to the Scheme to ensure that losses are kept to a minimum.

Indeed, but my dealings—or, rather, non-dealings—with Motability Finance suggest that it is doing no such thing. There is no doubt about the legal or moral position, but Motability Finance seems to have no control over the vehicles that it owns. It relies on people sometimes exchanging vehicles and initiating an HPI check that reveals a vehicle as missing. That is not good enough.

The real villain is Mrs. Johnson. Motability Finance could get a qualified motor engineer to assess the car's value. It would take responsibility for the loss and sue the original converter. However, they will not do that. Why? Because poor Mr. Kernick is a much easier target. They know where his car is and they can seize it at any time.

I do not know what the car is worth. In the menacing correspondence it started at £3,500 and then went down to £2,900. I carried out some investigation in the motor trade and I am told that, once the Motability snatch squad has lifted it and flogged it at auction, it might, after auction expenses, fetch £2,000. I asked Mr. Kernick to ask a dealer what he might get in part exchange and I am told that that would be about £1,750. However, that is not the point. Motability should undertake a radical assessment of its procedures and write off the relevant sum now. I have no idea what the matter must have cost it in executive time. Its argument might be that there is no slot available in its accounts for the writing off of such sums. However, if it

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wanted to it could pay Mr. Kernick a consultancy fee equal to the value of the motor car and thank him for drawing to its attention the woeful state of its administration. The idea that Motability will stand by while this ordinary man's car is snatched in the way I have discussed is appalling.

When I decided to bring the matter to the House of Commons I did so quite deliberately because I realised that the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley), would respond. I hope that I do not embarrass him too much by saying that I have been extremely impressed by the way in which he has dealt with my constituency correspondence. Whatever our political disagreements, it is obvious from his letters that he takes an active interest. He is not one of those Ministers who simply signs ministerial drafts. That is apparent from the quality of the response and some of the handwritten notes on the letters. I realise that, to an extent, he may, in the present instance, have to play close to his chest. However, I like to think that, if I had been a fly on the wall at the meeting that I assume took place between him and senior officials of Motability Finance Ltd., I would have heard him use the sort of language that he uses when raising a constituency case.

Most people know of Motability and know that it provides money to enable disabled people to buy cars. I do not know under what arrangement with the Government it operates—whether it is under a franchise, for example. But I know that on rare occasions morality does not follow the law. The law points in one direction and morality in quite another. It would be appalling if, in the end, Motability were to send in the snatch squad to take this man's car away. I am sorry that, because of its complete inactivity and unwillingness to explain, I have had to bring the matter before the House of Commons. However, that is the ultimate redress for any British citizen.

12.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): I start by thanking the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) for his kind remarks about me. I also thank him for bringing the matter to my attention and that of the House, both because of the issues about Motability that it raises and because of the consequences for his constituent. Of course I appreciate how distressing it must have been for Mr. Kernick to find out that he had no legal title to the vehicle and I am sorry for the delays in dealing with his queries. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for letting me see an early draft of his speech, which helped me to prepare answers to try to end the uncertainty faced by his constituent.

The facts of the case are relatively straightforward. In February 1996 Mrs. Johnson, who lives in Newton Abbot, made an agreement to lease a Ford Escort from Motability Finance Ltd., and seven months later Mrs. Johnson disposed of the vehicle to Mr. Kernick, although she did not own it and did not have the authority to sell it. It had been supplied to Mrs. Johnson by Newton Abbot Motors, who, under the Motability rules, should have recorded the vehicle's keeper on the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency's V5 document, the log book, as Mrs. Johnson, care of Motability Finance Ltd. Instead, it put Mrs. Johnson's home address on the document. That error might have given Mr. Kernick false reassurance that Mrs. Johnson was selling her own car.

However, I must make it clear that there is no legal requirement for the V5 document to carry a reference to any leasing or hire purchase owner. It is always advisable for a buyer to perform a hire purchase index check to find out whether any other party has an interest in a second-hand vehicle before parting with money for it. Unfortunately, Mr. Kernick did not do that, as the hon. Member for Teignbridge said.

MFL did not find out that Mrs. Johnson had sold its car until March 1999, because she continued to pay her lease charges to MFL until then. MFL took lawful action to recover the car from Mr. Kernick. The authority for its action comes from section 21(1) of the Sale of Goods Act 1979, which says that

> where the goods are sold by a person who is not their owner, and who does not sell them under the authority or with the consent of the owner, the buyer acquires no better title to the goods than the seller had.

I have a great deal of sympathy for Mr. Kernick and, within the constraints of the law, I should like to do whatever I can to help him. The hon. Gentleman made it clear that the problem that Mr. Kernick faces was created by Mrs. Johnson, who sold him a car that she did not own. Some of the blame should also lie with Newton Abbott Motors, which failed to register the keeper's address properly as care of Motability Finance Ltd., as it was required to do as a Motability supplier. I shall shortly return to discussing what can be done to seek repayment from those responsible for the losses incurred.

First, I shall comment on the situation that faces Mr. Kernick. I understand that, in September last year, he asked MFL what he would have to pay to buy legal title to the car. MFL did not reply until last month, when it offered to accept £3,500 in full and final settlement. I am concerned about the delay in making that offer and I discussed it with MFL. It said that the delay occurred in part because of MFL's wish not to put pressure on Mr. Kernick, because it knew of his poor state of health. That is not a convincing explanation for the delay.

Mr. Kernick believes that MFL is asking too much for the residual value of the vehicle, and several lower prices have been mentioned in the debate and the correspondence that I have seen. The most recent figure is an estimate of the current auction value in the hon. Gentleman's letter to MFL dated 15 June.

It is not for me to negotiate a price. I do not own the vehicle and it would not be right to discuss that issue on the Floor of the House. However, I can tell the hon. Gentleman that I saw the chief executive of MFL yesterday in my office. He assured me that he is willing to agree a fair price for the vehicle and that he understands the need to do so quickly. If, for example, both parties took the figure mentioned in the hon. Gentleman's letter as a guide price, the matter could be settled within the week.

At yesterday's meeting, I also asked the chief executive what action he would take to recover his losses from the parties whose actions caused them. He assured

me that MFL would commence legal proceedings against Mrs. Johnson. He also explained that MFL could not seek damages from Newton Abbott Motors for failing to register the right details on the V5 document, because the company no longer exists. It went into receivership and was sold to Evans Halshaw, which took over responsibility for maintaining Motability vehicles supplied by Newton Abbott Motors. I have asked the chief executive of MFL to find out whether Evans Halshaw also took over liability for the omission by Newton Abbott Motors.

Mr. Nicholls: I am grateful for the Minister's response, which is everything that I expected. If Motability belatedly realises that it should take action against Mrs. Johnson and it is prepared to issue proceedings against her, surely the least that it should do—it should of course wipe out Mr. Kernick's problem—is try to recover the vehicle's present value from Mrs. Johnson and pursue Mr. Kernick only if that does not work?

Mr. Bayley: I will pass that comment to Motability Finance Ltd. to consider when instructing its lawyers.

The hon. Member for Teignbridge raised some wider policy matters. He said that MFL should take a closer interest in what happens to its cars. Until March last year, the dealers who supplied MFL vehicles were responsible for maintaining them and for buying them from Motability Finance Ltd. at the end of the lease. Unfortunately, that arrangement permitted the problems to which the hon. Gentleman drew attention when the dealer fell down on its duties. However, since March 1999, MFL has taken direct responsibility for control of maintenance arrangements and the sale of lease and vehicles. That involves an in-house audit trail on the vehicle's activity throughout the life of the lease.

Motability and Motability Finance Ltd. assure me that correspondence from Members of Parliament will be handled either by Motability or by the chief executive of Motability Finance Ltd., who asked me to apologise on behalf of MFL for the way in which hon. Members' inquiries were handled. Mobility is aware of the importance of a speedy response whenever possible. It has a customer commitment to answer in full or to let the correspondent know within four days of receiving a letter what is happening to the case.

I apologise to the hon. Gentleman because my Department has been slow in answering some of his letters, and I have not yet replied to letters written immediately prior to the debate.

It is a pity that this case occurred, as the work done by Motability provides valuable help in assisting severely disabled people. At present, 380,000 cars are leased through the scheme. Motability works constantly to ensure that the service to disabled people fulfils their needs and that dealerships acting on behalf of a scheme meet Motability's high standards. It operates an accreditation scheme for dealerships to promote a first-class service to its customers and I regret that the actions, or inactions, of the dealership in the case in question should have caused the hon. Gentleman's constituent such problems.

The case brings home an important point: anyone purchasing a car should take precautions to ensure that the vendor has the right to sell the vehicle. The Office of Fair Trading produces a useful leaflet, entitled "Buying a used car", which contains information on checking whether a vehicle is subject to a financial arrangement with a party other than the vendor. It also contains details of whom to contact should a person have difficulties with the dealer from whom they bought the vehicle.

Now that the issues in the case have been brought to light and examined by MFL, I hope that everyone involved has learned lessons and that it will not be necessary for any hon. Member to bring a similar case to the House. The new procedures introduced by Motability Finance Ltd., in which it takes direct control of the management of the car during the period of the lease, will provide greater safeguards, although it will not deal with every case in which a Motability customer seeks to abuse the system. Motability and MFL are aware of that and, although their handling of this case is not a good example, their wish to counter abuse of the system is at the forefront of their objectives.

The hon. Gentleman asked how many cars that are registered to Motability Finance Ltd. are currently missing. MFL is pursuing the return of 23 cars that were sold in circumstances similar to those that we are considering today. That is a small number when compared with the total number of leased cars in the scheme—approximately one car in 15,000—and lower than is achieved by most leased schemes, but it is still too high. I have therefore asked my officials to explore with the DVLA in Swansea whether the V5 form could be changed to reduce that number.

Finally, it might be helpful if I explain the links between Motability, Motability Finance Ltd. and the Government. Motability is a charitable company, incorporated by royal charter. It was established in 1977 as a partnership between the Government, charitable and private sectors to help disabled people to obtain vehicles on favourable terms by using their disability living allowance higher rate mobility component or war pensioner's mobility supplement.

Motability Finance Ltd. is a private company, which works to meet the objectives and service levels established by Motability. It is owned by a partnership of five major clearing banks—Lloyds TSB, the Bank of Scotland, Barclays, the Royal Bank of Scotland and HSBC—which provide finance at preferential rates. The lending facility by the banks has increased over time from an initial £100 million to the current level of more than £3 billion. They provide finance to purchase the cars, which are then provided to disabled people on contract hire agreements, and are reimbursed by the diversion of disability living allowance and war pensioners' mobility supplement payments from my Department. That is a massive financing commitment, and the Motability scheme could not exist without the banks' support. I believe that it is the biggest car leasing operation in the world and accounts for 7 per cent. of new car sales in the UK.

My Department acts as a sponsor of the Motability scheme, although we are not involved in operational matters. The rules, terms of the agreement and administration of the scheme are for Motability to

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decide, in consultation with their service providers. However, by virtue of the diversion of customers' disability living allowance to pay Motability lease charges, we have some influence over aspects of the scheme. The fact that payments for vehicles are made from disability living allowance, and that the scheme benefits from concessions on VAT and corporation tax, means that there is a direct Government interest in the working of the scheme.

Those concessions, along with the direct negotiations between Motability, Motability Finance Ltd. and car manufacturers, mean that the scheme can provide disabled people with transport at an advantageous cost. Motability customers can obtain cars for as little as £24.99 a week. The lease provides not only access to the car, but insurance and AA or RAC assistance.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for drawing the problems in this case to my attention. I should also be grateful if he would pass on my sympathies to his constituent. As I have explained, Motability Finance Ltd. is an independent private company, and I cannot therefore issue it with an instruction. However, I hope that a satisfactory agreement between the parties concerned can be reached in the near future.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at two minutes to One o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 21 June 2000

[MR. MICHAEL J. MARTIN *in the Chair*]

Supermarket Competition

[Relevant document: Second Report from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, Session 1999-2000 (HC 120).]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mrs. McGuire.*]

9.30 am

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Planning in a small island is not a bureaucratic idea or an idiosyncratic response to some people wanting to build wherever and whenever they can; it is an absolute necessity. Throughout the planning history of this country, there have been determined attempts to create civilised and cultured towns and cities, and a positive balance has been sought to ensure that our industry and commerce live alongside our residential areas in peace and harmony. One would have thought that that was a straightforward and useful idea.

During the 1950s and 1960s, we saw the evolution of sensible planning policies. When we moved on, it became clear that some commercial interests regarded aspects of planning as inimical to their economic development. That was a misleading approach, but some people regarded the decision to consider where development took place as a positive bar to them.

The Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs was concerned when it heard some of the arguments about supermarkets. Supermarkets are ubiquitous; a person would have to be unusual to say that he had never benefited from or enjoyed their services. They are like rhododendrons, in that they may be attractive and interest people in large numbers but they destroy every other plant.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the positive rash of supermarkets that were built out of towns had an immediate and destructive effect. When we look around many of our smaller towns and villages and see so many charity shops and boarded-up properties, we realise that supermarkets can be not only competition, but destructive competition. They are like a series of private monopolies built on the outside of our cities. With their free car parking, they encourage people to come and buy not only one aspect of their shopping, but everything. As a result of the influx of American marketing techniques, the supermarket may increasingly seek to provide more than our weekly shop in terms of groceries, wines and beers, by providing textiles, household goods and other important items in our weekly budgets.

It became clear that if we were to rescue and improve the centres of our rural towns and cities, we would have to do something serious about the supermarket. That was an agreed policy, and we began to accept the fact that trade in the centre of a town was distorted if the area became over-supermarketed. That has happened to one town in my constituency, which has at least seven supermarkets on the edges of its small rural community. It was a welcome development when it was recognised that supermarkets could not be allowed to continue becoming larger and attracting an increasing amount of trade away from the centres of our towns and cities. I should have thought that that was a straightforward conclusion that was not difficult to support. Unfortunately, however, there seems to be a body of opinion among some economists and management consultants—such as McKinsey & Company, the Department of Trade and Industry and even, possibly, some Treasury officials—that more out-of-town supermarkets and more competition would bring down prices. That flies in the face of the fact that most supermarkets fight one another for only about 3 per cent. of the business and are prepared to commit murder to change their overall figures by an extremely tiny amount. I am afraid that consultants who say that there should be more non-food retailing have not thought through the implications.

The Committee decided that some anxieties were even more pressing. Last summer, the Director General of Fair Trading referred supermarkets to the Competition Commission, asking it to consider matters related to the planning regime. When the Committee began to inquire into the circumstances, it was worried to learn that that had been done without any evidence being taken from planning consultants or anyone involved, on the basis of the fact that some people thought that it might be a good idea to change the planning laws on science clusters.

If we are to make major changes in how we develop our towns and cities on the basis of some people's opinion, without having taken evidence, I can recommend to the Government a series of my own particular prejudices, not only in relation to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. I could give them a shopping list of the changes that I feel should be made, without any evidence to back it up. It is worrying that that decision was taken without any advice from planners.

We asked the Department about its attitude to that development. The Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford), who gave evidence to us, should be comprehensively praised. Not only was he clear and decisive, but he made it plain that no major change in policy had taken place. That makes it even more difficult to understand why we face such circumstances. I trust that the Government will not change their policy.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Does the hon. Lady agree that the clarity of the evidence given by the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich, contrasts starkly with the complete muddle of evidence that we received from the Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the hon. Member for Leicester, West (Ms Hewitt), on the same subject?

Mrs. Dunwoody: I believe that the problem was that the Department of Trade and Industry got into a bind, which was slightly bizarre.

If the Treasury is dictating that changes be made to planning law on the basis not of planning evidence but of having been told by one of its consultants that in

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future some science industries might like to be treated differently from other industries, everyone is in trouble. I trust that that is not so, and that the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes), will make it clear that such decisions will be taken by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on the basis of the aspects that are most important to us.

The Competition Commission published a remedies statement, which states that the commission does not at present believe that major changes should be made to the planning regime. However, the commission seems to be considering recommending a system of selective planning permission, whereby, for instance, in cases in which Sainsbury is the major company, Sainsbury would not be able to obtain planning permission for new stores, but others could. That is the very antithesis of planning law, which has always been based precisely on such difficulties.

The Committee considered all those questions, said that it was extremely worried, and made several plain and unequivocal statements:

> We support the Minister for Planning's statement on competition. It is a well-established principle of planning control that planning decisions should not favour one company against another but should be even-handed between firms...We are appalled that before referring planning matters to the Competition Commission, the OFT took no evidence from planning experts and did not consult the DETR. In failing to take into account such expert evidence, it has behaved irresponsibly.

If the commission suggests that it can distort the planning rules to profit one particular section, it is being shortsighted and irresponsible. We cannot understand how we have got into such a situation. The Government must say what is meant by the reference in planning policy guidance note 6 to

> sites in town centres which are suitable, viable and available within a reasonable time period.

What is suitable for the size of store and format, and who decides those aspects?

We do not believe that there should be any more super supermarkets built outside towns. The decisions that have resulted in the growth of smaller supermarkets in city centres are already beginning to pay dividends. The large supermarkets that have followed that trend, including Sainsbury and Tesco, are responding to some very real worries. To confuse that issue or fudge the lines would not only put that process into reverse but make our aims unclear in the long run. In all but very exceptional circumstances, supermarkets should be in urban centres.

Supermarkets should also be better designed. Let us consider the quality of the buildings in our towns and cities. We all have to live with those erections, so let us not imagine that we can go on blithely irritating the eye and depressing the spirit with the most sad and unimaginative architecture.

The report is good; it is short, but says plainly that we do not know how or why we got into the situation in which we find ourselves. We believe the Minister for Housing and Planning when he says that he is clear in his mind about the Department's aims. However, if that is true, why was he not consulted? Why was the decision about the reference taken without anyone asking on what basis it was made? If the Office of Fair Trading now takes two or three steps back and says, "Oh well; we didn't really mean it, guv," I would not regard that as evidence of a responsible or balanced approach.

It would not be acceptable if the Competition Commission's findings were published in late July after the House has risen. It would fuel the view that the decision was taken in a hole-in-the-corner manner, for the worst reasons and on the basis of prejudice rather than evidence. The final results of that decision may be to hasten the demise of our smaller towns and cities. It does not provide a balance across a commercial field so that customers can get what they want when they want it. The development of a duopoly or even of three or four large supermarkets will not, in the long run, act in the customers' interest. The Committee has set out its worries in plain terms and I hope that the Minister can put our minds at rest.

9.43 am

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I am most grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate and am privileged to follow the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody).

I make my comments against the backdrop of the balance in my constituency between small market towns and 30 per cent. of a major city—the outskirts of York. The results of the inquiry that the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee conducted into the environmental, impact of supermarket competition, which are published in our second report, encapsulate the problem. I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Lady about the part of the report that suggests that, although the planning regime serves the planning system well, we could tweak it and improve it. It was clear from the evidence that we received that planning policy guidance note 6 has the support of leading experts in planning and retailing, planning associations, local authorities and supermarkets.

Parking standards is probably the area of competition that impinges most on market town shops and corner shops on the outskirts of major cities. A major superstore on an out-of-town site is bound to have a clear advantage over those shops by offering greater car parking facilities that will attract people into the store. The Select Committee must ensure that planning policy guidance note 13 is observed and is as tightly construed as possible. It must not be interpreted in too lax a fashion.

Design is important. The high standard of evidence in the Select Committee report shows the importance of design and of not using the rhododendron scenario to attract people into the store. If we are now considering how to attract more supermarkets on to town sites, it is important to ensure that their designs blend in with the surroundings.

We did not have the opportunity to investigate in depth the impact of the unified business rate in market towns. It is significantly high and affects shops in small market towns and corner shops on the outskirts of major cities. A high unified business rate compounded by a high rent makes it difficult for those shops to compete effectively with out-of-town superstores.

We are all conscious of the development of charity shops, which we welcome to a large extent. We appreciate their special contribution to the community and the role of the volunteers who man them, but we do not want sites to be left empty for long periods. When we took evidence in Thirsk for the urban White Paper, we found that one shop had been empty for two or three years—almost as long as I have been Member of Parliament for the area—as a result of the combination of a high unified business rate and a high rent. We should pursue such matters, perhaps in the next stage of the competition report if we are fortunate enough to be able to do so before the recess.

I was struck by the evidence that we received from Mark Wood Associates about the margins of food store operators. The company said:

> Moreover the extract also shows that...the four leading operators (Tesco, Sainsbury, Asda and Safeway) increased their combined market share from 59.4 per cent. in 1996 to 61.4 per cent. in 1997, a rise of 2 per cent. in just one year. Total sales from these four operators amounted to over £40 bn.
>
> The average sales per store is continuing to increase at a significant rate equating to around £2 m. per store for Tesco and over £3 m. for Asda.

That increase puts the shops competing for business with supermarkets—especially out-of-town superstores, at least one of which I represent in my constituency—at an almost unfair competitive disadvantage because of the size of the superstores and factors such as parking facilities. I hope that we can pursue several of the issues that we highlighted in that valuable contribution. It must be ensured that PPG6 continues to be respected and built on, and that we forcefully consider the evidence from the Competition Commission against the backdrop of the planning regulations. To ensure that the competitive advantages enjoyed by out-of-town superstores are not repeated in future, we must integrate future supermarkets into market towns, having regard to the design of surrounding buildings.

I believe that the way forward is to meet a balance of interests, consumer needs and minimum competitive standards. I hope that we can put more supermarkets with better designs where required in town centres. That would allow sufficient competition in our market economy between supermarkets and, more important, between supermarkets and the market town and corner shops that I shall continue to hold dear.

9.50 am

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. I hope that the Competition Commission, in addition to studying the report of the Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, will read the comments of hon. Members on the subject. The concerns voiced by the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) about the effects of supermarkets on small urban areas, corner shops and small communities are shared by many of my constituents.

Out-of-town supermarkets have been the cause of many problems in town centres and the countryside. They increase car use, and the resulting congestion creates problems for people in the countryside, as some of the supermarkets are built in the green belt and on the edge of cities. I am, therefore, pleased that planning policy guidance note 6 restricts the development of supermarkets outside cities and urban areas.

The Government's aim in the planning policy guidance is to concentrate retail development in existing urban areas. I hope that they will push that policy and ensure that applications for supermarkets to be built outside towns will be firmly rejected, so that there is no misunderstanding of what the Government mean in the planning guidance.

I am not anti-supermarket. I would welcome and support supermarkets where needed, in towns and urban areas. I want good, structured planning, which means developing our town centres. The growth of out-of-town shopping developments over the past 20 years has had a traumatic effect on town centres, villages and corner shops.

There are small urban communities, such as Ossett, Horbury and Normanton in my constituency, that have suffered because shopping centres have been located on the borders of Leeds and Sheffield. Access to those centres is easy by car, which has an effect on the smaller towns. Much of their retailing trade has disappeared as a result of closures caused by the large developments.

Car parking is also a factor. Local authorities are advised that they must capitalise on land use for car parking—hence charges. Such charges are an anomaly, given that supermarkets have free parking. I hope that planning policy guidance note 13 will address that, and that local authorities will take it into consideration when they consider the application of integrated transport policy.

PPG6 deals with out-of-town shopping and greater protection for town and city centres. I want the Minister to provide assurances that there will be an increased focus on planning aims within urban areas, and a restriction of developments outside. Applications are being made to extend large supermarkets outside town and city centres, especially by Asda. The Wal-Mart principle is being developed—the desire to extend an existing unit and develop the larger supermarket.

In relation to applications for out-of-town developments, we are witnessing the phenomenon of architects submitting, on behalf of a supermarket chain, proposals for a small, compact unit on the edge of the town, so as not to give offence, but then, when the request is granted, applying to develop the unit further. We are all aware that that is happening in our constituencies. I hope that the Minister, who is familiar with such scenarios, will accept that such applications should be rejected, regardless of their size, because of the impact on urban areas.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): Has my hon. Friend come across the phenomenon whereby applications initially state a particular area for development, but a mezzanine floor is added later? The space above the site is thereby occupied, apparently in breach of planning conditions, but in circumstances which the planning regime is apparently unable to stop. Is that a further example of the phenomenon that my hon. Friend describes?

Mr. O'Brien: I am pleased that my colleague has drawn attention to that matter, as it has an impact on car parking provisions. When a planning application originally included car parking to meet a certain ground floor development, and extended developments follow

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in the form of mezzanine or additional floors, greater car parking problems are created. The Minister should address that issue and strengthen PPG6 to ensure that such piracy cannot happen. Measures to make our towns and cities more attractive must, therefore, be an important part of the strategy of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Furthermore, I should like to draw attention to the fact that, a great deal of money has been spent on introducing pedestrianisation and traffic-free areas in our towns and cities. That is part of the revitalisation of town and city centres. Losing retail outlets in those areas is a significant blow to such developments, which had the agreement of the communities concerned. The issue of supermarkets is not the be-all and end-all of retail shopping. If we want small, competitive retail units in urban areas, we should impress on local authorities the desirability of introducing covered markets, which would allow market traders to develop trade in various areas, so that competition and town centre development is generated through market procedures.

I am advised that, as a result of the closure of retail trades in the town of Ossett, no one can buy a pair of shoes. Ossett has a population of 20,000 or more and it is sad that people cannot buy shoes because of the demise of retail units in the area. We must persuade local authorities to reintroduce covered markets in small towns. I put it to the Minister that there is much to be learnt from the Select Committee report, as there is from the contributions of members of that Committee and others who have an interest in supermarket competition. I hope that they will influence the Competition Commission, which will present a report on the subject in the near future. Good planning is needed. We must reject bad planning. Will the Minister have regard in his response to the argument that small urban areas need regenerating?

We need more traffic-free centres. There must be a curb on planning applications to introduce traffic into pedestrian areas to facilitate supermarkets or other businesses. It is easy for supermarkets to offer planning gain to local authorities. We should put a stop on that, because some local planners can be influenced if they think that they can recruit a social or road development from an application for a supermarket to be developed.

I impress on the Minister and my colleagues that there is much to be said and done about out-of-town shopping. We must insist that PPG6 is applied firmly. Its aim is to strengthen the role of local planners to ensure that there is no further development on the edges of our towns and cities to the detriment of town and city centres.

10.2 am

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): I was struck by the analogy used by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) when she said that supermarkets were like rhododendrons. She is right. When rhododendrons are young and fresh, and flower in the spring, we are all attracted to them like bees to the honeypot. That applies equally to supermarkets. While they are young and fresh and necessary, we all use them. But those of us with a passing interest in gardening know that when rhododendrons have been around for a year or two, they become gross, overgrown and in need of major hacking back. We may be approaching that situation with regard to supermarkets, too.

We all use supermarkets. There are 20,000 adults in Chippenham, the main town in my constituency. It has three supermarkets, including Safeway, Sainsbury and Somerfield. I am told that 88,000 people pass through the tills at Safeway each month, so everyone in Chippenham uses Safeway four times a month, in addition to Somerfield and Sainsbury. Eighty-six per cent. of all food shopping in the United Kingdom is carried out at supermarkets. The average weekly shop is six supermarket bags, weighing 84 lb.

Mrs. Dunwoody: All carried by women.

Mr. Gray: Yes, and nearly all by car. I accept the argument about the use of cars; none the less they are needed to carry six supermarket bags weighing 84 lb. As my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) correctly pointed out, supermarkets turn over £44 billion a year in groceries—an enormous turnover.

Whatever else we may say about them, all of us in the nation use supermarkets to do our daily shopping. It is wrong to pretend that we do not. Our expectations, way of life and standard of living have increased greatly as a result. We presume that we can go to a supermarket on Christmas day and buy avocados, which were not even heard of in this country until 20 or 30 years ago. We can get fresh strawberries and vegetables all the year round—and not the sort of vegetables that I remember as a child. We used to have a bit of soggy cabbage in the winter and, if we were lucky, something slightly better in the spring. Now we can expect pre-packed, pre-washed, high quality, first class vegetables, eggs, meat and so on all the year round. The standard of beef that we buy in supermarkets is second to none. The quality, colour, size and texture of the fresh food that we get is first class. Our standards have increased enormously as a result of the supermarket revolution, and it is luddite to suggest anything else. We need them and rely on them.

In 1986 there were only 457 superstores in this country, but by 1997 that figure had increased to 1,102. I remember the debates that we had about that increase when I became a special adviser in the Department of the Environment in 1992, when my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) came into the job. He considered whether we should allow that exponential increase in supermarket sites to continue. The decision was taken at that time, with the first draft of planning policy guidance note 6, that we should control the increase in supermarkets because it was not sustainable.

We all use supermarkets and like them, and the nation depends on them. None the less, in recent years, we have begun to move against them—the rhododendron is becoming overgrown. In that context, the Competition Commission has loomed on to the scene. Most people would agree that the damage done to village shops, town centres and our environment as a result of the use of cars, and of the lorries that take goods from depots to supermarkets, is a bad thing. Most would agree that we should save our green belts by restricting supermarket

development, and that PPG6 is right, even when they continue to use supermarkets. That is not a controversial view.

The Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford), said that there was no question that the planning policy would be changed. He said, "We are passionate supporters of PPG6. There will be no more supermarkets built out of town. That is certain, so do not worry about it, ladies and gentlemen. Everything is tickety-boo." As the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich said, he made a robust defence of the PPG6 measure initiated by my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal.

The following week, the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce, the hon. Member for Leicester, West (Ms Hewitt), gave evidence before the Committee. We asked her what the purpose was behind the referral of competition of supermarkets to the Competition Commission, to which she answered that she was not certain, but she was sure that it was a good thing. Like the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich, I hope that the commission reports before the House rises; otherwise, some serious questions must be asked about the machinery of government.

Let us imagine that the commission says, "We have a problem in Chippenham because Tesco has no site there. The town uses supermarkets to a huge degree and prices are slightly higher there than in London. We believe there may be a competition problem. If we can find a site for Tesco, the prices may be brought down again. The extra competition might depress the prices a little bit, so maybe that is a reason for relaxing the stringent planning controls around Chippenham to allow Tesco to have a site. Tesco is seeking sites in Chippenham, Malmesbury and Tetbury and trying to find a toe-hold throughout the Cotswolds; it is desperate to get in somewhere. Asda is seeking sites all the time. Perhaps we should relax planning controls to accommodate that perfectly sensible competition."

If that is the case, what are we to make of the assurance by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions that PPG6 must remain sacrosanct? That is what the Department said, robustly and straightforwardly—that there will be no increase in the number of supermarkets in our countryside. If that is the case, what on earth is the purpose of the referral to the Competition Commission? What shall we do with the commission's report if, for example, it refers to Chippenham in the way that I described? However, if it says that there is plenty of supermarket competition and no reason to change planning, what would be the point of the referral?

When the Minister replies to this debate, which is useful and timeous in the light of the report, she must tell us precisely why the Department of Trade and Industry referred the matter to the Competition Commission, when the commission will reply and what consultations there were between planning Ministers in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the DTI before that referral.

More important, the Minister must tell us why the referral was made. What will happen if the report says that there is a restriction on competition between supermarkets in England? What will happen if it calls for a relaxation of PPG6 in order to accommodate that concern? Does the hon. Lady think that PPG6 can be relaxed, or does she agree with the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich that it cannot? Alternatively, if the Competition Commission says that it has wasted its time and that there is no supermarket competition problem, will she tell us why public money was wasted on an unnecessary inquiry?

Leaving aside the pros and cons of supermarkets, there is some confusion in the machinery of government. The Minister must at least try to shed a little light on what seems to be a murky subject.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Before I call Front-Bench speakers at half-past 10, I should like to be able to fit in the three remaining speakers. Hon. Members should, therefore, be concise and alert in their contributions.

10.11 am

Dr. Whitehead (Southampton, Test): It seems to be the form that we should preface our remarks with references to rhododendrons, and I shall not fail the Chamber in that. The analogy, which was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), is a good one inasmuch as there can be many different colours of rhododendrons and selective breeding increases the number of colours and types available to gardeners. None the less, they are still rhododendrons and still do what rhododendrons do. That seems to be the nub of the problem.

The owners of supermarkets say in public and to the Select Committee that there has never been a more intense period of competition, that the public are tremendously served for choice and that everything is great. There is a conundrum, however. Although there is greater competition between supermarkets, in wider and subtler ways there appears to be a diminution of competition at the same time. I am concerned about the approach of the McKinsey report, and to some extent that of the Office of Fair Trading, whereby the definition of competition is based on the narrow principle of price. My contention, which is reflected by the Select Committee report, is that supermarket competition is much more widespread and subtle.

The assumption of space has already been mentioned. Supermarkets are all generally dedicated to larger units wherever possible, although there has been some welcome variation with the rise of inner-city supermarkets as a result of planning policy guidance note 6. Common assumptions have been made about location and what is in the store. Recently, I read an interesting book called "Consuming Passions", which sets out the psychology of retailing. It mentions supermarket layout, anti-clockwise movement, different temperatures, products at certain heights and smells from the delicatessen and the bakery section. Those are always the same for every supermarket in order to homogenise the overall product but, within that, competition is available.

Secondly, a logistical assumption is made. Methods of supply are based on just-in-time management. The product must be in the store by the following afternoon. If the supply does not fit the requirement that the product be in the store the following afternoon, the

[Dr. Whitehead]

product is excised. Therefore the product available for competition is one that can be delivered by truck to the supermarket by 4 o'clock in the afternoon, to be put on the shelf immediately. Bakeries increasingly conform to that pattern, whereby products are delivered just in time, using frozen ingredients; if a product cannot be baked within a limited time, it is not made available.

The relationship with suppliers has fundamentally changed. There has been an inversion of the traditional brand-to-shop idea. Now it is the shop that decides which brands will be stocked. Deals that are made with brands can require exclusivity clauses. Under a contract to supply a brand to a particular supermarket, the supermarket can prevent the supplier from providing brands to competitors or non-supermarkets. Consequently, a brand that should be available to anyone in competition has effectively been captured by the method of retailing and the consequent restrictions placed on that brand.

An interesting by-product of that process is the introduction of clones in the form of own brands. We do not need to think very deeply to realise the consequences. Brands are pioneered in the open market, to which a substantial number of brands are still supplied, but 40 per cent. of products sold in supermarkets are own brands and, overwhelmingly, not brands that the supermarket has pioneered. Supermarkets wait until a brand has become successful and then copy it to capture its market. We have witnessed, for example, the extreme coincidence of the rise of a particular corn chip called Doritos and its imitation by a corn chip called Amigos in particular supermarkets. Head & Shoulders dandruff shampoo has resulted in various clone dandruff shampoos appearing on supermarket shelves. If it goes any further, we do not need a great deal of insight to realise that if supermarket own brands are all that remain, there will be no innovation and choice among the brands that are developed and available.

The combination of own brands, the power of purchase and exclusive deals has, in addition to planning constraints and out-of-town developments which we discussed earlier, led to a reduction in independent grocery outlets, as the report, significantly, highlights. The number has decreased from 116,000 in 1961 to only 20,000 in 1997. We may have a great deal of choice among the four brand leaders, but do we as consumers have choice outside those brand leaders?

I conducted a personal investigation into supermarkets' increasing monopolisation of fresh food and vegetables, from the beginning of the supply chain up to the supermarkets. Supermarkets increasingly require their fresh fruit and vegetables to be supplied by a decreasing number of producers, to allow for economies of scale and just-in-time management. Consequently, those who produce fresh fruit and vegetables are becoming large, agro-industrial companies in their own right, effectively pushing out varietals and smaller farmers in the process.

Interestingly, the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) underlined that point. He mentioned that we now have fresh fruit and vegetables all the year round. However, that is at the price of one-third of the vegetables produced in this country simply being left to rot in the field because they do not conform to what the supermarket wants for its purposes. Particular varietals are difficult to place within those production purposes. The fir apple potato is now virtually extinct as a brand on suppliers' shelves.

In capturing producers, supermarkets now require producers of fresh fruit and vegetables to provide what are known in the business as over-riders. That is a nice term that means that the producer gives the supermarket money in order to be allowed to continue producing fruit and vegetables for it. If that continues, the margins of the company are reduced, as a result of which the innovation of that company in trying to produce a product for the supermarket is taken out of the process and it becomes a machine-like supplier to the supermarket.

I mention those points because they are additions to the planning process, which was highlighted in the report and referred to in the Chamber today. The extent to which supermarkets can effectively dictate the workings of the market seems to be a factor well beyond planning. Whether it serves the British public in the long term with regard to choice is a big question. I urge those who consider such matters, especially the Minister who is to respond to the debate, to assure us that the complexity of competition is active in the Government's mind and that the protection of the consumer will be featured in future debates.

10.20 am

Mr. Hilary Benn (Leeds, Central): We are having this debate principally because supermarkets have been successful. The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) did us a service by reminding us of that fact. Like others, I welcome planning policy guidance note 6, as I do the report, because it fires a powerful warning shot across the bows of any person who is contemplating trying to row back from the decision taken by the previous Government, which I hope that the current Government will continue to support with equal vigour.

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire referred to the fact that the average weight of a load of family shopping is more than 80 lb. We must make it easier for people to continue to benefit from the service offered by supermarkets without necessarily having to use their car. I should like there to be more home delivery services in operation. Tesco leads the field in a modest way; 250,000 people have signed up to its service. I have used it twice and, speaking from experience, I would be keen to give up the pleasure of that weekly trudge up and down the aisles if my purchases were delivered to my home. Let us be imaginative. Why cannot we build into the planning system for new developments a requirement on the supermarket owner to provide a home-delivery service? Some people would welcome the chance not to drive their car to the supermarket, but to have their purchases delivered by van. That may release a few parking spaces.

One characteristic of inner-city areas is the absence of shops, especially in those areas that are in severe decline. The few shops that remain in such areas symbolise the problems that they face, given that they are steel-shuttered and, in a sense, as beleaguered as the communities that they try to serve. I represent a

constituency with one of the lowest levels of car ownership in the country. The debate about people's freedom to use their cars for shopping does not arise for many of my constituents. If they cannot go by bus to shop, they are denied the range of choice that supermarkets provide, including the right to low prices.

Early this year, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation published an interesting study into the extra costs of being poor in Britain today. A representative bought 20 goods from a supermarket at a cost of £17.88. He then went to the local shop where the same basket of goods cost £29.11. Shopping is 50 per cent. more expensive for poor people who live in areas that do not give them access to a choice of goods at low prices than it is for others. The poorest fifth of households spend nearly a quarter of their income on food; the richest fifth of households spend 14 per cent.

The Leeds Co-op recently opened two stores in my constituency, one of which is a refurbishment in the Selby road. The other is on the Lincoln Green estate, which was the subject of Fergal Keane's "Forgotten Britain" documentary on BBC television about a month ago. The arrival of the store, which is in a former public house—in which there may be some symbolism—has given a lift to the area. It is a small, modest shop, which opens long hours. It has a range of produce, such as fresh fruit, which may not have been available in such quantity previously. It has given a boost to the area, and has played a part in the redevelopment and regeneration process of a run-down inner-city community. I never thought that I would regard the Co-op or any other supermarket as an instrument of inner-city regeneration in that sense. In this modest example, however, that is unquestionably the case. Other supermarkets should recognise that in addition to providing successfully for the market, about which other hon. Members have spoken, they have a responsibility to inner-city areas.

To the extent that PPG6 has encouraged more supermarkets to consider developing inner-city areas, it has been well worth while. To the extent that the report encourages supermarkets to do more of that—and the Government to ensure that they do more—it will also have been extremely useful.

10.25 am

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in the debate. I join hon. Members in congratulating the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) on securing it. The subject of supermarkets is important, and Liberal Democrats used an Opposition day debate last year to discuss it.

The rapid expansion of out-of-town superstores and the concentration of market share has undoubtedly hit town centres. Supermarket purchasing and pricing policies have hit farmers but not led to lower prices for consumers. As the report highlights, a new wave of larger superstore developments, predatory pricing to gain market dominance and a squeeze on local producers and traditional retailers has had a heavy impact on town centres. Traditional food retailers and other retailers in town centres have closed, and many jobs have been lost.

The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) likened supermarkets to rhododendrons, and I, too, shall use a gardening analogy. I am currently fighting a running battle in my garden with ground elder, which I think that I am losing. Supermarkets can be likened to ground elder, as they continue to spread and strangle anything in their path.

In January 1998, Boots sponsored a report for the national retail planning forum, which showed how great has been the impact of out-of-town food superstores on local retail employment. It studied 15 catchment areas of 93 superstores that opened between 1991 and 1995. Although 10,500 full-time equivalent jobs had been created, no fewer than 25,000 jobs were lost in local specialist food retailers—a net loss of 15,000. A further 10,000 jobs were lost in other non-food retailers. That is an average job loss of 276 employees for every supermarket that had opened. That report was backed up by a study produced by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Supermarkets have not just had an impact on town centres. They have had a wider impact on the environment, to which many hon. Members have referred. For instance, the Government rightly say that they want to develop brownfield sites in town centres. What happens, however, when such sites are not available? The sequential test, which has been praised in the report, leads supermarkets to push for development on the edge of or even outside town centres, but there is nothing in the test to say that that cannot be done. The larger the store, the more likely it is that it will not be able to find a town centre site. It will, therefore, claim that it must rely on an out-of-town site.

Since the last Select Committee report on the matter, three years have elapsed, during which the Government could have defined what constitutes a suitable site. I hope that the Minister can give us that definition.

I believe that everyone agrees with the policy that has been in place since 1996 and the need for the sequential test. However, I am afraid that, once options in town centres are exhausted, supermarkets move out of town. A report published in 1998 by the Environment and Science Research Council said:

> Since the mid-1990s...the major food retailers increased floor space by nearly 2.5 million square feet a year, much the same as in earlier years.

It would be nice to think that the vast majority of that new floorspace had been developed in town centres, but I suspect that that was not the case.

Many members touched on the issue of traffic and congestion. The royal commission on environmental pollution producing its report last Friday, and the issue needs to be tackled quickly. The report called for a 60 per cent. cut in CO_2 emissions, much of which will have to be achieved by reducing traffic and congestion. I, therefore welcome the new planning policy guidance note 13 and the fact that it will contain maximum, not minimum, parking standards. I hope that they will be tough; the Select Committee was worried that they would be too lax. The Minister will have the opportunity to reassure us that she has not gone soft on congestion.

In one respect, I am disappointed by the Government's response. They point out that, under the Transport Bill, it will be possible to levy a charge on workplace car parking at out-of-town stores. That is positive, but will not apply to customer parking. My hon. Friends the Members for Bath (Mr. Foster) and for

[Mr. Tom Brake]

Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) tabled several amendments to the Bill suggesting the inclusion of out-of-town shopping complexes. If the Government are not prepared to entertain such proposals, perhaps the Minister could outline how they intend to level the playing field between out-of-town shopping centres without a charge and town centres, where charges often apply.

The development of out-of-town shopping centres leaves dereliction in town centres. There is a role for a greenfield development levy in trying to redress the balance and make the development of derelict sites in town centres more attractive. Value added tax has been mentioned as well, and it could help in levelling the playing field between out-of-town developments and the redevelopment of town-centre premises.

Even if those reforms were implemented, there would be a need for local authorities to make much more of compulsory purchase order powers to assemble sites, as the Select Committee report suggests. That would mean that, if the owners of a possible site in a town centre had different views about its future, the local authority would have the role of pulling all that together to make available a site that might not otherwise be available.

I am happy to endorse the report's views on design and PPG6. Supermarket design leaves much to be desired: there is an example in my constituency where the car park has been put on the high street and the store frontage has been set back. All that one can see when walking down the high street is the concrete of the underground car park. I hope that sometime we may consider not only the visual impact of building design, but the wider environmental impact. Much can be done about the environmental impact of supermarkets. The report's title is misleading, as the report concerns not only the impact of competition but the overall environmental impact of supermarkets.

The Committee report is rightly robust about competition, and I share its worry about the referral by the Office of Fair Trading to the Competition Commission. A relaxation of the planning rules would be disastrous, and I hope that DETR Ministers will hold their ground and insist on pursuing existing policy, if the Secretary of State for Industry has to consider adverse findings.

My time is up, I am told. I finish by saying that I welcome the report and its recommendations on Compulsory Purchase Orders, design, car parking and other aspects of supermarket development. However, I am disappointed by the Government's weak response, and hope that the Minister will enlighten us about their stance on the issue.

10.35 am

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): As the world's worst gardener, I will not extend the rhododendron analogy that has dominated the debate; given the greater expertise of other hon. Members, I would not add anything new. I commend the Committee on its report, which deals seriously with a range of serious and complex issues, as the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) showed when she opened the debate.

I should like to comment on the Committee's discoveries and recommendations and the Government's response, and to question the Minister on some matters. I hope that she can reassure the chamber about the Government's actions so far and their intentions.

First, I congratulate and thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), who introduced planning policy guidance note 6, which the Committee report commends. In fact, that is its most clear-cut commendation and it has often been mentioned in the debate. The Secretary of State whose policy is regarded as popular and right not only on the day on which it is introduced but four years later, should be a happy man. It is a rare accolade that he must want to savour. The special adviser in the Department at the time was my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray). As his sage advice contributed to a policy that has received universal commendation this morning, he should share in the glory.

We all agree that supermarkets cause a range of problems. The existence of a nearby supermarket is likely to accelerate the closure of village shops, and out-of-town superstores make shopping in town centres more difficult. Because of their buying power, supermarkets can cause problems for farmers, who feel that they are dealing with a leviathan and do not have the countervailing power to extract a fair return for their products.

However, the hon. Member for Northampton (Mr. O'Brien) was right in saying that it is absurd to be anti-supermarket. We all use them and find them convenient, as do millions of our constituents. They have improved the quality of life in this country over the past 30 or 40 years, by providing a range of goods at prices that most people can afford. I was fascinated by the price comparison referred to by the hon. Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn), which shows that, by driving prices down, supermarkets can provide a wide choice of goods, some of which would usually be regarded as luxury goods by the less well-off.

Like the hon. Gentleman, I would be delighted by a growth of home delivery through internet shopping, as it would be an enormous pleasure to give up that weekly routine. I have also discovered that it is a weekly routine that many of my constituents find convenient as a way of finding their Member of Parliament in the supermarket on a Saturday morning. It is a good way of getting things off their chest.

The report does not explain why supermarket competition is the problem, and I remain unconvinced. The quasi-monopoly characteristic of supermarkets is often the real problem. Many difficulties highlighted by the report relate to the areas in which supermarkets can effectively behave as a monopoly or, at best, as an oligopoly, instead of competing with one another. The Minister will have to deal with that central point.

I hope that the Competition Commission reports its findings when the House is sitting, given that the matter is important and controversial. It would be good to have an early and timely debate about it in one form or another. A balancing act must be clearly defined between consumer interests and wider environmental and social interests. At best, the Competition Commission will contribute to achieving that balance. It must be struck and I am sure that we shall continue to take a close interest in it.

I commend two points in the report, the first of which relates to the need for small supermarkets in town centres. The report says that planners are sometimes relatively inflexible and consider that all supermarket development is bad. The Committee feels strongly that smaller supermarkets in a town centre can help to regenerate the community and keep the town centres alive—something that we would all welcome. The second point concerns design, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh). Paragraph 23 of the report quotes the urban taskforce on the problems of "monotony of design". Planners should pay attention not only to the general design, but to the desirability of using proper vernacular materials. One depressing aspect of many town centres is that, if we were led into them blindfold and then had the blindfold removed, we would have no idea where we were. Far too many towns look like one another. We have lost much of the regional and local vernacular feel in our town centres. We should try to get it back; it is one of the glories of this country.

Much mention has been made of Wal-Mart and its takeover of Asda. Will the Minister say whether there are on-going talks between senior management at Wal-Mart and the Government? At the time of the takeover, we all read the reports of meetings with the Prime Minister. Is Wal-Mart having an effect on future planning regulations? What will be the planning implications if the Competition Commission makes an adverse public interest finding on the issue of competition? We have heard how strong the Minister for Housing and Planning was on the issue, but it would be a different situation if the Competition Commission concluded that the public interest was being damaged. What would be the Government's response to that?

I was slightly disturbed to read paragraph 28 of the report, in which the Minister for Housing and Planning said that there had been

> substantial inconsistency between individual local authorities.

That smacks of a desire for centralising micro-management that would not serve the planning process well. Can the Minister give us assurances about that today? Giving local authorities more power to take their own decisions is a good, rather than a bad, move.

The appeals system has not been mentioned this morning. It is widely held to be loaded in favour of the big battalions of the large shops as opposed to community groups that oppose big developments and it is regarded as one of the big problems with the system. It would be interesting to know whether the Government have any plans to change it.

Paragraph 12 of the Government response to the report is extraordinary. It refers to the compulsory purchase policy review advisory group, which will report to Ministers at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions in the next two months. It says:

> A decision will then be made whether, and when, to publish it.

I cannot believe that the report will be so sensitive that Ministers will not want to publish it. I assure the Minister that it is highly unlikely that the matter will form a central part of the Conservative party's manifesto at the next general election. If the advisory group makes such sensitive comments, it is all the more important to publish the report. I am sure that there are no reasons for not doing so, and I hope that the Minister will assure us that she will.

The final point to which I should like the Minister to respond relates to car parking. This is a good opportunity for her to clarify the Government's position on parking at superstores and, in particular, workplace charges, which have been mentioned. Has the Department done any work on the possible effect on pricing of the introduction of workplace charges at out-of-town superstores? Clearly, that may have an impact on the economics involved.

It seems to us that the long-term solution is decent and sensible guidance from the centre and greater devolution of power to local communities, because there may be a genuinely different balance to be struck in different communities between the advantages and disadvantages of supermarket development. We feel that Ministers should allow local authorities to take more of those decisions, as those decisions would then be more likely to reflect the needs of local communities. I hope that the Minister will reassure the Chamber about those points.

10.46 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): This has been an important debate in both substance and timing. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) on securing the debate, and the members of the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee on their thorough report. I thank hon. Members for their unequivocal support for our policy of encouraging new retail development in town centres.

We very much value the Committee's continuing vigilance and interest in town centres and shopping. I know that the Committee, rightly, takes great pride in the important role that it played in convincing the previous Government to change their disastrous stance and the outcome of that stance on the issue. The revision of planning policy guidance note 6 was due largely to the Committee's inquiry into shopping centres.

I very much welcome the debate, the timing of which is important because it provides an opportunity to reaffirm the Government's position directly to the Chamber and to confirm the robust defence of Government policy for which the Committee commended my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning. I shall give hon. Members most of the assurances that they want and I shall try in the limited time available to deal comprehensively with all their arguments.

My hon. Friend the Member for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien) graphically outlined the impact of decisions taken during the 1980s and 1990s. In a debate last night my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning informed us that half of all post-war out-of-town developments were approved between 1985 and 1990, which illustrates what a step change in practice we witnessed during that period. That step change was not positive. It left a legacy for many of our small towns and city centres, as many hon. Members discussed today. One of the Government's central policies is to start to reverse those destructive trends and to renew, enhance

[Ms Beverley Hughes]

and support the role of small town centres and inner cities in the rejuvenation of economic and social life for many of our people.

Mr. Gray: I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady; I know that we are short of time. She is trying to make what sounds to those of us in the know like a strong party political point that in the 1980s everything was bad and that this Government are changing that. Will she acknowledge that in 1993 my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) changed the policy, which was coincidental to the Select Committee's report? To try to suggest that the new Labour Government are putting right the planning wrongs of the previous Government is incorrect and lowers the tone of what has been an interesting debate.

Ms Hughes: I do not believe that it lowers the tone. I acknowledge the change of policy and when it occurred, and I said as much. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman has distracted us from the Select Committee's role at that time in drawing the Government's attention to the effects of their practices, if not policies, in town and city centres. In my constituency, the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal approved the largest out-of-town retail store in Europe some time after the apparent policy change. The policy is not the only important aspect; the way in which it is implemented and the rigour with which local authorities and Ministers take decisions in the final analysis makes a difference.

The Committee's inquiry was prompted by Wal-Mart's takeover of Asda, which has been mentioned by one or two hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green). At the time, the Opposition tried to suggest that agreement had been reached with Wal-Mart for a relaxation in the planning regime. Despite reassurances at the time, that claim continued to be made. Nothing could be further from the truth, and the passage of time has vindicated our reassurances. I hope that that satisfies the hon. Member for Ashford.

All supermarkets now face a level playing field in planning terms. That is the outcome of the current policy position and the way in which we are trying to implement it. They all face the challenge of finding more central sites for new stores and of adapting their formats. My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) raised an important point on the subject. Supermarkets need to adapt in terms of scale, design and car parking to try to fit their formats into existing centres. We are mindful of the possibility of applications in which a developer says that a community needs a store of such a size that it can be placed in only one location. We are not stupid; we can see that for what it is, and will not accept that argument as a reason for avoiding the sequential approach and the need to consider whether a small supermarket in a town centre could equally fit the need. We shall not accept the one-model approach of the large-format superstore. We expect supermarket operators to adapt their offers and possibilities to local circumstances. The Committee asked for clarification on the issue; we gave it in our response and I am happy to affirm it strongly today.

The subject of extensions was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton. All extensions require applications for planning permission and so will be subject to the test of PPG6. We shall not allow large superstores to be created by increments, in the way that my hon. Friend feared and believed to be possible.

There has been a great deal of discussion this morning about the Competition Commission's inquiry, and of whether it might impose a relaxation of the Government's planning policy. Although I understand those concerns, planning is not a central focus of the inquiry. I must correct the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray), in that the Department of Trade and Industry did not refer the matter; the Office of Fair Trading did. The commission's report will be given to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for consideration on 31 July. It will be published two months later—a time that is much more conducive to the sort of parliamentary debate for which hon. Members have called. The timing is not necessarily the problem that it has been thought to be.

Mrs. Dunwoody: My hon. Friend must forgive me, as I am not terribly bright. Is she saying that the report will be published, but that the Government's reply will be made in the recess? Although she may think that more convenient for Members of Parliament, I have a strange old-fashioned idea that we are more useful in this place than when dissipated throughout the country.

Ms Hughes: On that point, I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. The Secretary of State will have two months to consider the report submitted to him on 31 July, which will be published two months later, at the end of September—closer to the parliamentary Session.

Mrs. Dunwoody: In the recess, but closer.

Ms Hughes: I think that that date is preferable to 31 July, if Parliament rises on 28 July. I share my hon. Friend's views and take note of them. I understand and welcome the fact that hon. Members want to discuss the report, and hope that they will press for such discussion.

Hon. Members have expressed concerns about the Competition Commission. Competing objectives are in the nature of planning and balancing different Government policies, but the protection and enhancement of our towns and city centres is a top priority for the Government. I can only endorse again the robust statement that my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning made to the Committee. The Government regard the policy for the siting of supermarkets as a crucial lever for the wider policy of revitalisation of small market towns and city centres, and we are determined not to relax it. I place that on the record as the view of Ministers, from the Secretary of State downwards, in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. We will continue to hold that position.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn) raised another important point. Some people in inner cities are excluded from access to low-priced, good quality shopping with a wide choice. That is the area that we are considering, in so far as we may want to develop PPG6. We are following up the

proposals about access to shopping made by one of the policy action teams, because we need new approaches to help local communities to develop retail strategies, and to give them choices.

Mr. Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd): Will the Minister give way?

Ms Hughes: I beg my hon. Friend's pardon, but I believe that he has just come in. I have three minutes to deal with the remaining points that have been raised.

We are firm on PPG6 and intend to consider the matter. The hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) and others have raised the issue of market towns and rural areas. I agree that, although the issue affects inner cities, it also affects the vitality of smaller towns, on which the siting of out-of-town supermarkets has sometimes had a disastrous effect. That affects those people who are least able to go out of town, because they are elderly or disabled or have no car or resources to do so.

Several hon. Members raised the question of supermarket design and the Committee called for an improvement in that respect. Although there are exceptions, we are all familiar with the shed-like structures sited in acres of tarmac that seem to be the hallmark of many of our supermarkets—certainly in out-of-town situations. When supermarkets are located in town centres, their design is often incompatible with the buildings around them.

We want good design to be an aim of all those involved in new development, and we have published new guidance called "By Design", which the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment helped us to produce. It is not just an average guidance, but provides practical assistance for local authorities to help developers to improve the quality of the designs submitted in applications. The Government are pressing the issue of design, which is important, not only for supermarkets but for housing and public building, and affects the quality of the environment for local people.

Car parking is another important issue that has been raised. We have created a more level playing field for parking through planning policy guidance note 13, which imposes maximum standards as opposed to the minimum standards required previously. Workplace charging will assist in that matter, when local authorities want to introduce it.

In short, we are dedicated to retaining our robust approach to PPG6 because, as I said, it is so important for the achievement of wider Government objectives for regeneration.

EU Structural Funds

11 am

Mr. Martyn Jones (Clwyd, South): European structural funding is probably the most important issue affecting Wales's economic future for perhaps the next 10 or 15 years. I think that the Welsh Affairs Committee's report reflects the concern of all hon. Members from Wales to realise the opportunity to obtain for Wales possibly £1.2 billion in European funding, which would be a tremendous boost for the Welsh economy and a huge asset for Wales. Although the funding would go to only a part of Wales, Wales as a whole would benefit hugely from it.

The Committee began its inquiry on the matter in 1998-99 when it became apparent that west Wales and the valleys would qualify for objective 1 status in the 2000-06 European structural fund round. The Committee was very concerned to ensure that everything that could be done to prepare for the round would be done. In March 1999 we took evidence from the Wales European taskforce. On 1 July 1999 responsibility for social and economic development in Wales went to the National Assembly for Wales, but there is not a clear dividing line between devolved and non-devolved matters. Additionally, there was widespread concern that, because of UK Government funding restraints, Wales would not be able to benefit fully from the available European funds. The Committee, therefore, decided to continue our inquiry, focusing primarily on UK funding issues.

We took evidence at Westminster from the Secretary of State for Wales. In November 1999 sitting for the first time in the National Assembly building, we took evidence from the chairman of the Assembly's Economic Development Committee. We also took evidence from the Wales European task force and from the Assembly Secretary for Economic Development.

The Committee emphasised throughout our proceedings that we were taking evidence from the National Assembly not to scrutinise how it handled devolved responsibilities, but to obtain information that would enable us more effectively to scrutinise the UK Government. We greatly appreciated the spirit of co-operation shown by Assembly Members in responding to our inquiry.

The report was agreed unanimously on 8 February 2000 and published on 17 February. In it, we attempted to clarify the funding issues, many of which are very complex. There was much confusion about the concepts of public expenditure cover, match funding and application of the Barnett formula. The additionality rules and the UK rebate also confused the issue. We recommended that the Government and the Assembly should jointly publish a simple but authoritative guide on public expenditure and on obtaining UK and European funding.

Public expenditure cover—an authority to spend public money—is required for European funding and for any match funding, which is the local contribution to project costs, that is provided from public sources.

We reported some concern about public expenditure cover for 2000-01, noting that in the first year structural fund payments are expected to be few. As funding for

[Mr. Martyn Jones]

projects is effectively scheduled over five to six years, most funding comes in the third or fourth year, so although very little funding was likely to be needed in the first year, there was some doubt that the funding available would be sufficient. We have urged the Government to allow, for additional public expenditure cover in Wales for 2000-01, if structural funds are greater than expected.

Real problems may arise in 2001-02 and beyond if a significant increase in public expenditure cover is not agreed. It is not possible for Wales to meet the costs of objective 1 from its current budget, which has been formulated and allocated to meet the costs of services already being provided by the Assembly. The concern is that, if we do not receive additional funding, we shall not be able to access the £1.2 billion of European funding.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): The hon. Gentleman has said that he is happy that there is sufficient funding for year one, although that is only a small sum. Is he really happy that sufficient funds are available? I understand that various local authorities have proposed various projects but have been told to scale them down to only one project each. Could the hon. Gentleman say something about that?

Mr. Jones: I have no knowledge of that, but should be concerned if it were true. All the information that the Committee has received is that money set aside in the Assembly's budget is sufficient to cover foreseen projects. As I have no other knowledge of the matter, I cannot comment further on it. The Committee has to accept that what we have been told is correct—that £25 million will cover the first year's funding. It seems likely that that sum will be sufficient. The evidence that we received on the spending profile over six to seven years supports the view that very little other than, perhaps, seedcorn funding—which is provided for in the £25 million—will be needed.

The Committee is more concerned about the period 2001-02 and beyond. I am sure that at least all hon. Members from Wales will appreciate that some services will be lost if the block grant has to cover expenditure additional to expenditure on the services—such as health and housing—for which it was formulated and the Assembly is responsible. We know that extra public funding will have to be provided to Wales if we are to obtain a percentage of the £1.2 billion. We also know that some of the funding will come from private expenditure. Although that is all to the good, a substantial percentage will still have to come from public expenditure.

The objective 1 area covers 65 per cent. of Wales's population, and objective 2 covers another 9 per cent. In the comprehensive spending review, the Assembly is arguing for an increase in its departmental expenditure limit to provide additional public expenditure cover for all the anticipated European receipts. We urge the UK Government to make a clear and early commitment to increasing Wales's public expenditure cover to allow a full take-up of European funding.

The Assembly will also have to find money for match funding. The situation is confusing, as there are two factors in the calculation. In addition to public expenditure cover, which is the authority to spend money, there is a cash element to the extra funding. The Committee believes, as I have implied, that it would not be possible for Wales to raise the estimated extra £885 million of public sector match funding from existing resources. We have therefore urged the Government in the next comprehensive spending review settlement to increase the funding made available to Wales, to meet in full the public sector element of match funding.

In the Government's response, which was published in our fourth special report, we were told essentially that we would have to await the outcome of the spending review. Ministers reiterated their assurance that they fully appreciate Wales's needs and the importance of objective 1 funding. Both as members of the Committee and as hon. Members from Wales, we were very glad to receive that assurance, and at least some of us appreciated that we would have to wait to see the outcome of the comprehensive spending review.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, last week, the Minister for Local Government and the Regions gave cast-iron assurances that money would be available to the English regions, whereas such assurances have not been given to Wales?

Mr. Jones: I was not aware of that. If it is true, I am happy that the English regions have received such an assurance, although it would be nice if Wales could receive a similar assurance. The problem may be that it is not as easy for such assurances to be made under the Barnett formula. I look forward to my hon. Friend the Minister responding on that point.

The report's conclusion is clear. It states:

> The award of Objective 1 status to West Wales and the Valleys is a sign of how far parts of Wales lag behind the rest of Europe in economic development. The next few years offer an unprecedented opportunity to transform this situation . . . Unless the UK Government provides a substantial increase in the Assembly's expenditure limits in the Comprehensive Spending Review, Wales will not be able to take full benefit of the European funds available. The current CSR negotiations are a test of the Government's commitment to Wales, and indeed of the Devolution settlement.

That statement still holds good, but if we accept the restraints we must therefore accept the Government's answer that there are problems with the CSR. We understand that it is those problems that have caused the delay, but we hope that the Minister will continue to press the case very strongly for maximum public expenditure cover and maximum match funding for Wales.

We have a unique opportunity to access European funding, which will not come again. The Committee is aware of what objective 1 funding did for Ireland's economy.

Mr. Evans: I understood that, when the proposals were resubmitted to the European Union, a cast-iron guarantee was sought that match funding would be made available by 31 March. That date seems to have disappeared. Has the hon. Gentleman been given any indication that the Government have guaranteed to the

EU that the £1.2 billion will be match-funded throughout the entire period of the EU structural fund grants?

Mr. Jones: I was not aware of that either, but it seems odd that the Commission would want such an assurance. European funding is project-based: if the projects do not exist, anticipating and accounting for the destination of every penny, ecu or euro of that £1.2 billion would require a crystal ball. If such a demand had been made, I would be concerned, but I do not think that the European Union could have imposed it on the Government. Given that any such demand would have required the assurance that it sought, but that no such guarantee has been given by the Government, I am certain that no demand was ever issued.

Wales has a unique opportunity. I believe that the Government are committed to getting as much money as possible into Wales. I hope that today's debate will strengthen Ministers' collective arms in their negotiations with the Exchequer.

I look forward to the Minister's response.

11.13 am

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): The Select Committee report derives from a wide-ranging piece of research undertaken in a short space of time. I shall not dwell on the report's conclusions, which were highlighted by the hon. Member for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones), but its main thrust is to urge the Government to give some cast-iron assurances on the additional funding and match funding that are prerequisites for drawing down moneys for successful structural fund projects.

We also said that we supported

> the initiative of the Assembly Secretary for Economic Development in seeking to exempt Structural Funds from the operation of the Barnett Formula.

That is an important point, as about 5 per cent. of the moneys coming to Wales do so under the Barnett formula. That 5 per cent. would be imposed on the total structural block moneys coming to the United Kingdom and, as a result, Wales would, in effect, be sold short.

The hon. Member for Clwyd, South said that about 65 per cent. of the population of Wales reside in the area now given objective 1 status. The funding is therefore more important to Wales, pro rata, than any other part of the UK.

The Committee also urged the Government to respond swiftly to the report. Over the past few years, we have been disappointed in the content of the responses from Governments to reports, and in the fact that there have been delays of nine, 10 or 12 months before such responses have been made available. Those delays have been something of a scandal. On more than one occasion, the Committee has had to write a firm letter to the Wales Office asking for an urgent response. Those request have been totally ignored for another three or four months.

That is not good government. It is an affront to the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs, and to the parliamentary process. However, the Committee urged the Government to respond swiftly to the report by making a clear public commitment that they will provide Wales with public expenditure cover for the anticipated European grants, and with additional funding to meet the full costs of the public sector match funding requirement.

Swift response there was, in this particular case—indeed, it came the same day as the report was published. In a press release, the Secretary of State stated that

> it is my view that the report is incorrect in its conclusion.

Somehow, the Secretary of State had prejudged the report's conclusions, or had received a leaked copy of the report. Clearly, he knew the contents of the report, and the Wales Office press release was issued on the morning of the press conference held by the Select Committee.

The press release continued:

> In these circumstances I believe it would be entirely wrong to separate one aspect of funding of the Welsh block grant from all the others. We cannot afford to prejudge decisions about funding of Welsh schools and hospitals by considering one aspect of the Welsh budget in isolation.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): The hon. Gentleman has made the very serious allegation that the report was leaked to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. I hope that he will clarify that in his contribution, as it is a serious allegation against my right hon. Friend and members of the Committee.

Mr. Llwyd: In return, will the Minister explain how the press release came to be issued at the time of the Committee's press conference?

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State expressed a view about the report's conclusions.

Mr. Llwyd: Without seeing the report?

Mr. Hanson: He had certainly seen the report's conclusions at the time of the press conference.

Mr. Llwyd: I dispute that, as the press release was issued at the same time as the press conference was being held. That is a matter of record. However it happened, the Secretary of State gave an urgent response—that much is true.

Mr. Martyn Jones: I think that I can clear this up. Press copies of reports are sent out under embargo, 24 hours before their official publication. The Secretary of State would therefore have had 24 hours notice of the report's conclusions.

Mr. Llwyd: The hon. Gentleman confirms that the Secretary of State would have had prior sight of the report, in which case it is good that he gave his response within 24 hours of receiving it.

[Mr. Llwyd]

However, the content of the Secretary of State's response is far from good, as he made it clear that he believed that the report was "incorrect in its conclusion".

Mr. Hanson: Will the hon. Gentleman withdraw what he said?

Mr. Llwyd: I will not.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. I remind hon. Members that there is a Chair here. It is occupied, and must be recognised.

Mr. Llwyd: I am obliged, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

There was a swift response to the report, saying "Wait for the CSR," and that the Committee's conclusions were incorrect—even though the report was consensual and its conclusions had been agreed by members of all parties involved.

Last week, it emerged that the English regions qualifying for objective 1 status—Cornwall, South Yorkshire and Merseyside—had been assured that they would receive match funding from the Government. The Minister for Local Government and the Regions has struck a deal with other Government Departments. Those Departments' budgets will be treated with more flexibility, so that cash can be freed up to match funds from the EU.

As we have heard, the issue of match funding for Wales is still to be resolved. We must have assurances that we will receive the necessary amount of match funding, over and above the Barnett block, to enable organisations in Wales to draw down money from the European structural funds.

Mr. Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is easier for the three English regions with objective 1 status to get money as they represent only 6 per cent. of the English population? They can go to the Government and say, "We represent only 6 per cent. of the population. Can you spare us just a few extra pounds"—or millions of pounds. It is harder to do that in Wales, where 76 per cent. of the population live in objective 1 or objective 2 regions.

Mr. Llwyd: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says and I dismiss it utterly.

We must ensure that the First Secretary and the Secretary of State for Wales do all that they can to put pressure on the Treasury to deliver on this crucial issue. Without adequate funding it will be impossible to draw down funds from Europe, rendering objective 1 status worthless and a Pyrrhic victory.

Why are Welsh Ministers failing when those representing the English regions have been able to do deals with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Department for Education and Employment, the Department of Trade and Industry, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and so on and are able to give cast-iron assurances?

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): I am interested in what the hon. Gentleman is saying, as I understand that the English regions have clearance for expenditure from 1 January 2000, which gives them a significant advantage. Does that not also highlight the fact that the Barnett formula has a stranglehold on the issues of public expenditure cover and match funding?

Mr. Llwyd: I agree entirely. The hon. Gentleman, as a member of the Select Committee, is fully aware of the problems that we face.

Mr. Evans: Does the hon. Gentleman also accept the fact that, because so much of Wales is covered by objective 1 and 2 status, there is a greater need for the Government to take an urgent decision instead of hiding behind the smokescreen of the comprehensive spending review?

Mr. Llwyd: I agree entirely. The hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Mr. Ruane) said that objective 1 regions in England represented 6 per cent. of the population, whereas in Wales they represent 65 per cent. according to my figures, and 76 per cent. according to his. Obviously, the decision is urgent and in any event it represents more people pro rata.

It is not just my party that is making this point; so are the hon. Members for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) and for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey). We are all ad idem on this and we need to get it clear. We have been asking for a decision for months now. This situation led to the downfall of the First Secretary in Cardiff and we are still no nearer a decision. I wonder when we will know what is happening.

Many projects are on hold and will not wait for much longer unless some assurances are given. People who are prepared to make inward investment are not prepared to wait for ever for assurances to be given. For all I know, some projects will switch to the English regions, once again denuding the Welsh economy of much-needed inward investment.

Mr. Ruane: Match funding is a key issue. It is not just the three Opposition parties that want an assurance on that; the Labour party does, too. There are rules, however, and announcements will be made in July. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that going on exclusively about match funding is scaring investors away from Wales? We are talking Wales down and people are afraid of getting involved because the only issue that they hear about is match funding. We need to talk up projects in Wales.

Mr. Llwyd: With respect, we can talk up projects in Wales till the cows come home. If we are unable to persuade inward investors that the economic conditions are right and the money is there, we can talk up Wales from now till kingdom come without any benefit to anyone.

The Government have failed the people of Wales in this matter. I understand that the final strategy and programming document will be with the Commission on 4 July and that the shadow monitoring committee will meet on 16 and 29 June and 21 July. The fast-track procedure will operate for two weeks in July with the possibility for every local partnership/regional package to submit applications.

There is great concern that only large-scale projects involving bodies such as the Welsh Development Agency will be considered as part of the procedure. Small voluntary and community organisations are concerned that they will be left out. Further, there are serious concerns that only one project per application can be considered, since many local partnerships already have 50 to 100 projects lined up. All other project applications will have to wait until the end of September to be submitted and, in reality, will not start until November or December when the money starts to come through. That means that nearly a year has been lost since west Wales and the valleys have been eligible to receive objective 1 funding.

There are fears that only a small number of projects will be able to get into the fast-track procedure in July and that only a few will be able to claim under that process. Retrospective funding is the term for claiming back money that has been spent after a project has been approved. That, too, is in danger. The leader of Gwynedd county council told me yesterday that he has been informed that there will be no retrospective approvals and payments in respect of some projects already undertaken. I specifically ask the Minister to give us an answer on that when he replies to the debate. It does not have to wait for the comprehensive spending review.

My party and others represented in this Chamber have the best interests of Wales at heart. Objective 1 funding has been designated simply because the GDP of Wales is below that of the rest of the United Kingdom and below the European Union average. That is not a matter of pride. We are all concerned about that, but we are equally concerned that this is our last chance to draw down the funds. Six years from now there will be further integration into the European Union, probably involving eastern European states, and objective 1 funding will no longer be available, so we need to make as much as we possibly can of the current opportunity.

As I have said, it is undeniable that we have lost 12 months already and crucial issues still need to be resolved, such as the relationship between what can be delivered through regional and local packages and actions plans. Will there be a lead body or accountable body responsible for projects under such packages? Who will have financial control over those projects?

Many organisations and partnerships complain that they are being held back by the lack of guidance from the Assembly on such issues. Lack of guidance from the Government of Wales is doing enormous damage to preparations for the launch of such projects in all objective 1 regions. I believe that that was intentional on the part of the Government as they have allocated only £25 million for such projects during the first financial year.

We have been saying for the past six to nine months that we have been let down by the Government of Wales. The achievement of objective 1 status may well turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory if we are unable to maximise the structural funds that we can obtain. The Government have handled the matter in a deplorable way and we will get nothing like the benefit that we could have achieved.

Mr. Martin Caton (Gower): We have heard on many occasions in the past few months that the Government are letting Wales down. Can the hon. Gentleman give us a figure that he would expect from the comprehensive spending review that would not result in a statement the following day from Plaid Cymru to the effect that the Government had let Wales down again? How much does the hon. Gentleman expect from the comprehensive spending review?

Mr. Llwyd: I am no more privy to the comprehensive spending review than the hon. Gentleman is. It is one of the problems to which the Minister will refer in a moment. I do not know what is in the comprehensive spending review. I say simply that we should have additional funding and match funding sufficient to allow us to use all the allocated structural funds that have been designated for the poorer parts of Wales.

11.29 am

Mr. Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd): I am concerned about the contribution of the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd), which contrasted greatly with his more collegiate, co-operative approach in the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs yesterday. Perhaps someone has had a word with him—he is usually an amiable character, yet he said that the Government's record on objective 1 was deplorable.

Was it deplorable when the former Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), accepted the hon. Gentleman's county and my county into the Welsh Office bid at the last hour? If he had not, 7,000 people in the hon. Gentleman's constituency would not have benefited. Was it deplorable when the former Secretary of State for Wales, my right hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Mr. Davies), argued in Cabinet—quite often with Cabinet members from other regions with objective 1 interests—that Wales should be accepted, and that it should be the largest region in the United Kingdom to be accepted? Was it deplorable when the Prime Minister went to Berlin, argued through the night for the UK bid to be accepted and then flew back to Hawarden airport to announce that to the Labour party conference?

Labour has delivered on these three key points, yet the Welsh nationalists have used objective 1 as a political football—a political cosh with which to bang Labour over the head time and time again. They have neglected the true interests of the people of Wales; they have sought party political gain at every opportunity—at the local elections last year, at the European elections and at the Assembly elections. They sacked the First Secretary, conniving with the Opposition parties in Wales to achieve that narrow political goal. They were after a political scalp, not objective 1 or match funding. They have used the subject of structural funding time and again for their own narrow political ends.

Match funding is a critical issue, and no one in Wales has tried harder than I have to ensure that objective 1—

Mr. Evans: Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that if the Government had come forward with the match funding, Plaid Cymru, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats would not have united in the interests of the people of Wales and removed the First Secretary?

Mr. Ruane: I am not accepting a criticism like that from the hon. Gentleman. When the previous

[Mr. Ruane]

Government came to power in 1979, of the 13 regions in the UK, Wales was mid-table as far as gross domestic product was concerned. When they left office in 1997, Wales came bottom of the league table. It is thanks to the previous Government that Wales achieved objective 1 status—they took us from the middle of the table to the bottom. They sacked the miners, they sacked the steelworkers, they put nothing in their place and they did not get the structural funds for objective 1. So I will have no truck with the hon. Gentleman when it comes to objective 1 funding. The Conservatives did nothing, and they continue to carp and do nothing.

As I was saying, match funding is a key issue. The way to achieve it is not along narrow party political lines, but through a collegiate approach. We should forget our political objectives and work together to put a cohesive, cogent case to the Chancellor of the Exchequer for match funding. That is what the Welsh Affairs Committee report does. It is critical, and it has all-party support. We want match funding.

I should have liked the Chancellor of the Exchequer to announce last year, or even in December, in the middle of the comprehensive spending review, that Wales was a special case and that the Government would stop the comprehensive spending review and guarantee the people of Wales objective 1 funding.

Mr. Llwyd: Can the hon. Gentleman confirm that Treasury Ministers were invited to give evidence to the Select Committee but declined?

Mr. Ruane: I am disappointed that they did. I should have preferred them to give evidence. I should have preferred the Chancellor of the Exchequer to announce in the middle of the comprehensive spending review that money for Wales—for the objective 1 regions in the UK—had been guaranteed. The report says that, and I support that view. However, we live in a political world, and if my right hon. Friend had guaranteed Wales that money for objective 1 funding, every other Department in Whitehall would have demanded the same. So that is what I wanted, but it was not to be. It will happen in July.

You have threatened us with all sorts. You have sacked the First Secretary.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have threatened no one.

Mr. Ruane: I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Llwyd: Is the hon. Gentleman aware of the last Budget speech made by the Chancellor in which he departed from the purdah on the comprehensive spending review in no fewer than three instances, saying that extra expenditure would be forthcoming? If he can do it in those cases, why can he not do it for Wales?

Mr. Ruane: The Budget, as the hon. Gentleman knows, is fine tuning for the economy. The comprehensive spending review sets spending patterns for a three-year period. The objective 1 spending pattern is over a nine-year period. We do not need fine tuning; we need a strategic approach for the next nine years. That is why the funding has not been announced.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Ruane: This is the last time I shall give way—unless it is to one of my hon. Friends, of course.

Mr. Walter: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I am a little concerned by what he says. Is he suggesting that when we do get the announcement of the comprehensive spending review, the Prime Minister's commitment not to let Wales down may not be fulfilled, and that the money that is necessary for the first three or four years of objective 1 will not be provided?

Mr. Ruane: I take the Prime Minister at his word; I take the Chancellor of the Exchequer at his word. If the money is not delivered, I will be the first to criticise. On the flip side of the coin, I hope that if—or, rather, when—the money is delivered in the comprehensive spending review in July, the Opposition parties will apologise for sacking the First Secretary and for using objective 1 as a political cosh. I will criticise, and I hope that they will apologise, when we have the result in July.

I have concerns about the objective 1 plans for Wales. I have concerns that information has not percolated through to our communities over the past two or three years. Like the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy, I am concerned that the agencies that have paid employees on £25,000 and £30,000 a year will cut the cake before the community projects can get up and running.

In Cornwall, a 27-page full-colour brochure was sent out to all 450,000 households.

Mr. Livsey: Because of the Liberal Democrat council.

Mr. Ruane: The hon. Gentleman's party political point is well taken. However, such action has not been taken in Wales; it has certainly not been taken in Denbighshire and Conwy, which entered the bid late. We have had 40 meetings in Denbighshire on objective 1—people know about it, but there is more to be done.

I am also concerned about something else that the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy said. The procedure for applying for objective 1 bids is not clear to the communities, especially for community projects. What do the application forms look like? We need a general outline—if they are not ready yet, let us look at the sort of things that should be included. What is the line of command? Where is the local responsibility? Will it be too complicated? I believe that there are 32 strands, including strands for the development of tourism, small and medium-sized enterprises, agriculture, and so on.

I am also concerned at the slow pace this year. I hope that, once the comprehensive spending review is announced, and match funding is in place, there will be rapid action. I have been evangelising and enthusing about this in my communities; I have organised numerous events giving information in my constituency. My constituents are expectant—they want results. I want results, and I hope that we will see them soon.

The Committee's report is an excellent document—it is critical, comprehensive and readable. It has strong conclusions. I hope that the Ministers who read it will take the feedback from the Committee and the people of Wales right to the top so that it will influence the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he makes his announcements on the comprehensive spending review in July.

11.39 am

Mr. Martin Caton (Gower): I want to focus first on the Select Committee's recommendation, in paragraph 12, that

> the Government and the Assembly, jointly publish a simple but authoritative guide to public expenditure in Wales, setting out in simple terms how both UK and European funding operate in Wales.

When I reconsidered the evidence taken by the inquiry, I was reminded what a difficult and painful process it is to get one's head around the whole subject of European structural funds.

Most of that pain and aggravation is unnecessary, however. Yes, the issue is complex; to get on top of it, one has to become familiar with terms such as departmental expenditure limits, PES—public expenditure survey—cover, match funding, additionality, single programme documents and so on, as well as the organisational structures and grant criteria applied under a particular programme. However, one cannot help but wonder whether some smoke and mirrors have not been chucked in to make life even more complicated.

Last October, Jane Hough, of the House of Commons Library, attended an informal briefing of the Committee to try to lighten our path through the structural fund jungle. She provided us with an extremely useful background paper, although she acknowledged that it was not definitive. She pointed out:

> There is an absence of any substantive explanation of the process either from the Treasury or the territorial departments. I have, however, discussed this matter with an official at the Treasury. While he was unable to add to the notes below, he confirmed that my understanding of the subject was "as accurate as it could be for someone outside the Treasury".

I do not know about you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but those words sound to me like those of the high priest of an obscure cult, protecting the mysteries of the inner sanctum from the common worshipper. That is not good enough. Structural funds are an instrument of public policy and should be open to public scrutiny and democratic influence at every level. It is not merely a matter of producing helpful brochures and booklets to enable individuals or organisations to submit grant applications—although, of course, that is vitally important. Information about how the funds are designed and how they work should be available to anybody who is prepared to undertake a little study. At present, that is not the case. I hope that soon the Assembly and the Government will work together to produce a guide, as we have requested them to do.

The inquiry was the Committee's first attempt to fulfil a liaison and communication function between the National Assembly in Wales and the Government in Whitehall. There are clear responsibilities for both forms of government. Early on, ways were established for the Executives in Whitehall and Cardiff Bay to communicate and to reach decisions. Joined-up government can work between different tiers and in different geographical locations. Many members of the Select Committee hope that we can help to achieve joined-up scrutiny and joined-up accountability by working with the National Assembly on such issues.

We have not yet completed a mechanism to achieve that, but our inquiry did not make too bad a start. We took evidence from the First Secretary and the Chair of the Economic Development Committee in Cardiff, as well as from the Secretary of State.

The focus this morning has understandably been on match funding and public expenditure cover. However, the report made other significant recommendations—on the possibility of advance payments in certain circumstances; on shifting administration of the social fund from the Department for Education and Employment to the National Assembly for Wales; on operating aids—a matter which needs further exploration; and on urging extra funding from the UK Government if it was shown that there were a higher number of claims than were predicted when the allocation was made. The recommendations were all important; they have in part informed the consideration of structural funds at both tiers of government.

There has been a lot of huffing and puffing on spending cover and match funding this morning. That comes over as rather unconvincing theatre. As my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Mr. Ruane) said, our report made a bid for a commitment to match funding. I certainly support that, although we did so more in hope than in expectation—aware that, in all likelihood, the Welsh block would have to be considered together and as part of the comprehensive spending review.

Mr. Walter: From talking to Commission officials in Brussels, my perception is that, if the money is not additional to the Welsh block, it will not fulfil the requirements of the objective 1 programme. Is the hon. Gentleman aware of that?

Mr. Caton: I do not know what the hon. Gentleman heard in Brussels, but I certainly agree with the spirit of what was said. We need the money to be additional. If the rules permit us to receive it only in that way, I have no problem with that. The money should be additional to the block grant.

We are within weeks of learning what the comprehensive spending review will reveal about Wales. My view of the matter has become firmer over the months; we shall hear a good-news story for Wales. However, the problem is how will the Opposition parties assess whether it is a good-news story? That is why I put my question to the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd). One cannot help but feel that, whatever is announced in the CSR, the day after, we shall hear that the Labour Government have let Wales down again. If Opposition parties do not have a figure in

[Mr. Caton]

mind—how much they expect in order to provide match funding—when we are within weeks of that announcement, it is most disturbing.

Mr. Livsey: The answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is simple. We know that we need £885 million for match funding from public expenditure. We shall judge—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I should be much obliged if hon. Members would address the Chair rather than the wallpaper.

Mr. Livsey: Mr. Chairman, I shall never do that again—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps I should remind hon. Members that when the House took the decision to adopt this modified form of debate, it also decided that those who regularly occupy the Chair in Westminster Hall were to be addressed as Deputy Speaker. Those to be addressed as Mr. Chairman—or Miss for that matter—would be those who were reserves. I am not a reserve.

Mr. Livsey: I take your comments on board, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The judgment that has to be made is about whether the Government come up with the amount of match funding required to meet that provided by the EU—as we know that is £885 million. That is surely how the matter should be judged.

Mr. Caton: It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman has not mentioned the fact that match funding for our existing structural fund money has not taken into account the current DFEE payments through the social fund. I am sure that he will enlarge on how he arrived at that figure when he makes his speech.

Mr. Evans: Will the hon. Gentleman tell the Chamber what figure he expects in the announcement, so that we can judge whether the Government were successful or inadequate in their provision?

Mr. Caton: My assessment will be based on the type of formula that I had begun to outline in response to the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey). After taking into account the existing match funding for our present structural funds, and after taking out the money currently controlled by the DFEE—which should eventually be controlled by Wales—the amount should match the remainder. It is as simple as that. I hope the amount will be better than that, and that we shall hear a good announcement about the block grant.

To conclude, Mr. Deputy Speaker—I apologise for my failure to address you correctly earlier—I am sure that there will be a good-news story. When we receive that announcement, we need to get on with the job of exploiting objective 1 in west Wales and the valleys to the benefit of constituencies such as mine, which desperately need it.

11.49 am

Mrs. Betty Williams (Conwy): I had hoped that we would have had a constructive debate about European structural funds. However, I am sorry to say that, having listened to the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) in particular, it sounds as though the nationalists' campaign continues as it has for the past eight to 10 months. I would like us to work together constructively to put a strong, sound case forward, so that, in a few weeks time, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will make a favourable announcement for all the people of Wales and not just one section of society.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Mr. Ruane) referred to the comprehensive spending review. However, we do not receive answers from the nationalists' representatives when we try to pin them down on how much funding they seek. They have mounted a long campaign, but I do not accept that we should expect any Chancellor, Minister or Prime Minister to sign an open-ended cheque to any organisation without knowing exactly what sum we are talking about.

The comprehensive spending review will tell us the Government's plans for the next three years. That must be separated from any Budget announcement, because that is the whole point behind having a comprehensive spending review.

Mr. Llwyd: Did the hon. Lady hear me earlier refer to the fact that the Government departed from that general rule in no fewer than three instances in the latest Budget statement? Furthermore, did she not listen when I said that the Minister for Local Government and the Regions has already given cast-iron assurances via the Treasury to the three English regions now getting objective 1 status?

Mrs. Williams: I am not a Minister, but I am sure that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Wales will address that point when he winds up. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd attempted to give the hon. Gentleman an answer on that point.

At the height of the nationalist campaign to talk Wales down, prospective applicants raised certain questions. However, Labour Members and the Government were able to persuade those applicants to put packages together. I, as the Member for Conwy, was asked by members of the Federation of Small Businesses, voluntary organisations and local authorities whether it was worth their while to put packages together if they would be disregarded at the end of the day. They had accepted the nationalists' view that the money would not be available. I am confident that, in a few weeks time, we will hear a favourable announcement from my right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Prime Minister and that they will not let Wales down. It is wrong for any politician to consider this issue only in a political sense when the rest of us sincerely feel that the whole nation should be considered when we make our case to Government for match funding and for additional resources for Wales.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Mr. Caton) referred to paragraph 12. The absence of a simple guide has left the door wide open for opposition parties to

make use of the fact that people are unclear as to what additionality and match funding actually means. The opposition parties have grasped that opportunity and made the most of it in their 10-month campaign.

We must now persuade Government that the need for the funding exists. I refer to a meeting that we had at the Welsh Office some time ago at which the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy was present. We tried to persuade Government that Conwy and Denbighshire should be included on the map for objective 1 status. We succeeded in doing that, and the Prime Minister then succeeded in his attempt when he spoke on behalf of the United Kingdom later that year.

We need to work together on this at the last minute before the announcement is made. We need to persuade the Prime Minister, the Cabinet and the Chancellor that Wales deserves additional resources so that we can consider closely all the packages and projects that have been prepared in the past few months. I am confident that my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Chancellor will not let Wales down and that we shall have a favourable announcement shortly.

11.54 am

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): The Welsh Affairs Committee has produced an important report. It is important because it is an all-party report and it was well received, not least by Members of the National Assembly, as an effective contribution to the debate and to ensuring that Wales receives a fair deal.

The report primarily deals with objective 1 funding and, in particular, with the raising of public expenditure for match funding. It highlights the importance of advance payments and it asks for a clear and early commitment for full public sector funding. We identified the amount of match funding that is required, and I referred to that figure earlier. We also asked for the exemption of structural funds from the operation of the Barnett formula and for funds for European social fund payments to be transferred from the Department for Education and Employment to the National Assembly. That is an important issue. We also want to ensure that private sector match funding is adequate.

We also asked what new structures for overseeing and monitoring plans after the wind-up of the Welsh Office task force will apply. I am sure that hon. Members will remember that we were critical of the way in which the task force was wound up, because that caused a significant delay to objective 2 plans which cover 9 per cent. of the population of Wales.

We also asked for a renegotiation of the objective 2 map, but that has not occurred. The answer that we received in the Government's response about additional public expenditure survey cover was to wait for the comprehensive spending review. That is a case of jam tomorrow and I believe that it is strongly connected with the next general election campaign. It demonstrates the iron grip by an iron Chancellor on such information. However, as has already been pointed out, he was prepared to make three exceptions only the other day.

I wish to deal in particular with the problems confronting objective 2, because much has already been said about objective 1. First, I congratulate the East Wales Partnership, which produced a single programming document that has already received approval from the European Commission. Although it still has to go over several internal hurdles, it has been approved in principle as a result of much hard work by civil servants in the National Assembly and by councils within the partnership, driven, not least, by my county council in Powys.

What worries us in particular is that there appear to be inadequate numbers of staff in the National Assembly to deal with the programming document. I understand that every expectation was given that the document would be in place and ready to go by November or December of this year. However, we found out only yesterday that the process has been delayed to March or April of 2001. The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) slashed the number of staff in the then Welsh Office and that has contributed to the delay. None the less, why cannot consultants or competent members of county councils be drafted in to speed up the process? The delay has slowed everything down. When I was in America with the Welsh Affairs Committee last week, I saw a fast-food restaurant called Mr. D. De-lay!, but the only problem was that it had been shut down and looked decrepit. That is what could happen to objective 2. The problem is serious.

The English regions have already had approval for objective 2 and that will be effective from 1 January. As of yesterday, we understand that objective 2 will not be effective in Wales until a starting date of 26 May and we must remember that the money is disbursed by the "M plus 2" rule. In other words, the money must be spent within two years. The position is therefore very unsatisfactory.

To achieve objective 2 status, we need £80 million of match funding against a contribution of £50 million from the European Union. The programme is extremely important. In my own area of Powys, the gross domestic product in 1995 was 76 per cent., of the average, which is only 1 per cent. over the 75 per cent. qualifying threshold for objective 1. It is now well below that threshold, even though we are receiving objective 2 funding, which concentrates on 60 per cent. of business development, entrepreneurship initiatives, help for small and medium enterprises and growing indigenous businesses, all of which are vital to our local economy.

I draw the Chamber's attention to a report produced last week by the Alliance for Regional Aid which addresses the problem of additionality that we discussed this morning. The report highlights the fact that additionality does not apply so much in England because of the Barnett formula. It says that the Treasury does not allow public expenditure to rise in Wales, but should do so. That is a huge issue. Indeed, the report proposes a matching finance fund. It states that there are two problems, the first of which

> concerns the additionality of EU grants. This is about the public expenditure cover for the grants themselves. At the present time additionality is primarily a problem in Wales—

in the context of a comparison with what is happening in England—

> where the fixed public expenditure total has not been adjusted to reflect the extra money coming as a result of Objective 1 status. The net effect is therefore that extra EU grants in Wales threaten to displace an equivalent amount of other Welsh public expenditure—on schools, hospitals, social services etc.

[Mr. Richard Livsey]

That point cannot be made often enough. The report goes on to recommend a way of ensuring additionality and states:

> One way of averting the immediate problem of non-additionality in Wales would be for the Treasury to allow Welsh public expenditure to rise by the value of the additional grants coming from the EU. That way, the extra grants would no longer displace other Welsh public expenditure.
>
> The disadvantage of this one-off solution is that it is likely to provoke a reaction from other areas. A better way forward is to provide Wales with the extra spending it needs but within a framework that treats all EU grants equally and provides fairness for all parts of the UK. There are two simple ways in which this could be done.
>
> The first way is to
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> take all EU regional grants right out of departmental spending totals.
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> The second way is to
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> give automatic extra spending consents, equal to the value of the grants to bodies in receipt of EU funding.

That is common sense and should be done. We expect it to be included in the comprehensive spending review; indeed, we should have had this information far sooner.

12.3 pm

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): First, I welcome the fact that we are having this debate. I have read the report and I congratulate the Welsh Affairs Committee on its comprehensive work.

The subject of objective 1 status is vital to the vast majority of Wales. As the map shows, whole swathes of Wales will now be covered by objective 1 status. We recognise that there are pockets of deprivation, even in those parts of Wales that are not covered by objective 1 status. It is therefore important that we do what we can to get this money through to the most deprived and disadvantaged areas of Wales as quickly as possible.

We have already given money in connection with these European funds. We are net contributors to the European Union and, as we are getting back our own money, the matter is doubly urgent. I agree with much, if not all, of what the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) said.

Mr. Evans: It is just as well that the hon. Gentleman is not running for his party leadership, as that might have been a critical blow to his campaign.

Mr. Llwyd: It would have been fatal.

Mr. Evans: What the hon. Gentleman said was important. Criticism of the Government is useful when their actions are wrong. There is nothing improper about such criticism. Indeed, in the first five years of my being a Member of Parliament, I was critical, both publicly and privately, of my Government when they did things that were wrong.

Mr. Ruane: Name the issues.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order.

Mr. Evans: There is nothing wrong in being critical when things are going wrong. Indeed, it is a strength to be critical of one's own Government. Similarly, we are not talking Wales down when we discuss deprived and disadvantaged areas, but are recognising problems that need to be recognised.

We have already heard a little about the fast-tracking of some bids that have come through in the first year. I was led to believe that any local authority that came forward with such projects would be match funded within the first year. We heard that £25 million would be made available, but were then told that the authorities could look at only one project in each area. Caerphilly has 90 projects; Blaenau Gwent has 40; Swansea has 20; Carmarthenshire has 10, and Gwynedd has seven. However, those areas will now have to reduce their projects to one each. If objective 1 is to be important for such areas, surely all the projects that have come forward should be examined. One should not just say that £25 million will be sufficient in the first year, as clearly it is not. I accept that the First Secretary is busy, as he is also a Member of Parliament and, I understand, has four jobs. The problem may be that he cannot give the necessary time and attention to objective 1 funding. Perhaps that should be re-examined.

I sat on the Standing Committee that considered the Bill that became the National Lottery etc. Act 1993. The Committee was told that lottery funding would all be additional funding, and we have heard the term "additionality" being used. However, it seems that some of that money will go into funds that the Government would normally provide. Again, we learn that we must wait for the comprehensive spending review. Is that a smokescreen? Going back to the subject of the lottery, it seems that the dome can ask for as much money as it likes. Cheques are written there and then as it needs the money straight away. Yet, whenever Wales asks for money, it has to wait for the comprehensive spending review. It seems that if Wales is now playing second fiddle to a failing theme park in Greenwich.

Mr. Ruane: Is the hon. Gentleman seriously suggesting that match funding should come from the lottery?

Mr. Evans: As I understand it, the Government have said that they are seriously considering using lottery funding, which will be part of the match funding to win funds from Europe. If the hon. Gentleman is critical of that and wants to intervene again, it would be breath of fresh air to hear him criticise his Government on anything. The lottery and lottery funding will be vital in gaining funds from the European Union.

Time and again, the Government use the comprehensive spending review as a barrier to prevent those funds getting through. Yet the dome can use lottery funds and goes back, cap in hand, time and again, and there does not seem to be any problem with that. The funding of £1.2 billion will be critical to parts of Wales and may be the last of its kind. As has already been said, several eastern European countries want to join the European Union and some of them are very poor indeed. I do not doubt that they will seek large cohesion funds from the EU to assist them with their problems.

Mr. Ruane: As a representative of the Conservative party, does the hon. Gentleman take credit for taking

Wales from mid-table to the bottom of the league? We got objective 1 funding because we were at the bottom of the league for the whole of Europe.

Mr. Evans: That is a typical tactic by the hon. Gentleman, who is not prepared to address the problems of whether the Government will guarantee match funding, which we are here today to discuss. He just looks back at the past, and he must recognise that the Conservative Government did a great deal for Wales over 18 years, but, in 1997, despite the fact that more than 300,000 people in Wales voted for us, we paid a price. We are listening, and it is about time that the hon. Gentleman started listening to what people in his heartlands in Wales are saying. He should look at the results in the European, local government and Assembly elections, because the people in Wales are shouting, and he is refusing to listen.

Mr. Ruane: I am listening.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I enjoy and encourage interventions, but they should be interventions to which the hon. Member has given way. I deplore sedentary interventions that interrupt the flow of the debate.

Mr. Evans: As ever, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am grateful for your protection.

The £1.2 billion will be vital to Wales, but what has been achieved so far? We are six months into the programme, and not a single project has got off the ground. All that we have had is the scalp of the First Secretary for Wales, and I will not let Plaid Cymru take all the credit for that because the support of all the opposition parties in the Assembly was necessary.

Mr. Llwyd: May I assist the hon. Gentleman by pointing out that half of the Labour Members of the Assembly wanted to get rid of the First Secretary as well?

Mr. Evans: I am looking forward to reading autobiographies as they emerge. Perhaps we will then get the full story of exactly what happened on that day; it could not have been only the Prime Minister who did not know what was going on.

I am concerned that projects could be lost. We do not know whether any have been lost to date. We know that a firm in Ceredigion in west Wales said that it was looking for objective 1 funding so that it could expand. We have to accept that inward investment into Wales might now go somewhere else. It has been suggested that the investment might go to England, but, with the European Union single market, it could go to Germany, France, Spain or Portugal. I cannot imagine Germany, France or Ireland—which has done very well out of the EU—hiding behind their comprehensive spending review and failing to get EU money.

The single programming document was sent to Brussels and criticised roundly by the European Union, and by businesses and by local authorities, because of the lack of guidelines that the hon. Member for Gower (Mr. Caton) has mentioned. In January, it emerged that the European Commission had been critical of the way in which Wales had handled its bid for objective 1 funding. It stated that the bid was flawed in several ways, including a lack of vision and innovation, a weak sense of ownership of the programme by some of the partners, and the barrier caused by match funding.

The Commission said that the weaknesses of the submission were more comprehensive than the strengths. It concluded that

> the Commission needs to be satisfied that future financial resources will be available to provide public funding for the whole programme and cannot be satisfied that this will simply be reviewed in the forthcoming CSR.

The Commission has made the same criticism as we have.

Mr. Livsey: By contrast, will the hon. Gentleman congratulate the East Wales partnership, which was not criticised? Its single programming document was accepted, but it is subject to even greater delay. We wonder whether some of the match funding due to go to objective 2 areas may, as a result, find its way into objective 1 areas, and that may be a reason for the delay.

Mr. Evans: Of course I accept that, but we are all keen to make sure that the funding comes through as soon as possible for all the regions of Wales, so it must be tackled as a matter of urgency. The Prime Minister said that he would not let Wales down. He said, "Trust me, I'm Tony," but we are still waiting. We have to ask why Wales is being let down. The Government state that this summer they will publish a clear, simple guide to the funding policy, and we look forward to that.

As many hon. Members know, I have a business in Swansea which I am expanding at the moment. When I borrowed funds for that, I was told, "And here is £500 from the European investment bank." I did not ask for that and it was not critical to my investment, but of course I am grateful for it. There are many areas in which such funds are available, and in many cases they may be critical to investment by a business. It would be extremely useful if the Government produced guidelines in simple language so that people knew exactly what funds were available and what projects they might be able to develop to get EU funding.

Mr. Caton: Do I take it from what the hon. Gentleman is saying that a Labour Government are good news for the economy of Townhill?

Mr. Evans: No, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the Evans family are good news for the economy of Townhill.

Perhaps the Minister will tell the Chamber when those guidelines will be published.

We know that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has a war chest, and we are all wondering what he is going to do with it and when he is going to spend it, but some areas of Wales are deprived now and they are asking for that money. The Chancellor is getting £22 billion for mobile phone licences, and people in Wales are wondering why they have to wait for the comprehensive spending review.

The Select Committee report is critical of the involvement of small businesses. The Federation of Small Businesses made several comments to the

[Mr. Evans]

Committee. Will the Government re-examine that involvement, because it is the small businesses in Wales that will create new jobs, as they did in the 1980s?

The report says that the Committee will continue to monitor the situation of objective 1 funding, and I welcome that and wish it well. I hope that lessons will be learned for the future. Although it will be several years before we find out how much of the £1.2 billion will be taken up, will the Minister tell the Chamber exactly what percentage he believes will be taken up?

Paragraph 20 of the report says that the "trust us" approach is not enough, and I agree. The Government are all spin and no delivery, and style and no substance. They have gimmicks galore, but the people of Wales will not be fooled and will not forgive them if they do not stop the spin and deliver where Wales needs it most, in its deprived and disadvantaged areas.

12.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): Anyone who had arrived from the planet Zog and listened to this debate would think that objective 1 was a bad news story for Wales. I state categorically that it is a good news story for Wales; whatever criticisms have been made this morning about a range of issues, in the report and by hon. Members. Wales will benefit from objective 1 and, with the Government, will maximise that benefit. I shall try to respond to all the points that have been made, but I hope that hon. Members accept that the Government are acting in good faith on objective 1.

This is the first time that a Welsh Affairs Committee report has been debated in Westminster Hall, and I welcome the contributions that have been made and the partnership approach that the Committee has taken in discussions with the National Assembly. I welcome also the work of the staff in producing the report, which is comprehensive. We have had an enjoyable and interesting debate, which has strayed into party political issues.

Mr. Llwyd: How strange.

Mr. Hanson: Well, the report was consensual, and the debate has strayed into party political points to which I shall respond accordingly.

It is important to say at the outset that Europe matters to Britain and to Wales. Over 50 per cent. of our trade in goods and services is with the European Community; one seventh of all UK income and production and millions of jobs depend on sales to EU countries, and Wales is home to many mainland European businesses. The EU's 380 million consumers make it one of the largest and richest markets in the world.

The Government are pro-Europe, but it is not all about the market or working with our colleagues in Europe—there is also a common social objective. It is through the European social partnership and structural funds that we can make progress on achieving our common aim of reforming and modernising Wales. The voluntary and private sectors have an important role to play in Wales to make sure that we can look outwards to the UK, European and global economies.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) is slightly out of tune with the shadow Chief Secretary, the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), who does not believe that structural funds are of value. However, the Government believe that European structural funds provide a real and tangible benefit to the people of Wales and to our membership of the EU. They are of particular significance to Wales.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Mr. Ruane) said, my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Chancellor negotiated through the night at Berlin to reach agreement on the eligibility rules across the EU for objective 1, so that Wales can benefit from objective 1 status. That is why west Wales and the valleys have been designated as an objective 1 area and allocated 1:85 billion euro in the seven years 2000-06. The Government are committed to the receipt of structural funds and taking the issue forward.

As hon. Members have said, objective 1 covers areas that have less than 75 per cent. of average EU per capita gross domestic product and is intended to stimulate proper economic growth, enabling Wales to catch up. Given the political nature of the discussion, I have to say that the hon. Member for Ribble Valley has a bit of a brass neck to say that objective 1 is an important issue when the Government have been able to secure objective 1 partly because we have had to return to the EU and raise the Conservative Government's failures; they increased deprivation and the disparity between wealth and prosperity in Wales.

It is vital that such a huge injection of money is spent wisely and that the priorities correspond to the real needs of all the different sectors of the Welsh population. The EU resources must go where the real need lies, not just to established projects, partners and bidders for money. The widest possible partnership is needed, involving all sectors with an interest, from the National Assembly to the United Kingdom Government and the organisations on the ground. The rejuvenation of the economy of west Wales and the valleys is a vast and worthy task, and we must show that we are up to the job.

My hon. Friends the Members for Gower (Mr. Caton) and for Conwy (Mrs. Williams) and the hon. Member for Ribble Valley asked whether the Government would produce, with the Assembly, a report and authoritative guide on the European process. We shall produce an updated version of the statement for funding policy that was first published in March 1999. It will be published in the summer, shortly after the comprehensive spending review reports. I hope that it will help to clarify precisely the roles and responsibilities of the National Assembly and the Government.

The Welsh Affairs Committee report on European structural funds clearly shows the seriousness that it attaches to the matter, which I welcome. Objective 1 is immensely important to Wales and, as hon. Members have said, represents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. As the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) has said, the enlargement of the EU before the next structural funds round means that this will almost certainly be the last chance for Wales to receive the economic boost that objective 1 funding will bring.

That is why the Government are committed to grasping this opportunity firmly and ensuring that it makes a real and lasting difference to Wales.

The report was thorough, comprehensive and raised several serious and important matters. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I particularly welcome the recommendation on the importance of making the objective 1 programme a success in Wales. As my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd clearly said, it is imperative that we move the debate on from funding and consider how to use the money. Hon. Members understand where we are coming from; we have explained the position many times. We have a commitment from Brussels, and the Government are committed to examining the issue in the comprehensive spending review. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has clearly and publicly said in Wales and in Parliament that he will not let down Wales. It is important hon. Members take that commitment in the good faith that my right hon. Friend gave it and in which I repeat it today. We await the outcome of the comprehensive spending review shortly so that we can consider how to use the money and resources to transform the Welsh economy.

Mr. Walter: Before the Minister moves on, several questions have been asked about funding, but I am not sure that we have heard any answers. Why is it necessary to negotiate something to which the Government have allegedly agreed? Will those funds be in addition to the Welsh block grant?

Mr. Hanson: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Welsh block grant, objective 1 funding, additionality and other issues will be considered in the comprehensive spending review. It is important to take the Government in good faith and to await that announcement in due course. Hon. Members have understood that to be the position for many months and have continued to ask those questions—it is their legitimate right to do so.

Mr. Llwyd: If it is clear that, following the CSR, the Chancellor will commit £60 million in additional funding to Wales, together with £190 million direct from Brussels without taking any money away, that good faith will have been well invested.

Mr. Hanson: I take the hon. Gentleman's point. The CSR is due shortly. The Government's decision to include objective 1 funding in the current spending review does not put programmes at risk in any way. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley said that programmes and projects are threatened, and other hon. Members have made similar points, but projects cannot be brought forward in Wales until the Commission has approved the plans. The plans will not be approved until next week at the earliest, so no project has been approved or can be supported.

The hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy, among others, mentioned retrospective payments. It is difficult—in fact, nigh impossible—to approve payments that have been made already on potential projects, because the Commission has not approved the plans. Some hon. Members have spoken about projects not being brought forward or allowed, but that is tosh because, to date, the document has not been approved and, therefore, the Government are as yet unable to consider it.

Mr. Livsey: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hanson: Time is pressing.

Mr. Livsey: What about objective 2?

Mr. Hanson: I must deal with the points that have been made.

As hon. Members will know, the spending review is a thorough, on-going examination of all Government spending plans. In those circumstances, it is wrong to try to separate one aspect of Welsh funding from the others. European structural funding is not new to the United Kingdom; it is well known. The comprehensive spending review constitutes the normal procedure for reviewing the spending needs of Wales and all Departments, including those for structural funds. My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has recognised that objective 1 is new to Wales and that that has to be considered in the current spending round.

When the objective 1 plan has been approved in Brussels, which is imminent, we will have a strategic framework in place. At that point, the Assembly will be able to draw down the payment on account and then submit claims to the Commission to reimburse payments that have made on account. That money will go straight to the Assembly, without delay. Britain would be in breach of the Commission's regulations if that did not happen. From then on, the success of objective 1 will be driven by the excellence of the projects and packages proposed for funding. The vision and local ownership of proposals produced by the Welsh partnership, tailored to meet Welsh needs, will be fundamental elements.

I give a clear commitment that the outcome of the spending review will be announced before the end of next month. It will include overall spending limits for Departments and the Assembly, as well as the other devolved administrations. I cannot pre-empt that announcement—as hon. Members would expect, negotiations are still continuing—but spending limits will be set from April 2001.

It is time to look ahead. We must consider what we must achieve for Wales—promoting community regeneration, employment and developing a competitive environment for business, a learning society and the sustainable use of natural resources. That involves a step change for Wales, and we shall use objective 1 funding to help to make that step change. We need to get on with that job.

The Welsh Affairs Committee report is welcome. Considerable allegations have been made and concerns have been expressed today, but I hope that the Government's intentions will be taken in good faith. The Labour Government have negotiated and achieved objective 1, and we shall deliver it for Wales when the time comes.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I congratulate the Minister on responding in the time available. We now come to the next debate.

Marine Pollution

12.30 pm

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): The annual meeting of the commission of the Ospar convention on marine pollution in the north-east Atlantic does not usually attract a great deal of advance publicity. Nevertheless, during this brief debate I want to highlight proposals that will be put to the annual meeting next week in Copenhagen, which could have significant implications for the United Kingdom and to which the Government have to give a clear response.

The Ospar convention, as it is commonly known, originates from two previous conventions relating to marine pollution: the 1972 Oslo convention on marine pollution caused by dumping, and the 1974 Paris convention on marine pollution from land-based sources. In 1992 those were merged; hence the name Ospar. The 15 member countries and the European Union form the 16 contracting parties to the convention, which meets annually. Every five years there is a ministerial convention.

The first Ospar ministerial convention at Sintra in Portugal two years ago agreed to establish strategies to eliminate hazardous substances and eutrophication from the north-east Atlantic, to provide protection of ecosystems and biodiversity and to agree a policy on the disposal of offshore installations. It was also agreed to end the British and French opt-out on radioactive dumping at sea. However, the most wide-ranging proposal was the elimination of radioactive discharges to close to zero by 2020. The intention to achieve that was reiterated at the 1999 annual meeting in Hull. My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Mr. Meale), the then Minister, responded to that meeting by saying:

> On the strategy for radioactive substances, the Contracting Parties agreed to intensify their efforts to implement it by focusing on the principal sources of discharges, emissions and losses, including the reprocessing of nuclear fuel and some other nuclear and non-nuclear activities; where action by the operators of nuclear installations is required, the Contracting Parties agreed to ensure that this is taken without delay.—[*Official Report*, 5 July 1999; Vol. 334, c. 377W.]

The consequence of that is this year's convention in Copenhagen. There will be proposals on the table from Ireland and Denmark, supported by other countries, which would require the participating countries to end their discharges simply by ending nuclear reprocessing; the reprocessing industries in the United Kingdom and France contribute the largest proportion of all discharges. It is well known that the Nordic countries and Ireland, in particular, are long-standing opponents of the reprocessing industry because of the effect on their fishing industries. Radioactive isotopes have been found in lobsters and other fish in the Irish sea—that is a matter of enormous concern in Ireland—and the isotope technetium-99 has been found as far north as the fishing grounds of Norway and Iceland. Indeed, traces have been found in the Arctic circle.

The consequence for the United Kingdom, where nuclear reprocessing has been a major and lucrative industry for many years, could be significant. I shall dwell on three aspects. The first is the implications for the thermal oxide reprocessing plant at Sellafield and the international trade in plutonium, which British Nuclear Fuels has developed in recent years. I do not want to rehearse the history of THORP, which has been contentious from the concept's origins in the 1970s, through a delay in the 1980s, to its final commissioning in the early 1990s. It is now well understood that the original rationale for the reprocessing industry and for THORP no longer apply.

It was assumed that there would be a gradual expansion of nuclear power as each year went by. That has clearly not been the case. It was assumed that the rising price of uranium fuel would mean that the reprocessing option was cheaper. In recent years, uranium itself has become cheaper. It was assumed that plutonium would have an enormous value, largely for nuclear weapons, but for other purposes as well, in the manufacture of further nuclear fuel. The end of the cold war and the reduction in the weapons programmes of the major nuclear weapons states have led the value of plutonium to become highly questionable. Last year, a House of Lords Science and Technology Committee report concluded that much of Britain's plutonium stockpiles, which are currently about 60 tonnes and, it is estimated, will reach more than 100 tonnes by 2010, should be declared to be waste.

It was assumed that the fast-breeder reactor programme would become successful and that endless supplies of plutonium would be needed for that. Fast-breeder reactor research has been stopped in Britain and France, and continues only in Japan. It was assumed that the alternatives to recycling nuclear fuel were not feasible. In recent years, the alternative—the dry storage option—has become much more feasible, and is quite practical and far cheaper than the reprocessing option.

The question mark over THORP has been intensified by the recent decision of the German Government—one of BNFL's biggest customers—to phase out its nuclear power programme within 20 years. The effect of the falsification of data scandal related to mixed oxide fuel exported to Japan, along with the nuclear accident at the Tokaimura plant there last September, has contributed to a rapidly changing climate of opinion in Japan. That country has also been one of BNFL's greatest customers. The issue is whether we can assume that reprocessing at THORP will continue much beyond the period of the base-load contracts, which end in 2004.

The second aspect of the proposals that will be put to the Ospar conference next week relates to the other reprocessing plant at Sellafield—the B205 plant, which reprocesses fuel from Magnox reactors. I and many others welcomed BNFL's announcement some weeks ago that all but two of its Magnox stations would be closed before 2010—thus, arguably, allowing the B205 reprocessing plant to close by 2012. However, there are major concerns as to whether that can be achieved, largely because of the total volume of spent fuel that still needs to be reprocessed, but also because of the time scale between deciding to close or switch off a reactor and decommission the plant, and the possibility of starting to reprocess the spent fuel. I shall give an example.

Currently, we have about 7,200 tonnes of spent reactor fuel from Magnox reactors either in reactors or in storage ponds. Only 465 tonnes were reprocessed in 1998-99. Therefore, on current throughput it will be at least 2015 before the existing fuel is reprocessed, regardless of any spent fuel generated by Magnox reactors between now and when most of them will close.

The possibility of meeting the Ospar target to reduce radioactive discharges to close to zero by 2020 is becoming increasingly remote.

The third aspect that concerns me is the role of the Environment Agency in the consideration of the reprocessing industry. I note that the important report by the Select Committee on Trade and Industry on the future of BNFL, published last month, contained some comment about the relationships between the Environment Agency and BNFL not being of the highest order. However, my concern is that the agency has insufficiently challenged the assumptions put forward by BNFL—and accepted by the previous Government and, to some extent, by the present Government—about the inevitability of reprocessing and the feasibility of the alternatives. The significant point is that the 1994 Sellafield discharge authorisation required the Environment Agency to review the whole question of discharges and alternatives to reprocessing. That should have been done by 1997, but it is only starting to be done this year.

The scope and methodology for the review appear to rule out any consideration of dry storage options as a way to manage spent fuel. Although the agency accepts that Magnox could be reprocessed at THORP, thus allowing the closure of the B205, it still insists that dry storage is not an option. That is unusual, because at the power station at Wylfa about 100 tonnes of Magnox fuel have been kept in dry storage for the best part of 20 years. The whole question of the technology involved in the dry storage—rather than reprocessing—of Magnox fuel was confirmed as viable by the former Central Electricity Generating Board in its evidence to the Select Committee on the Environment in 1986, and by a more recent statement by the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee in 1990. There is now a solid body of scientific evidence that maintains that it is feasible to deal with the potential corrosive problem of Magnox spent fuel through dry storage.

Several issues arise from the facts that I have laid out. The Ospar negotiations, although not widely understood by the public, are crucial for the future of one of Britain's major industries. The Trade and Industry Committee commented in its report that it was remarkable, both in this Parliament and in the previous Parliament, how few debates had been held about the nuclear industry. If we compare that industry, and its strategic importance to Britain, with the car, coal or textile industries, it is obvious that Parliament has scrutinised those industries much more than it has the nuclear power industry. The fact that the nuclear power industry has operated with that degree of secrecy, and that lack of accountability and scrutiny, has perhaps contributed to some of the difficulties that it has recently experienced.

The Government cannot ignore the feelings of other European countries or the scientific evidence of the radioactive pollution in the north-east Atlantic. Nor can they ignore our treaty obligations under Ospar. We are firmly committed to seeking discharges close to zero by 2020—and under our current policy, that cannot be achieved. A change of policy will therefore be necessary.

It is indisputable that reprocessing is the main cause of radioactive pollution in the Irish and North seas. If we are serious about our environmental commitments and our broader environmental policy, we must be prepared to act. I do not argue that the Government should immediately declare that reprocessing should end and Sellafield must close, because the issue is complicated, and Sellafield is important to the economy of west Cumbria, with many jobs at stake. However, the Government should now prepare for the inevitability of the closure of the reprocessing plant at Sellafield, which is likely to happen sooner rather than later, given the way in which nuclear power policy is changing, especially among key customers in Germany and Japan, and also given the requirements of the Ospar convention.

We should take careful note of the fact that the new chief executive of BNFL said to the Trade and Industry Committee that the time had now come for BNFL to think the unthinkable and withdraw from reprocessing as a key part of its business strategy. We should also take careful note of the comments by the chief executive of British Energy, who said recently that reprocessing was economic nonsense and should stop immediately. It is also in the long-term economic interests of the UK, and of BNFL, to grasp the nettle of preparing to withdraw from reprocessing and concentrate on dry storage and decommissioning, which has huge potential for the expansion of global business. That would be good for British business and for the environment. It is also an enormous opportunity for the Government to take the lead on a crucial environmental issue, by making a statement to that effect in Copenhagen next week.

I have several questions for my hon. Friend the Minister. I appreciate that he may not be able to answer all of them, but I would be grateful for an answer in writing in due course. First, what action has the UK taken since the ministerial Ospar meeting in 1998, which agreed the policy of reducing emissions close to zero? Secondly, what assessment have the Government made of last week's announcement by the German Government that they have now reached an agreement to phase out nuclear energy in Germany within 20 years? What will be the impact of that on the future of reprocessing in the UK? Thirdly, what consideration has my hon. Friend given to the statements by the chief executives of BNFL and British Energy on the likely future of reprocessing?

Fourthly, will my hon. Friend actively support the renegotiation of reprocessing contracts, both between BNFL and British Energy and between BNFL and foreign customers, into dry storage contracts? That issue is also flagged up in the Trade and Industry Committee's report. Fifthly, in view of the current backlog of spent nuclear fuel from Magnox reactors, does he believe that the timetable given by BNFL for an end to Magnox reprocessing by 2012 can be achieved?

Sixthly, does my hon. Friend agree that the Environment Agency has to get a serious grip on the issue? Why does its current review of discharges contain no consideration of the dry storage option? I may be mistaken on that point, but if it is true, will he challenge the Environment Agency and ensure that it gives equal consideration to dry storage of spent fuel and to reprocessing? Finally, I would be grateful for a concise statement of the British negotiating position at next week's meeting, and of the proposals by the Irish and Danish Governments.

12.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): I shall do my best to provide answers to the questions that my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) has asked. However, as he said, some of them may have to be pursued through correspondence, partly because I have only 12 minutes left in which to reply to the debate. I am pleased to have this opportunity to set out our thoughts on the annual meeting of the Ospar commission, which will be held next week in Copenhagen.

The Ospar process is one to which the Government continue to attach great importance. My right hon. Friends the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for the Environment both participated in the original meeting in Sintra in 1998 and fully supported the agreements reached there. The main work of next week's meeting will be to consider progress on the work agreed in Sintra. In particular, as my hon. Friend has said, the meeting will consider the strategy on radioactive substances, but it will also discuss progress with the implementation of the hazardous substances strategy and the overall assessment of the state of the marine environment of the north-east Atlantic, as well as a number of other issues.

My hon. Friend referred to issues relating to radioactivity. He also mentioned the two draft decisions put forward by the Governments of Ireland and Denmark, which will be considered in Copenhagen next week.

It may be helpful if I remind hon. Members of some of the background to Ospar's consideration of radioactive discharges. As my hon. Friend explained, the Oslo and Paris commission was set up to protect the marine environment of the north-east Atlantic; it came into force in 1998. The UK is a contracting party and supports the commission's aim of reducing discharges of radioactivity. In 1998 at the meeting in Sintra, all the contracting parties, including the UK, agreed to a radioactive discharges strategy covering the period to 2020. The strategy provides that the commission—which means all the member countries—should reduce radioactive discharges, so that, by 2020, concentrations of radioactivity in the marine environment in excess of historic levels as a result of such discharges are close to zero.

I should make two points about the agreement. First, all the contracting parties accept that it does not state that discharges of radioactivity should be reduced to zero. The Sintra agreement does not mean that contracting parties are in any way obliged to close their nuclear industries, or any part of them, to meet their commitments. My hon. Friend asked about the Government's attitude to the announcement by Germany that it would phase out nuclear power generation. That is entirely a matter for the German Government. I can confirm that the UK Government have no plans to make a similar announcement.

Secondly, it has to be recognised that the terms "historic levels" and "close to zero" have not been defined. In technical level meetings since 1998, there has been some discussion of those terms, but considerably more work needs to be done before agreed definitions are available. The UK has pressed strongly to engage with our Ospar partners on that subject, but has not met with much enthusiasm from other countries for grappling with the definitions. However, it is clear that progress must be made, so that reductions in radioactive discharges can be properly monitored.

To demonstrate our commitment to reducing radioactive discharges, the UK is publishing a 20-year radioactive discharges strategy: it is being published in draft today and copies will be placed in the Library. The purpose of publishing the strategy in draft form is to enable us to consult other Ospar members and interested parties both at home and abroad about our proposals. After taking account of their comments, the Government intend to publish the final version of the strategy towards the end of this year. The UK is the only Ospar contracting party to have announced that it is preparing for publication a strategy charting how discharges are expected to decrease over the next 20 years. I am sure that hon. Members will acknowledge the seriousness with which the Government take their Sintra commitments.

The Government will shortly publish a second consultation document—a draft of guidance that we propose to issue to the Environment Agency on radioactive discharge authorisations. The purpose of the second document is to ensure that the agency's decisions on individual applications to discharge radioactive substances are consistent with the overall strategy.

My hon. Friend talked about radioactive discharges arising from the reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel. It is true that discharges from reprocessing operations are higher than those from other parts of the nuclear industry. However, hon. Members will recall that, last month, BNFL announced a closure programme for the Magnox nuclear power stations. The closures will contribute substantially to the reduction of radioactive discharges, but, more importantly, they will enable the reprocessing of Magnox fuel to be brought to an end. It is currently estimated that that will be achieved by about 2012, so an important step in reducing discharges will be accomplished well before 2020. Discharges from the only other reprocessing plant in this country—the THORP plant at Sellafield—are very much lower in radiological terms than those from the Magnox reprocessing plant. The Government are satisfied that the continued operation of the THORP plant will not in any way jeopardise our meeting our Sintra commitments by 2020.

My hon. Friend asked about the Government's view on reprocessing in the light of the recommendation by the Trade and Industry Committee that we should clarify our position. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry is considering the report and will reply in due course.

It is important to bear in mind the fact that, as a result of strict regulatory action in this country, discharges of radioactivity are kept well below internationally agreed limits. The Environment Agency is carrying out a review of all radioactive discharges from Sellafield, and consultation on any proposed new limits is expected to start in spring next year. The agency is also carrying out a review of discharges of technetium-99 on a faster track, and the outcome of that part of the review will be known in the autumn. The Government have made it clear that we support the aim of bringing the limit for

technetium-99 down to 10 terabequerels a year. The strategy being published today will reaffirm this commitment, but we cannot, of course, pre-empt the outcome of the agency's review.

My hon. Friend asked why the Environment Agency was not considering the dry storage alternative. My understanding is that the design of Wylfa is different from that of the other Magnox stations, and that important safety considerations that prevent dry storage apply to the remainder of the stations. The Environment Agency has explained its reasons for not considering alternatives in its current review: they relate to a change in European law and to proposals that the issue of justification should pass to the appropriate Secretary of State. Any more detail on that point will have to be provided in correspondence.

The Environment Agency has published a document setting out the scope and methodology that it proposes to follow in carrying out the review. The Health and Safety Executive has already consulted on a proposal that, following the coming into force of the new Euratom basic safety standards directive, reviews of the justification of practices will be a matter for the appropriate Secretary of State. A further announcement will be made in due course.

It may be helpful to set current discharges from Sellafield in context. Discharges are already only 20 per cent. of what would be considered acceptable under internationally agreed dose limits. Our strategy indicates that we are on target to achieve a 90 per cent. improvement in that already low figure by 2020. The draft strategy published this week will give detailed information about how that is to be achieved. I should add that those dose figures relate to people who live close to Sellafield and whose eating habits expose them to higher than normal effects, and that those most exposed people are already well within internationally agreed dose limits. Anyone living further afield, especially people living in other countries, have nothing to fear from discharges from Sellafield.

The Governments of Ireland and Denmark have submitted for discussion at next week's Ospar meeting in Copenhagen draft decisions that call for a cessation of reprocessing. As I have already said, the reprocessing of fuel that gives rise to the highest discharges will cease by about 2012. The UK can meet its Sintra obligations without shutting the THORP plant, so we do not think that it would be appropriate for the Ospar meeting next week to agree a decision in the terms of the drafts submitted by Ireland or Denmark.

All Ospar contracting parties will, I am sure, study the draft strategy that we are publishing today. I hope that it will persuade them that the UK is committed to achieving reductions in radioactive discharges that are fully in line with the 1998 Sintra agreement. At the Copenhagen meeting we shall seek agreement on a decision that renews our commitment in a form acceptable to all contracting parties.

Government Websites

1 pm

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): I sought this debate—I am grateful for the opportunity to hear the Minister's reply—because I am concerned that use by the Government of websites to communicate with the public is ineffectively regulated.

The Public Accounts Committee reported last week on managerial and technical issues arising from the Government's use of websites. Although it was a damning report, to which the Government will no doubt respond in due course—I am not attempting to pre-empt that formal response—the focus of my concerns is different. My concern is with the threat to the integrity and propriety of Government information flowing from what I perceive to be weak accountability, which is leading to inadequate control of advertising and sponsorship on Government websites. I am also concerned about the absence of effective guidelines and policing to prevent the Government's abuse of their valuable access to the public by the dissemination of politically controversial and tendentious assertions as public information on the net.

The Minister will be aware, I have no doubt, that I have tabled a substantial number of written questions to different Departments on the cost of the Government's websites and on sponsorship and advertising on those sites. I have been dismayed by the responses that I have received. Some questions have still not been answered; some have been answered misleadingly, and some inaccurately; other answers are incomplete. In sum, I take this opportunity to ask the Cabinet Office to recognise that it needs to take a grip of the situation and require conformity with rules that are open and properly adhered to.

I remind the Minister—I am grateful for his presence—of the recommendations of the sixth report of the Neill committee, particularly recommendation 35, to which the Government have not yet formally responded, although they are expected to do so quite soon, which states:

> There should be disclosure in departmental annual reports, and to the public on request, of the details, including the value received, of sponsorship of government activities by the private and voluntary sectors.

I am afraid that it is clear that that is not happening. No such indications are given in departmental annual reports and it has proved extraordinarily difficult to elicit information, even by means of parliamentary questioning.

The lack of candour, I am sorry to say, starts in the Cabinet Office. So it is perhaps unsurprising that it is not exercising the control that one might look to it to exercise over other Departments. In replying to the debate, the Minister might make plain his view of the role of the Cabinet Office in ensuring the integrity and propriety of Government information on websites.

I should like to draw attention to certain advertisements that the Cabinet Office is hosting on the Government's principal site, www.open.gov.uk, such as by Lycos, which is a search engine, and IBM. I also draw attention to advertisements of what are called "Government Opportunities", owned by private limited

[Mr. Robert Maclennan]

company Business Information Publications Ltd. That is to be found at another site used by the Cabinet Office, www.bipcontracts. com, which is described as

> the only officially sponsored UK source through which government service contracts are advertised.

That site has logos of companies that provide technical services—Ultraseek Server and Cable & Wireless Communications Ltd.

The Ministry of Defence began by denying that it carried advertisements or sponsorship-acknowledging advertisements that generate revenue and that such advertisements appeared on its principal websites. However, it includes on its website the Peregrine Trophy, which is named after Peregrine Associates. The Ministry explains, however, that sponsorship of major service events or, for example, the Royal Navy submarine museum, which recognises British Aerospace Systems and Equipment Ltd., may lead to advertising with company logos.

The Department of Health claims that there is no advertising on departmental, agency or non-departmental body websites. However, there is a live link on the NHS Confederation website to the American pharmaceuticals firm, Merck Sharp Dolme, which is a large supplier of the NHS. The NHS Confederation comprises 95 per cent. of NHS hospitals and health authorities. Although a charity, it is directly funded by NHS hospitals and health authority members and therefore clearly receives departmental money. To deny that that is an agency over which Government rules ought to apply must make one highly critical of the extent of coverage of the rules.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has come closer, but not all the way, to an admitting the facts. It states that two companies—Eagle Star and Glaxo Wellcome plc—have contributed £35,000 and £6,000 respectively to the Planet Britain website, www.planet.britain.org, on which the companies' logos appear. That site is linked to many groups that provided information for the site, including *I D Magazine*, Rough Guides and Millennium Products. Cable & Wireless is also there, presumably for technical services rendered.

The most remarkable case that I found was that of the Treasury. It appears that, although the Treasury claims not to have accepted advertising or sponsorship for its websites, that disclaimer does not cover the Treasury's private finance initiative taskforce, which is accessible through the Government's main portal, www.open.gov.uk. The taskforce was set up by the Government to oversee negotiations on PFI deals, in which hospitals, schools, roads and other projects attract private money. The taskforce's website is www.treasury.treasury-project-taskforce.gov.uk. It is sponsored by none other than Berwin Leighton, the City solicitors who specialise in private finance initiative projects. The site, which has the firm's own logo, is linked live to its website, which discloses that it is involved in 16 PFI deals with the Department of Health alone—those deals are valued in total at more than £473 million.

According to the taskforce website:

> The taskforce has become the focal point of all PFI activity.

Therefore, it follows that that firm of solicitors has been allowed to sponsor the website of a taskforce that directly impacts on the company's commercial interests as it has handled the legal side of dozens of PFI deals with the Government. Will the Minister say whether what has happened in that case, which received a little publicity earlier this week in *The Observer*, reveals—as I believe it does—that the rules, if they exist, are not biting sufficiently tightly?

Government websites have developed to such an extent that the Government have effectively become a broadcaster. The appearance of sponsors and advertisers on those sites makes that a commercial activity. I searched in vain to find any adequate guidelines from the Government on how that activity should be regulated. One can find general guidance about matters of propriety, but nothing is targeted on websites. The "Government Information and Communication Handbook" contains a section entitled, "Toolkit". Although there is also a section on sponsorship propriety, the only section on websites—that headed "Building Websites"—includes nothing on the propriety of the content. Nor is there any reference to the propriety of the content in the "Framework, policy and guidelines for Government websites", which is to be found on a such a website. The document "Guidance on the work of the Government Information Service" does not deal with sponsorship or advertising on websites.

The underlying failure of the Government appears to be their complete unwillingness to acknowledge that sponsorship involves mutual endorsement—endorsement of the Government by the company and vice versa. As the Neill committee report pointed out, one of the aims of sponsorship is to achieve credibility. It is worth asking where that credibility would come from if not from implicit endorsement by the recipient of the sponsorship. The Cabinet Office general guidelines lack the understanding that endorsement is intrinsic to the nature of sponsorship.

The need for a rethink by the Government on the issue is demonstrated by the flawed statement by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions in reply to my question, which concluded:

> Above all, acknowledgement of any sponsorship—

on websites—

> would not imply any endorsement of the sponsor's goods or services, nor be open to misinterpretation as influencing policy making.—[*Official Report*, 19 April 2000; Vol. 348, c. 489W.]

I submit to the Minister that that statement from that important Department demonstrates a complete failure to grasp the nature of sponsorship and the risks to the perception of objectivity.

From the parliamentary answers that I have received, it is clear that the average annual costs of Government websites are expected to run at more than £4.5 million. I have not yet received answers on the matter from several significant Departments, including the Treasury.

Some Departments are recording the number of hits. The Department of Trade and Industry received 67 million hits in the year to May, averaging 1.3 million per week. The Treasury website receives around 20 million hits per annum. I am advised that it is commercially calculated that 1,000 hits are considered by the industry to be worth £25. It appears—however difficult it may be

to quantify—that the value of the advertising space of the Government's webs must run well into millions. What is not clear is how the Government are seeking to evaluate that and what they are giving in return for sponsorship and advertising facilities on the websites.

My conclusion is that since the rules, in so far as they exist, seem incapable of ensuring openness and preventing abuse—never mind delivering value for money to the taxpayer—it would be appropriate for the Government to end advertising and sponsorship on their websites.

Finally, on a different aspect of guidelines for the use of the websites, the Mountfield report made the general recommendation on political propriety that the aim of the Government Information and Communication Service should be

> to retain a politically impartial service and sustain the trusted values of the service embodied in its rules of guidance.

That was stated by the service to be merely a restatement of essential principles in its third annual report. Unfortunately, none of the handbooks or existing codes are working to ensure that those principles are sustained on Government websites.

I shall give one broad example from the No. 10 site where, under "facts" the site purports to track the progress of all 177 manifesto commitments of the Labour party. The information there imparted is certainly not regarded as incontrovertibly factual and, indeed, would be contradicted by much information that has been obtained from the Government, the House of Commons Library and other objective sources. The information is highly tendentious and certainly does not accord with statistical information from the sources that I mentioned. Worse perhaps, are the press releases, which are often placed on websites and are highly partisan and undoubtedly breach the guideline on objectivity.

The guidelines indicate that information should always be directed at informing the public. I shall cite a few examples that fall short. The Financial Secretary to the Treasury issued a press release headed,

> A good way to explain what the Government is trying to do is that we want to build a new Britain that will be modern and decent.

I question whether that could be regarded as providing either information or objective information.

In a press release of 30 March, the Home Office announced:

> Straw announces an "increase" in the funding of police authorities to reflect the enlarged size.

In fact, that was a transfer of funding from the authorities with decreased areas of responsibility. It was a highly misleading statement, and certainly not objective. It is a rule of Government publicity that it should be objective.

Finally, let me cite an example from the Department for Education and Employment. One of its press releases was headed "World Class Guides for Employers launched—Hodge". No objective justification is given for the use of the phrase "world class" in that press release.

The problem is far wider than I can hope to tackle in the ambit of a short debate, but I hope that I have at least opened the subject. I look forward with great interest to the Minister's remarks. We are at a formative stage in dealing with websites, and it is extremely important that the independence and objectivity of Government information on sites are secure; that advantages are not improperly given to sponsors; and that the public's right to be informed is protected.

1.20 pm

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Ian McCartney): I thank the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) for providing us with the opportunity to discuss websites and for the intellectual case that he made in respect of some of the relevant issues.

In the 10 minutes available to me, I cannot deal with all the issues that the right hon. Gentleman raised, but I give him an assurance that I will write to him and place my reply in the Library, so that other hon. Members who take an interest in the matter can link that to the debate. I will consider the right hon. Gentleman's comments in the same way as the Government are considering the issues around the reports that he mentioned, to which we shall respond.

I am clear that my role is to ensure the best possible access for the citizen to Government services, and to ensure that we have in place appropriate guidelines and working arrangements and that the system is transparent and cannot be abused by Departments, individuals or, for that matter, politicians. It is crucial that the information provided by Government websites is trusted.

The right hon. Gentleman made a general complaint about the cost of development of Government websites. It has always been the task of Governments to provide information to citizens—information about taxes and benefits and employment regulations; personal information about insurance records or tax details; records of change of address or change of circumstances; information about payments to Government by the citizen, such as vehicle licensing, general taxation or council tax payments; and information about payments by Government to the citizen, such as benefits and student grants.

By using new technology, we are opening up access to every citizen far more effectively. That means that the right hon. Gentleman's constituents in Caithness and Sutherland can access information and services from the Government as readily and as quickly as someone who lives in central London. It is vital that communities in the highlands and islands, in the mountains and in large tracts of rural England have the same opportunity to do business with the Government or to seek information from the Government. Information technology provides such an opportunity.

In the process of establishing websites or service delivery modules, it is important that we listen to customers. As the Government introduce a new service or a new link-up to a portal, it is essential that we continue to consult our customer base, and that we produce guidelines on the basis of consultation. Guidelines must be regularly updated, so that they incorporate the improvements in practice for which the right hon. Gentleman called. We will soon be going out to further consultation on the revision of our website guidelines, as I promised a few months ago.

[Mr. Ian McCartney]

The right hon. Gentleman implied that he was worried that the Government's new knowledge network would be used as a party political tool. That is not the case. Strict safeguards and rules have been put in place to ensure that it is not misused for party political purposes. New types of information exchange have been used within Government for years. The only difference is that large amounts of information which were previously accessible only to the Government will now be available to everyone—Members of Parliament and the citizen. It is crucial that access to Government information is opened up. That is the purpose of the knowledge network.

A website without links is a poor website. The Treasury website does not endorse the firm that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned—in fact, it contains a disclaimer. The Cabinet Office website points to other websites, in the same way as other Government websites point to *The Guardian* for jobs, for example. Do *The Guardian* or *The Observer* complain about that? It seems a reasonable approach.

Websites should give people additional information that they can use if they wish to do so. The Government websites merely signpost the way to further information and services, some provided by Government and some not. It is nonsense to suggest that because we provide signposts and access to the citizen, that is a corruption of Government websites. It ensures that the websites maximise the potential for the citizen to obtain information.

Sponsorship on websites is not special. New guidelines to take account of the Neill committee's recommendations are in their final draft. As soon as they are ready, I shall make them available to the right hon. Gentleman for his comments.

Links are what make websites work. For example, the BBC has links on its news pages, but that does not compromise its editorial integrity. For those who use the sites, links provide further opportunity to seek out information or services, and the same is true of Government websites. That is a sensible and reasonable approach.

No Government Departments have advertising on their websites. The Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency—CCTA—is an executive agency and has a banner advertisement clearly distinct from any Government messages. The recommendation of the Neill Committee in January 2000 was:

> There should be no ban on sponsorship of Government activities subject to our other recommendations.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned www.planet.britain.org. I hate having to read out such things—in fact, this is the first time that I have done it. In the past, I have always avoided doing so, but the right hon. Gentleman has me in a corner. He referred to it specifically, so I have to read it out for the record. That website is sponsored throughout by various organisations, including the provision of editorial content. It is supported by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office but has no Government content. It is not a Government site.

The Treasury taskforce website is an old one, with links to Brown Leighton, but there is a statement specifically disclaiming any endorsement. In any event, the website is due to be replaced. When that has been resolved, I shall send the details to the right hon. Gentleman.

Guidelines are needed, and they exist. Branding should not detract from a Department's own branding. Advertising should not imply endorsement and should not contradict Government messages. Standard sizes of banners are recommended.

The Committee on Standards in Public Life and the Cabinet Office also publish guidelines on sponsorship. Sponsorship must not appear to place a Department under any obligation, and must not be able to be read as an endorsement by a Department. It must not come from firms that are currently engaged in negotiation with the Department. Sponsors must be suitable and must not appear to contradict Government messages. Sponsorship must not be for the activities of a particular Minister. Other similar companies must have been offered sponsorship opportunities. In accordance with a recent revision, any sponsorship worth more than £5,000 must be listed in the Department's annual report. Clearly, the Government are moving to ensure probity in these matters.

The right hon. Gentleman complained about costs of Government websites and delay in responses to his parliamentary questions. For every avenue of communication used by the Government, there is a cost. The question is whether that represents value for money. The Department of Trade and Industry had 5.6 million hits last month on its website. How much would that cost in postage, telephone calls and other communications with those 5.6 million people? Some of them will have hit the website more than once, of course, so I should speak of 5.6 million communications, rather than people. Traditional methods of responding to those inquiries would have been far more expensive.

The Department of Social Security has 2.5 million hits per month, and the Cabinet Office and The Stationery Office have 1.8 million hits. We are communicating with far more people and providing them with far more detailed information about their rights as citizens.

I take on board the right hon. Gentleman's comments and the spirit in which they were made. I assure him that the Government will ensure that our guidelines operate effectively and that they are drawn up on the basis of consultation.

Peel Hall, Warrington

1.30 pm

Ms Helen Jones (Warrington, North): I am most grateful to be given the opportunity to debate the future of the last large open space in the north of my constituency. It is a green space that is important for the well-being of the residents in the area. Development proposals raise serious questions about future planning policies.

Warrington has always accepted the need for development, and the complexity of development issues is well known to us, especially that of balancing the need for housing with the need to protect the environment. Following the development of the new town, large parts of my constituency have been built on what were once green fields, so we are not nimbys. However, as time has passed, we have become increasingly conscious of the need to protect the quality of life of our residents, both old and new. We are all too well aware that building houses without the necessary infrastructure, transport links and regard for people's quality of life is not enough.

That is why there has been local outrage at proposals to build on the Peel Hall site. Indeed, we collected a petition bearing 14,500 signatures, and there was a march to present it to the then mayor. The reason for that is simple. Peel Hall is one of the last remaining areas of open grassland, trees and pond in the north of my constituency. The Warrington nature conservation audit, which was carried out in 1995, placed high value on the variety of habitats found on the site, the wide species diversity and the sheer size of the area. It is one of the few remaining uncompromised wildlife areas that we still have.

The Warrington nature conservation forum has identified at least 67 species of birds, 78 of moths and butterflies, three of amphibians, 10 of mammals and two of bats on the site. Seven of these are red-list species and seven are on the amber list. I am assured that there is the presence of the short-eared owl, which is found on only two other sites in the area. The area comprises also a large area of wet grassland where species such as the marsh orchid and the purple loosestrife are to be found. All these would be wiped out by development.

In addition, an archaeological assessment of the site has suggested that it has some of the most convincing evidence of long-term occupation in Cheshire. It is the site of a mediaeval manor house and moat. It is suggested also that there may be other archaeological remains on the site.

My hon. Friend the Minister will be well aware that as things stand it is difficult to protect local sites such as Peel Hall. Part of it has been designated as a site of importance for nature conservation. However, local councils have limited powers in relation to such sites. I know from an answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment that the Government have a local sites review group that considers how sites can be protected.

It is important that we protect local sites better. It is relatively easy to protect areas of outstanding natural beauty or a site of special scientific interest. It is also relatively easy to protect well-known historical sites. However, it is equally important to protect green spaces such as the Peel Hall site, and to protect local history before it is wiped out. That is especially important in areas where there has been intensive development, and where a site may be one of the few that remain.

The need for protection was clear from the inspector's report on the Warrington local plan. The plan had to be abandoned for technical reasons, and a new one is being drawn up. However, we can learn important lessons from what the inspector said. He dismissed the possibilities of the area and talked about it being used for—I think I quote him correctly—

low-level informal recreational activities.

I think that he meant walking. I hope that he did. He said also that the site had no nature conservation value. Bearing in mind the evidence, that is nonsense, and the thrust of the report indicated that the inspector felt that only areas of outstanding beauty were worth preserving. I do not agree with his argument that a wildlife area can be equated to a park. It is important that we maintain proper wild areas. Not everyone wants to see nature tamed and confined. The ability to walk along footpaths in such an area, to watch birds and to enable children to play is especially important to my constituents because they have so few opportunities for these experiences.

The strength of feeling of the residents in the area has already been tested on many occasions when there have been development proposals. Originally, when the plans for the new town were being unveiled, people in what was then the small village of Orford Green were assured that the area between the M62 down into Orford would be preserved as a linear park. Eventually, the development corporation abandoned plans to build on the site generally. It considered it unsuitable because of problems associated with mining subsidence.

There have been many battles since then, which the residents thought that they had won. However, they clearly reckoned without the company called Satnam Investments, which bought the site in the mid-1980s as agricultural land. Satnam operates through a number of subsidiaries. After some local publicity, one of the subsidiaries put in six outline development applications in September 1999, which would have resulted in the building of more than 1,000 houses on the site, with presumably a substantial profit for the company. Residents were outraged and they did all that they could to oppose the applications.

A public meeting was called, at which I was present. I understand from a letter that I have seen subsequently that a representative of Satnam was at the meeting, but that was not known to the residents at the time. That would not be surprising to anyone who attended the meeting. I received a letter afterwards that said that many of the arguments advanced were misleading. I would argue that the most misleading has been done by the company. It has shown itself to be acting as a predatory developer.

From 14 August 1999, people in the area were awoken by the noise of bulldozers and a JCB moving on to the area. They saw shrubs, trees and willows being ripped up. When council officials arrived on the site, having been called by the residents, they were told that the land was being cleared on the order of the owners. The solicitor acting on behalf of the company assured local

[Ms Helen Jones]

people that the site would be fenced and prepared for planting so that the owners could get some return on their investment. He suggested that a crop of potatoes might be planted. There were reports of a flying pig the same day. Not surprisingly, the potatoes never appeared. Instead, the vegetation that was ripped up was placed in huge mounds alongside the M62, and there was a report that it would be disposed of by burning.

On hearing that, I contacted both the environmental health department and the Cheshire fire brigade. I did so because of worries about the health of people in the area and the potential lethal consequences of black smoke drifting across the M62. It says much about the attitude of the company that it could even contemplate such action.

It seems to be a clear sign of an attempt to discourage people from using the site. Barbed wire has been placed alongside some of the footpaths that cross the site, and they have been blocked in some areas. I know that that has happened because I have walked them myself with someone who lives in the area.

That is a clear attempt to destroy the site's wildlife and nature conservation value and to discourage people from using it. At the moment, there are no sanctions that can be used against would-be developers who behave in such a way and try to pre-empt the planning process by destroying some of the value of a site, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will touch on that point in her reply.

This is a firm which is out to make a large profit at the expense of the health and well-being of my constituents, and that is a real issue here. The traffic in this area of Warrington is already extremely heavy, and, at times, it comes to a standstill. Recently, an air quality survey was undertaken under the Environment Act 1995. I have not yet seen all the figures from that survey, but what would usually be called a reliable source tells me that it shows that the air quality in the neighbouring Poplars ward is extremely poor. That will come as no surprise to anyone as it is bounded by the M62 and A49. It clearly cannot take the increase in traffic that such a development would generate.

People's health is a real issue because two of the wards bordering the site, Poplars and Hulme, are among the most health-deprived wards in north Cheshire. People badly need green space in which to walk and watch wildlife. I hope that they will benefit from the health improvement programmes that the Government are initiating, but such programmes are no use if, at the same time, the quality of people's environment is deteriorating. Our health and planning policies must be much more closely integrated if we are to achieve our objectives.

The development is not in accord with the Government's policy planning guidance note 3, which makes it clear that brownfield sites should be used before greenfield sites, and that local authorities should attempt to reuse existing land and buildings in a process of sustainable development. According to the agreed structure plan, Warrington has 5.7 years' supply of land, and, measured against the draft regional planning guidance rate of development, it has 7.9 years' supply of land.

Therefore, we do not want or need a development on Peel Hall. Residents, local councillors and I, who also live in the constituency, oppose it. But if we are to implement the Government's planning policy, local authorities need the powers to ensure that that planning policy becomes a reality on the ground. It is nonsense that we should still be talking about building on greenfield sites when property stands derelict in Greater Manchester and Liverpool and inner-city sites need regeneration.

We in Warrington agree with the Government's planning policy, and we support the draft regional planning guidance, which has a regeneration-led agenda. But the Government must ensure that local authorities have the power to make that a reality on the ground, that they can protect local open spaces better, that they can take into account the health of their residents, and that they have some powers to prevent developers from destroying the value of sites before planning applications are determined.

I hope fervently that when the application comes before the local planning committee, it will reject it, and I hope that if it ever reaches my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, he, too, will reject it. But, most importantly, I hope that we learn the lessons from what has gone on here for our future planning policy, so that communities are not put in such a situation again, and we ensure that we protect our local open spaces and our local wildlife for future generations as well as for ourselves.

1.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) on securing the debate and raising this important issue. My hon. Friend is an assiduous user of Adjournment debates to raise important local issues, and it is right that she should do so. She is performing a proper service as a Member of Parliament for her constituents.

As my hon. Friend has explained, five planning applications have been submitted by Satnam (Millennium) Ltd. for outline planning permission for residential development, access roads and retail and community facilities at Peel Hall. Taken together, the applications relate to a site of around of 55 hectares, lying to the north of the built-up area of Warrington and to the south of the M62.

As my hon. Friend acknowledged, the consideration of the planning applications is, in the first instance, a matter for Warrington borough council, as the local planning authority for the area, and at this stage, it is not clear whether the council will be minded subsequently to grant planning permission. If it decides to refuse planning permission, it will be open to the applicant to exercise his right of appeal, and the matter could, therefore, come before my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for determination.

If, on the other hand, the council is minded to grant planning permission, I understand that it first intends to refer the applications to the Secretary of State because, on the face of it, the proposals do not accord with the development plan for the area and because they involve residential development on a large greenfield site, as my

hon. Friend clearly explained. That would allow my right hon. Friend to decide whether to use his reserve powers to call in the applications for his own determination.

I have explained that fully so that it is clear. My hon. Friend will appreciate that I am unable to comment on the merits of the proposals because my right hon. Friend may well have to use his call-in power and I cannot fetter his decision in any way. However, there are some comments that I can make which I hope will be helpful.

The Secretary of State's general approach is not to interfere with the jurisdiction of local planning authorities unless it is necessary to do so. Many hon. Members argue for that principle of local determination. Parliament has entrusted local authorities with responsibility for day-to-day planning control in their areas, so it is right, in general, that they should be able to carry out their duties responsibly, with the minimum of interference.

The Secretary of State's policy is to be selective about calling in planning applications. He will do that only if a case conflicts with national policy on important matters, such as transport, sustainability or regional or greenfield issues; could have significant effects on the locality; give rise to substantial regional or national controversy; raise significant urban design issues; or involve issues of national security or foreign government. Each case will be considered on it merits, so I can assure my hon. Friend that, if the applications are referred to my right hon. Friend, in either of the two ways that I have identified, he will give the most careful consideration to all the issues raised before deciding to exercise his call-in power.

My hon. Friend painted a clear picture of the site and its value to local people in terms of its wildlife, open space and plantlife. She will know that the original applications were submitted last September, but, as they proposed the development of a large greenfield site, the council formally requested the applicant to submit an environmental statement under the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) (England and Wales) Regulations 1999.

The main aim of that procedure is to ensure that the authority that gives primary consent for a project makes its decision in the full knowledge of any likely significant effects on the environment. That helps to ensure that the public and the local planning authority understand the importance of those effects and the scope for reducing them.

In the case we are considering, I understand that the council has received the completed environmental statement very recently and has undertaken to give it wide publicity. It will therefore be in the public domain. That will give the public an opportunity to present their views about the project and the detailed contents of the statement. The council is required to take account of the statement and the comments and representations on it when deciding whether it would be appropriate to grant planning permission for the development. Doubtless the information will be copied to us in due course; it must be if the council decides to grant permission.

The procedure that I have outlined is one means of considering all the environmental issues, including those that my hon. Friend raised, that pertain to the characteristics of the site and its value to the local community.

My hon. Friend said that the developer had felled several trees and removed some of the hedgerows on the site, and that questions have been asked about the current route of the public right of way. I understand my hon. Friend's anxiety and that of her constituents about what they perceive as the cavalier actions of the developer towards the wildlife and plant life on the site. At this stage, those are matters for Warrington borough council as the local planning authority. However, I asked my officials to make inquiries on my behalf, and I understand that the council has investigated the matter.

The council's current view on the hedgerows is that no consent was required for their removal and that, after discussions with the developer and the council, the correct route of the public right of way has been reinstated. I take account of my hon. Friend's comments about the need to ensure that councils have the wherewithal to protect sites from such action.

Relevant Government policy is mainly PPG3, which my hon. Friend mentioned, but also policies on development plans. PPG3 is the guidance note that relates to housing. When considering planning applications, the council is required to have regard to national planning policy guidance as stated in PPG3. It sets out the key elements of Government policy, which encourages greater choice for different sizes of household, greater affordability and more mixed development. It specifically encourages less profligate use of land—there has been profligate use of land in some very modern housing developments—and, of course, the use of brownfield sites before greenfield sites.

The national target for the use of brownfield sites is 60 per cent., with some local and regional variations. That is a demanding target because, in previous decades, a rate of between 40 and 50 per cent. has been achieved. The policy also demands the adoption of a sequential approach to identifying suitable sites for applications. Brownfield sites must be identified in preference to greenfield sites.

Local authorities should try to exploit opportunities to locate larger housing developments around major nodes along good quality transport corridors, and to ensure that all housing developments are accessible by a range of transport other than the private car. Public transport should be used positively to shape the pattern of development. New housing development should be used to make public transport services more viable.

We also firmly believe that new housing development, whatever its scale, should not be viewed in isolation. My hon. Friend stressed that point. Design and layout must be informed by the wider context, having regard not only to immediate neighbourhood buildings but to the townscape and the landscape of the wider locality. PPG3 is therefore of great relevance to the application to which my hon. Friend refers. I am sure that the council wants to apply that policy assiduously.

Policy on development plans is also relevant. As my hon. Friend said, Warrington borough council had been in the process of preparing a local plan when it became a unitary authority on 1 April 1998. As a result of its change of status, the council decided in June 1999, after discussion with its lawyers, to discontinue further procedures on the local plan—it had by then been subject to inquiry, on which the council had received the inspector's report—and move immediately towards the

[Ms Beverley Hughes]

preparation of a unitary development plan. As a new unitary authority, Warrington is charged with the preparation of a UDP, which includes policies on strategic matters as well as local plan and site-specific matters.

Warrington council is currently consulting widely on the UDP strategic issues and strategy options document, as the first stage in the process of moving towards a UDP. It is unlikely that the UDP will be adopted before 2004. As the UDP moves towards adoption, decision makers will be entitled to attach increasing weight to its content.

Officials tell me that the position in Warrington is unique because there is currently no strategic framework for site-specific preferences for development. That means that there is nothing in council strategic policy to identify suitable or preferred uses for the sites that we are considering. There is therefore no local policy framework to inform decision making on the site. Although the framework does not exist, there are two process whereby my hon. Friend and local residents can make their views known about the applications in particular and the future of the site in general.

First, there is a process of development control whereby the council considers the applications. It will apply PPG3 and other relevant national policies to its decision making. Clearly, local residents can make their views known through that process. Secondly, there is the development of the UDP. In that process, the council will have to consider the future use of the site and identify its preferences. Through that process, my hon. Friend and her constituents can express their views strongly.

I apologise for not being able to comment on my hon. Friend's remarks about the merits of the application—I know that she understands the reasons for that. I hope that I have given her some assurances about the policies that we want to be applied in the decision making. I also want to assure her that if the applications are considered by the Secretary of State, we will ensure that the policies that we are robustly pursuing on housing development and greenfield sites are applied, and that the best judgments are made.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at two minutes to Two o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 22 June 2000

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

School Meals

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned. —[*Mr. Kevin Hughes.*]

2.30 pm

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): It gives me great pleasure to open this debate on the Education and Employment Committee's first report on school meals.

I begin by making a confession. The only active role that I played in the report was presiding over the press conference, because I was appointed Chairman of the Select Committee after all the hard work had been done. However, since that time I have immersed myself, if one can, in school meals and have taken it upon myself to visit many schools to check some of the facts that the Select Committee discovered and reported. I hope, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that you will bear with me if I purport to be an expert on the subject of our report, but I did not make the visits with the members of the Committee, a number of whom have changed since the report was put together.

The Chairman of the Committee was my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks), a colleague of the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), who will reply to the debate. I pay tribute to him and the members of the Committee who did such a thorough job on the report. I assure hon. Members that we shall act as passionate and informed advocates of the findings.

I have read the report in great detail and read the evidence. Indeed, it has been one of my priorities on the many trips that the Select Committee has made to schools to visit school kitchens and look at the meals that are provided.

We discovered that the overall nutrition of many people in this country is in a serious state. Indeed, it would not be too dramatic to say that the diet of many British school children is a disgrace and a savage indictment of our society. Hon. Members should read recent reports on nutritional levels in Glasgow and study the Medical Research Council's work, which points out that in many ways the diet in 1950 was much healthier than it is now or was in the 1990s. That is shocking to most people in this country, who would expect us as parliamentarians to try to do something about it. It was the intention of my colleagues on the Education and Employment Committee to tackle this state of affairs with their normal thoroughness.

Many people put nutrition to one side, as if it were an added-on extra, believing that what is important is teachers, resources, computers and all the other things in a good school, but a child who is undernourished and not getting a proper diet is less able, or unable, to concentrate on the lessons. That is not a healthy child: it is a child who cannot apply himself or herself to the business of acquiring knowledge. Therefore, I hope that today we can focus on the integral part that the school meal and school nutrition play in our children's educational levels and the overall health of the population.

The overall impact of poor nutrition on children's health is a cause of serious concern. If the Government are serious about their commitment to reducing infant mortality by improving the health of expectant mothers, and doing something about the burden of coronary heart disease that kills most of my constituents—in some areas the largest killer is cancer, but in my constituency it is coronary heart disease—and the many forms of cancer and bone disease that affect people in later life, they must regard childhood nutrition as part of that commitment. We must consider not only childhood diseases but the diseases that occur later in life. Childhood nutrition is a significant factor in achieving those goals. Furthermore, a great deal of research shows that improving a child's diet has a positive effect on his or her educational performance.

Those who take an interest in the history of this matter will be aware of that great piece of legislation, the Education Act 1944. Some of my friends who make over-generous claims about what Labour did in 1945 sometimes make the mistake of saying that the 1944 Act was introduced by Labour. It was not. It was the Butler Act, introduced by Rab Butler, who later became Lord Butler. However, although he introduced the Bill, it had the support of the wartime coalition Government, who were still in power in 1944. The approach to the Education Act was therefore agreed by all parties.

In addition to the tremendous change that the Act brought to the education system, it ensured a fundamental change in our approach to school lunches, as they were described. The regulation prescribed that those lunches should provide children with one third of the daily nutritional requirements laid down by the Department of Health. One can understand that approach being taken in a country that was coming out of the war and out of rationing. The embargo around Britain made it difficult to bring in fresh food, of which there was a scarcity.

After the war, therefore, the importance of school meals was realised. I do not want to make a heavy political point, but they were, tragically, abolished by a Conservative Government when Mrs. Thatcher, as she then was, was Prime Minister, in the full flush of her first Administration in 1980. That did a great deal of damage. I know many members of the Conservative party in the House today who agree that it was a mistake. They can now see the problems that were caused. They understand that, given the Medical Research Council's research comparing 1950 with the 1990s, something went seriously wrong, which no one anticipated. It was believed that the markets would provide, and that good food would come naturally from a competitive process in the school meals system.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): How does the hon. Gentleman respond to the evidence given to the inquiry that implied that much of the food being produced pre-1979 was not being eaten by children because they found it so unattractive?

Mr. Sheerman: I have read all the evidence, and the report. I found much evidence from all sides on that

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matter. Of course, I understand that there is a great deal of food wastage. One must move with the times, and not provide stodgy, old-fashioned food. There was an element of that, and I do not want to push this aspect of the argument too far.

However, there is no doubt that, with no guidance or standards, it was impossible to judge the quality of school meals for 20 years. I welcome unreservedly—as does the all-party report—the reintroduction of standards relevant to our time that give a basis on which to judge the quality of the food that our children eat in school.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): The hon. Gentleman was setting the scene successfully until he reached his last point, from which it would be wise for him to move on.

The comments of my hon. Friend are amply borne out by the evidence recorded on page 17 of the report. In response to question 60, the chairman of the Local Authority Caterers Association said that, after an initial drop-off from 1980, the number of pupils taking meals increased year by year, that school catering provision was extremely good and that many local authorities had excellent standards. I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman wants to move away from that point.

Mr. Sheerman: I want to move on, but I should comment briefly on the dreary experience of many of us who were in Parliament during those years. There was a real decline in the quality of school food–a shift towards the culture of baked beans, pizza and chips and away from a proper balanced diet. One could not say to the head of a school or governing body, "This is not of the right standard", because there was no standard by which to judge. It would have been unfair of me not to have made that point, but I shall now move on.

In February 1997, following a commitment in the run-up to the general election, the new Labour Government introduced voluntary guidance entitled "Eating Well at School". In July 1997, in the "Excellence in Schools" White Paper, the Government announced that they would introduce minimum nutritional standards for inclusion in school meal contracts by May 2002. The Committee wholeheartedly welcomed the Government's decision and their commitment to ensuring that nutrition in school meals reached acceptable standards.

I have to say—not just to please everyone in the Chamber—that I have a criticism of the Government. Given that there is such a demand for standards, why must it take so long—until 2002—for a Government elected in 1997 to reach the point that we all want to get to? I understand what is involved in consultation processes and in producing our report. I have been a Member of Parliament for a long time—probably about the same length of time as you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, despite that, and the fact that I understand the procedures involved and the difficulty of introducing change, I still feel that the machinery of government grinds small and slow. I should have liked this problem to have been dealt with much faster, as a matter of priority. I hope that I have been even-handed in balancing the blame for that.

The Committee strongly advocated that the school meal regulations should be based on scientific, nutrient-based guidelines. We were therefore very disappointed when the Government did not accept our recommendations that nutritional standards for school meals should be based on nutrients, which can be measured. The evidence that the Committee took clearly showed, across a range of opinion, that any adopted standard should be measurable. Alternatives such as "You can have a bit of that and a bit of this", "It looks nice on the plate" or "You can only have chips three days a week and baked beans once a week" do not add up to a standard that we could present to a school, saying, "Here are the guidelines and how to meet them through nutritional standards". It seemed to members of the Committee to be plain common sense, backed up by much of the research work and many of the leading health advocates in the country, that we must have a standard that can properly be measured.

Unfortunately, in that fundamental regard, the Government's response has been disappointing. They have made a mistake: the Committee has not changed its mind about that. Governments being Governments, they have the right to disagree with Select Committees—although I cannot understand why, especially in the case of the Education and Employment Committee. During our few hours of debate, perhaps we will have been so eloquent that the Minister will have totally changed her mind and we will get a pleasant surprise.

I understand from the National Heart Forum, with which the Minister had a meeting earlier this week, that her Department believes that it can ensure nutrient levels using the food-based approach. "Food-based approach" is an interesting phrase. I do not know what other approach there is. It is a technical term for a balance of foods on the plate throughout the week. However, it is unclear to the National Heart Forum and to me how that balance will be delivered. I hope that the Minister will enlighten us.

As a political realist, I agree that there is scope for strengthening the guidance for monitoring local and national standards. If it came to a knock-out fight, I would rather have a standard than not, but I would be very careful about how it was monitored, and I agree with the experts that after two years it should be reconsidered. I am giving the Minister until the end of the debate to change her mind and to accept the suggestion of a review after two years. I am providing a good range of options.

I am again going to criticise the Government, because I would have expected a Health Minister to be present. The two elements are indivisible. The educational element cannot be cut out, and diet is so important that I would have liked the Minister for Public Health—an hon. Lady who represents another Yorkshire constituency—to be alongside the Under-Secretary. There is a joint responsibility, and standards cannot be monitored without a strong health input. The Government have introduced a Food Standards Agency and a Health Development Agency. Most people believe that those two new organisations should be involved in the early evaluation and review of the regulations. Some have also called for full evaluation of the achievement of those two bodies after the two-year regime.

I urge the Minister to change her mind and to back the nutrient-based standard, but if our advocacy fails, we would still want the guidance to be strengthened with the implementation of the regulations monitored and evaluation by the two bodies.

That is my most critical comment on the Government, and I shall move on to matters of common agreement and concern.

The Select Committee is pleased that the Government have accepted much of our report, including the necessity of the whole-school approach to learning about food and nutrition. Some of us would go even further and argue for a more multi-dimensional approach to health and life skills in schools. Some members of the Committee met the BBC's education unit only this morning and looked at some of the amazing educational programmes, including some about life skills, that are being adapted to on-line learning.

Every product—every chair, bench, light, piece of plastic and so on—can be given a life-cycle analysis. We can tell how much energy it uses, where it originated, how it was made, what it cost and what it will cost to dispose of it. A total life-cycle analysis can be made of any material object. Why do we not have a life-cycle analysis of young people? Why do schools not have a fully dimensional approach to teaching young people about a healthy diet and exercise, explaining that smoking and other drugs, early pregnancy, ear piercing and tattooing in obvious places can lead to poverty and difficulty in achieving what most of us would consider a good standard of living? There is an urgent need for the health, food and education sectors to get together and—perhaps with some of the extremely good material that the BBC is providing and planning—to ensure that we have a life-cycle analysis for human beings so that people can learn about the implications of early decisions on the rest of their lives.

Schools should have a whole-school, holistic approach. I have received many letters from people stating that Delia Smith would never have had the enormous success with her "How to Cook" book teaching people to boil an egg if anyone anywhere had been properly teaching children about food and the preparation of food. We are getting to a dangerously low level of activity in the food sector in schools. I know that there is a minimum period—I think it is 12 weeks—but we need an holistic approach that goes right through the school experience, because learning about food and diet is so important.

What is most depressing is to see a young woman becoming overweight—I believe that it applies to young men now, but I did not know that until recently—because she eats too much junk food, and she then takes up smoking to slim. What an awful cycle of bad health that is! I am looking at a great friend and neighbour of mine, my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney), who has the noxious habit, but I think that he will accept that it is not a good cycle to get into. He may have seen the light since I last spoke to him and given up, but I have my doubts. Young students' life chances are affected by the negative effects of poor diet, lack of exercise, smoking, drug abuse and early pregnancy. The Committee's findings highlighted the fact that a child who does not receive sufficient nutrition is a child severely disadvantaged in the learning journey.

One thing that I congratulate the Department on is the concept of a learning journey and the way in which the curriculum has been redesigned. There will now be a rough guide to the learning journey for parents and a map to the learning journey for students. That is brilliant. That is a very modern way of describing the educational process. A child must be well fed, well nourished and well provisioned if he or she is to survive that tough journey. Gaining knowledge is not easy: one must sweat and work with all one's heart and mind. However, those of us who have been lucky enough to undertake the journey successfully know that it is worth while.

Before closing my remarks, I want to answer one or two other criticisms that have been made of our report. Some of those involved in school catering have accused us of too much interference, when they, the experts, have far more knowledge of the food industry. I saw one letter that said "What a cheek, trying to suggest that we should know how to steam fish and boil potatoes". There are some good providers in the food catering sector, but they are not all equally good. Members of Parliament know that. Many of us go to receptions and meals in the course of our work not a mile from this place—usually about half a mile—and we have pretty fair opinions of the quality of catering in the different establishments.

Going round the schools, I found dramatic differences between the really good and the average school meals. There were some schools that, through good management and imagination, provided excellent school meals with diversity and choice, and a good range of vegetables, salads and pastas. The best are very good, much better than the average. I tell the catering partnerships that it can be done, but I acknowledge that good food is often more expensive than poor food. I know that, when budgets are cut, there is a temptation to go back to beans, burgers, pizzas and the dreary litany of ghastly food that so many people, young and old, indulge in. That is not to say that there is no room for fast food. I have four children—three daughters and a son. I used to drive tens of miles to find a Pizza Hut when my son went through a phase of thinking that the Pizza Hut was the only good place to eat. Indeed, we once spent some time in the Nevada desert looking for a Pizza Hut, which was particularly taxing. Nevertheless, we found one—they are everywhere. We are seeking a balanced diet.

If the Government want better food, they cannot ignore the fact that that will mean more expense and a larger food budget for schools. We should not kid ourselves or pretend that all schools can provide a wide range of beautiful, fresh food and a greater range and diversity in an attractive environment. Too often, we saw horrible places to eat. We do not expect adults to eat in horrible places, although during the time that I have been in Parliament I have come across some pretty horrible places for Members to eat in—some are better, but some have a pretty horrible environment.

In general, people have a choice—they go willingly to eat in pleasant and welcoming environments. We must do more to encourage schools to provide the premises that make eating food a pleasurable experience. I realise that that has cost implications. The Government have a significant initiative involving school building and renovation—much work is going on in my local

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authority, Kirklees, where a private sector partnership is carrying out a massive reinvigoration of school premises, and 20 schools will be affected.

Unless the importance of school meal provision is emphasised, the facilities may be tucked away in a corner or in the oldest, dreariest and least lit or ventilated part of the school, which is not good. The design of kitchens and schools is important.

To return to the point that was made by the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn), although standards are involved, we also need to move with the times. These days, in order to make food attractive to young people one has to make the places in which they eat attractive, which requires innovation and imagination. One sees that in the high street—a wonderful revolution in our country has resulted in London, Leeds, Huddersfield and Halifax having better food, more restaurants, and more diverse places to eat than ever before. People want to eat in settings that are attractive. If we cannot provide such facilities in schools, we should not be surprised if the lure of the burger bar and the fish and chip shop becomes compelling to schoolchildren. That is how I respond to the suggestion that our approach involves interference by a nanny state.

I shall conclude on the most important point. One's diet in one's early years has a dramatic effect on one's life expectancy and life chances. When I re-read the Committee's report, I was struck by the fundamental themes that run through it. A significant percentage of our population is tragically affected by the poor diet that they choose. Recent medical research shows that the situation has declined rather than improved during the past 40 years. Children get the habit of good food in their early years and at school. Schools are about education, and they should educate students about diet and good food. We should inculcate them with knowledge about the essentials of good, fresh food and the need for a proper diet. We must encourage lifelong learning—that will help children to become healthy adults and, in turn, good and nurturing parents.

Although members of the Select Committee produced an excellent report, they should not simply walk away saying, "We have finished the report. Producing it was a good, cathartic experience." We should say to the Government, "We shall watch carefully to see how you will respond and whether you will incorporate our conclusions in policy commitments." We shall return to this matter time and again. This subject is too important to be left alone.

2.59 pm

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): I really enjoyed this inquiry. We had an interesting visit to a school in Reading and we had our fair taste of school meals whenever we visited schools in the course of other inquiries. We went to Lambeth, Reading and other parts of the country to look at early years provision. Nutrition is very important in early years. I am sorry to have missed the first few minutes of the speech made by the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman), but this issue needs to be addressed from the earliest stages of the education system. The hon. Gentleman asked why it is taking the Government so long to act—five years in all. Typically for this Government, however, they have a five-year implementation period but only a two-month consultation period with the outside world on their proposals. That is a wholly disproportionate effort.

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman is so anxious for the Government to act so quickly to reverse the previous Government's legislation that removed nutritional standards for school meals.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I am sorry if I did not make myself clear. I was surprised—although that was tempered by previous experience of this Government—that in the course of a five-year programme, they have allowed only two months for outside consultation. They have allowed five years for implementation because they do not believe that the problem is that pressing. We heard a great deal of evidence that the deregulation of the provision of food had not caused any overall deterioration. The object of introducing new guidelines must be to raise standards.

We must be careful here. We can be forthright in our views about what is right for children. However, all of us who have children—the hon. Member for Huddersfield and I have ample experience—know that they do not always do what one expects. Unless their diet is attractive as well as wholesome and nutritious, they will find their own means of supplementing the food that they are given. It is hard to escape the observation that although the past 50 years have seen a massive increase in the amount of soft drinks consumed by children, which one would have expected to have done a great deal of damage to their teeth, children's dental health has markedly improved. As in all the areas, we can point to good practice. We should, as the report recommends, encourage children to consume healthy liquids as well as healthy foods, but we should not become too precious in our approach to their development in the big bad world.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I am listening to the hon. Gentleman with great interest. I do not want to make a judgment on the point he is making. I simply want to counsel him and other hon. Members on the dangers of associating cause with effect on the question of whether the improvement in dental health is despite or because of an increased consumption of fizzy soft drinks and sugar.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, whose knowledge of medicine greatly exceeds my own. Indeed, I was implying that that improvement was despite the consumption of these fluids. One must keep the problem in perspective, given that there are other remedies, such as proper dental health care. There was a moment when I thought that the hon. Member for Huddersfield was decrying the fact that children in the 1980s and 1990s discovered baked beans, pizza and chips. Those will always be a part of children's diet. There is little that we can do about that.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): Would the hon. Gentleman take it from someone who was teaching before and after the Education Act 1980 that the experience on the ground was of a great deterioration in

school meals? Fresh meat and fresh vegetables almost disappeared from school canteens. Does he accept that we cannot encourage children to make healthy choices about food if those healthy choices are not on the menu?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): Order. Interventions, however telling, must be brief.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Certainly we saw evidence from a number of sources that the effect of deregulation was not as bad as that. As I implied earlier, the meals that were provided met the nutritional standards laid down at the time, but were often deeply unattractive to children. Many children simply did not consume that gunge. I respect the hon. Lady's specific experience, but we received written evidence from the Local Authority Caterers Association, which says on page 9 of the report:

> Without doubt the introduction of Compulsory Competitive Tendering has led to some Local Education Authorities saving money on the provision of school meals and updated the systems and methods of production.

I will deal with that issue in a moment.

Other witnesses told us that, initially, there was a drop in the take-up of school meals because the price went up in 1980, but that was rapidly reversed. In the opinion of most, including the National Heart Forum, it would not be fair overall to say that the quality of school meals deteriorated.

I mentioned the evidence of the Local Authority Caterers Association. One important change that resulted from the introduction of competitive tendering following deregulation was that a great deal of investment went into the production of school meals. Many schools had hopelessly out-of-date kitchens and facilities, many of which might have been regarded as unhygienic. They certainly would have been regarded as such by today's standards.

There simply has not been the scope within the education budget in the past 20 years to meet the significant capital investment and economies of scale that have been undertaken by contractors. We can see the results today. Many contractors have hubs from which they distribute school meals, which means not only that their internal standards can be more rigorously tested and enforced, but that delivery of school meals is much more consistent and efficient than previously.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I remind the hon. Gentleman that contractors in rural areas must travel a lot further.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Indeed. However, in rural areas—which, typically, have much smaller primary schools—a hub from which to deliver meals has induced a great many economies of scale. Small rural primary schools have avoided making the capital investment that they would otherwise have had to undertake, which has perhaps enabled many schools to survive. Therefore, a deregulated system has many advantages.

However, no one pretends that deregulation is perfect. We can always look for improvement. As a member of the Select Committee, I endorse the idea that new standards should be set, because I believe that we now have an opportunity to make improvements, build on the successes of the past 20 years and learn from them. Why should we make improvements? Despite the fact that children's health has been improving overall, poor nutrition has a significant effect on their educational attainment. We took evidence from Dr. Michael Nelson, who says on page 34 of the report:

> Recent evidence from the US and the UK shows that cognitive function is poor in children with poor dietary status but no overt signs of deficiency, and that intervention to improve diet...results in improved cognitive function and learning ability.

There can be no doubt that well-fed children, who have breakfast before they enter class and eat nutritious food during the day, will be more capable of concentrating on their studies. As Members of Parliament, we know what it is like to rush into the House to deliver a speech without having eaten a good meal beforehand.

Schools want to ensure that their pupils have a decent meal. Pressure to ensure a high quality of school meals exists in the local education authority system, which is why the need for new standards and guidelines has not been pressing hitherto. However, we are moving towards a new world. The Government already contemplate more direct funding for schools to purchase provisions themselves. The Conservative party will take that to its logical conclusion and make schools free of local education authority interference in such spending decisions. As purchaser provision reaches school level, more guidance about standards is necessary, but it is also important that schools retain flexibility in choosing how best to deliver a decent school meal.

The National Heart Forum mentioned a national school fruit and vegetable scheme, which the Select Committee looked on with enthusiasm. In its evidence, the National Heart Forum told us, on page 31 of the report:

> Fruit and vegetables... are one of the main components of the diet where you see huge social class differences with those in social class one eating about 50 per cent. more or half as much again as those in social class 5. This... to an extent, this reflects the social class differences in heart disease and in cancers later in life.

If we can develop schemes whereby all children receive their fair share of fruit and vegetables, we will have done a great deal for their physical as well as their educational development.

There is, however, a problem with a fruit and vegetable scheme. In comparison to milk, fruit and vegetables are far more perishable, so any scheme will have to be flexibly developed. It may require Government initiative and incentive, but it will take place at the local level. Schools will, perhaps in collaboration with local farmers, farm producers and food stores, work out their own schemes.

Children must be encouraged to consume what is good for them. It can be difficult persuading those who are entitled to free meals to claim them. Much confusion, as a result of conflicting evidence, reigns on that matter. Some said that children were unhappy about showing that they merited free meals; others disagreed. There are new ways of identifying the children, so they can claim their free meal without it being evident where the meal is delivered. That must be preferable to the old-fashioned systems.

Where there is a high entitlement to free school meals, it may be worth considering converting the cost of the entitlement into a general subsidy for the delivery of

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meals on the site. That would not mean departing from contracting-out arrangements; once the price of the school meals had been negotiated with a contractor, a standard percentage discount would be applied to make them highly accessible to the children.

The report's main conclusion is that the Government should get on with it. Many who responded to the consultation on the draft regulations and guidance wanted the Government to take action. Curiously, the Government did not consult on one question. Paragraph 24 of the report on the response to the draft regulations, published earlier this month, said:

> Food vs nutrient-based standards...was not an issue for consultation.

The argument about food versus nutrient-based standards arose during the Committee's inquiry. Although responses were not invited on that issue, respondents who volunteered views were split down the middle. More than half supported food-based standards, and the minority, which was nevertheless 20 out of 44, supported nutrient-based standards.

High prices will deter take-up by children, so we must be mindful of the cost of imposing the new regime. A nutrient-based system will be easier to police than a food-based system, because conditions can be built into the contract with the supplier, who could be subject to spot tests. If the supplier failed a spot test, severe penalties could be imposed. That would place the onus on the supplier to meet the standard.

Food-based standards will require more evidence-gathering in the school, and much more debate will take place after the evidence has been gathered. Food-based standards will be more expensive to implement and regulate. The Government should consider the extent to which their food-based approach should be legally enforceable, instead of part of the guidance package given to schools.

The Committee heard that many with experience in school meals felt patronised by the Government's initial approach. It was unnecessary to tell those people how to undertake basic tasks such as boiling an egg or baking a cake. I gather from the latest response that the Government have wisely withdrawn from such excessive nannying of the people doing the cooking.

If the Government are to succeed in responding to the consultation, they must set new standards, use a light touch and only generally educate the schools that will now take the purchasing decisions. That will ensure that the quality of school food is raised and, more important, that the quality of school food consumed is raised.

3.18 pm

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): One of the first debates in which I took part in the House, 13 years ago, was on health and I spoke about the importance of school meals. That subject is dear to my heart, as a Member of Parliament, a mother and a recipient of school meals when I was younger. I welcome the debate and congratulate the Committee on its report. I congratulate also the Government on accepting some of the recommendations, and I will say how I would like the measures to go much further.

A school meal is one of the most valuable services that we can offer children. Even now, it is the main meal of the day for some. We could all visit schools in our constituencies and talk to teachers who would tell us that such a meal is the mainstay for many pupils. For almost 100 years, schools meals have played a vital role in nourishing children, especially those from poorer families. The meals were first introduced in the 19th century, when they were provided by charities. My mother, who was one of 11 children, welcomed the free school meal, which was provided by a charity because she was from a big family; she told me many times that she would have gone hungry without it.

The 1906 Act allowed local government to raise money on the rates to provide meals for schoolchildren. The interest in school meals came about when working-class recruits in the Boer war died like flies; their health was so poor, they could not fight off diseases. As my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) said, the Education Act 1944 was vital; it was part of the welfare state and made it compulsory for local authorities to provide a school meal for any child whose parents wanted to buy one. As a child of that generation, I benefited directly from the measure and so did my family.

During the second world war, school meals were provided for all children as a public health measure. The nation had gone through a very bad period in the 1920s and 1930s and health was not as good as it could be. In 1965, the price of a school meal was fixed at an affordable level, and strict nutritional guidelines for the quality of those meals were standardised throughout the country. Under the 1965 directive, schools also had to provide free school milk for children during their mid-morning break. That seems like an age of enlightenment because, at that time, everyone accepted the case for good public health and recognised that what one ate as a child determined one's health as an adult. There was a consensus about health; that consensus was inherited when we all worked together so closely and so well during the second world war.

We returned to the dark ages in terms of public health with the election of the Tory Government under Mrs. Thatcher. It was an act of unique irresponsibility to get rid of nutritional standards; Mrs. Thatcher, who earlier got rid of free school milk for the majority of school children, was determined to go even further. I do not understand the logic of anyone who applies a free-market philosophy to children's health, but the Education Act 1980 removed the obligation for school meals to meet nutritional standards. We can all talk about freedom, but I want freedom from poor health and from eating junk food. Those are much more important freedoms to give to the nation.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I should be interested to know what the hon. Lady would say to the representative of the National Heart Forum who, when asked in the Select Committee if standards in schools had declined since the previous Government took nutritional guidelines off the menu, said:

> It is difficult to say, but from some of the latest information we have had from school children, it looks as if it is more or less the same.

Mrs. Mahon: I was a mother with children at school during that period and I know that the quality of school

meals went down. My children had previously loved school meals and did not enjoy them as much after the nutritional guidelines were removed. Fast food, fizzy drinks and chips were introduced after 1980; my children were brought up to eat fruit and vegetables and to like a good midday meal. I witnessed a deterioration of the standard of school meals.

Mr. St. Aubyn: There may have been a variation in standards. Was the local education authority where the hon. Lady's children went to school run by her party or another party?

Mrs. Mahon: During the 1980s, the LEA was run by the hon. Gentleman's party, but that is irrelevant. I was active in the public sector union NUPE at the time and as I was on the national advisory committee for women, I represented the school meals staff. I went in and out of schools all the time, so I had vast experience throughout the country of the quality and popularity of school meals. The National Heart Forum may have carried out research, but I have certainly done my own.

I cannot understand how a Prime Minister could have been so irresponsible. Why did Mrs. Thatcher set out—almost deliberately, it would seem—to destroy what everyone agreed was a cheap, efficient and valuable service? I am not saying that it did not need to be modernised or that the menus did not need to be revised—I am all for change. Perhaps we should not be surprised. On taking office in 1979, the same Government tried to bury the Black report on inequalities in health, which was commissioned by the Labour Government in an attempt to identify and offer solutions to the specific health problems experienced by those living in poverty.

It is interesting to note that the Black report recommended free school meals for all children. Sir Douglas Black was quite unequivocal, and recognised the value of the midday meal. I have supported the principle of free school meals throughout my life, and I give the Minister warning that I have campaigned on this issue frequently. In the long run, free school meals would be cost-effective in terms of the health of the nation.

I congratulate some trade unions—Unison in particular—on campaigning tirelessly to put the issue of school meals in the spotlight, and the Child Poverty Action Group has published superb material and carried out good research over the years.

How do we make further progress? The report and its recommendations are moving the debate along, and that is certainly doing some good. I must also congratulate the Government on accepting some of the recommendations. That is to be welcomed, and if we are serious about improving the health of the nation, that is the place to start. We are all sensible enough to know that children need nourishing diets to protect their health.

Reliable surveys have shown that the diets of British schoolchildren are high in fat and sugar, and often low in the vitamins and minerals necessary for healthy growth and development. We can all quote from our favourite survey but, by and large, surveys agree on those points. Scientists and the medical profession agree that the best way to protect against dietary diseases in later life, such as heart disease and certain cancers, is to begin as early as possible. High nutritional standards and enabling children to eat a healthy diet in school are a very important part of that, and I support my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield in his plea for a raising of standards.

For many years, the Child Poverty Action Group has called for the implementation of many of the report's recommendations. In particular, I pay tribute to the Child Poverty Action Group in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney). I have spoken to members of that group and listened to what they had to say. They are very active and have contributed much to the debate. A recent letter from the Bradford group stated:

> In addition to the reports recommendations—

which it welcomes—

> we would like to see entitlement to Free School Meals extended to children in families receiving Working Families Tax Credit or Disability Tax Credit.

Like Unison, it also wants

> to see action on encouraging take up of Free School Meals and the ending of the stigmatization of children claiming them.

That is still the most significant reason why some children do not take up free school meals. I realise that all manner of procedures have been designed to prevent those who do take up those meals from being discovered by their peers, but the truth is that children have a way of finding out such things. If all children received free school meals, we might escape that problem, and I wholeheartedly support the Bradford Child Poverty Action Group's plea.

Finally, I am slightly disappointed that the Government have not gone a little further. I have already mentioned Unison and the Child Poverty Action Group. They gave evidence to the Committee on the question of the low take-up of free school meals, and the attitudes of children and parents towards them. It is a very sensitive response, and I am pleased with it. Similarly, the British Medical Association gave irrefutable evidence that school meals are vital if we are to be serious about the health of our children.

The health of our children is far too important to be left to chance. I give warning to the Government and the Minister that some of us are not going to let this one go. We want free school meals. Will the Minister, at the very least, consider free school meals for the children of people who draw family tax credit? That would be an enormous start.

3.28 pm

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): I am delighted that the Select Committee report has received so much interest in terms of media coverage and this three-hour debate. I am especially pleased because I proposed the report to the Committee, and I was delighted that it was taken up.

I had three reasons for proposing the report. First, school meals are an important part of a child's day. If one has unhappy children in the dining room, one has unhappy children in the classroom also. That makes a tremendous difference to their learning ability. Secondly, nutrition can make a real difference to

[Charlotte Atkins]

learning outcomes, especially among more deprived children. School meals can provide a significant proportion of their nutritional intake, because so many of them do not have a cooked meal in the evening. A hungry child cannot learn. Thirdly, school meals provide an opportunity to the school and to us to teach children about the value of healthy food.

We chose to conduct our inquiry at the time when the Department was working on its draft regulations and guidance for nutritional standards for school lunches. They are a significant development, and a real credit to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment. He has been committed to reintroducing nutritional standards for years. I remember him giving that commitment to Unison conferences many times; first as shadow Secretary of State for Health, then as shadow Secretary of State for Education and Employment and finally as Secretary of State. He has turned around the situation that the Conservatives introduced when they stopped nutritional standards being part of the important service delivered in schools.

The reintroduction of nutritional standards is a milestone. That is the case whether those standards are based on nutrients or on food groups, as long as the process is properly monitored. One of our recommendations was that governors should monitor the delivery of school meals, and that the Office for Standards in Education should make sure that they do so. As chair of governors at a primary school in London, I regarded the subject of school meals as a very important part of my duty. I was chair of governors at an inner-city primary school with an intake of very deprived children—including a great many children of refugees and of single parents and children living in short-stay housing—and school meals were very important.

We have a worrying legacy, because we are becoming a nation of snackers and junk food addicts. Average sugar consumption has risen in Britain by more than 30 per cent. since 1980. Britain is the proud holder of one title: the fattest European nation. In this country, 17 per cent. of men and 20 per cent. of women are considered clinically obese. How can we break this vicious circle? Schools are already worried about obesity in children. Recent Medical Research Council reports have concluded that today's children are more at risk of developing osteoporosis, heart and respiratory diseases and some forms of cancer than their more deprived parents and grandparents.

Eating habits are learned, primarily, at home. What can schools do to turn back the tidal wave of junk food? As a governor of a school in London and Member of Parliament for a Staffordshire constituency, I am aware of a wide range of provision. The Committee saw some good provision in Reading. However, in my role as chair of governors in a London school, I was alarmed by the way in which school meals contracts went to outside contractors. In such cases, the considerable skills of the school meals staff were undermined. Schools were serving up standard menus, prescribed by these outside contractors.

Instead of Val the head cook serving up her excellent cheese and tomato tagliatelle—a great favourite with the children, especially the vegetarians—she had to cook fish tiddlers and turkey dinosaurs. Turkey dinosaurs taste a bit like chewed string, but they are expensive to buy in, even though they do not really look like food at all—just lumps of substance that have been chewed up and covered in breadcrumbs. Many children never saw anything that resembled natural food and got used to eating a diet of—almost—pre-digested mush that would have been more suitable to a one-year-old child than to a growing young person.

The situation in rural Staffordshire is different. Staffordshire caterers provide marvellous Staffordshire oatcakes, filled with cheese, which are very nutritious, and good-quality meat dishes. Perhaps this is because there are beef farms producing excellent beef, and dairy farms producing excellent milk. People are used to eating real food—although, of course, huge amounts of chips and burgers are also eaten.

Primary schoolchildren are a more captive audience; they are less likely to vote with their feet and leave the dining room than secondary school pupils. If we are to change eating habits, we must start with the youngest children. As a nation, we are not very interested in good food. In most other European countries, family cooking and dining out represent the norm. In France, good restaurants are full of children; they are often very young, but well behaved and enjoying real food. They eat smaller portions of their parents' food, and the restaurants encourage parents to bring their children, so that they can enjoy that experience.

In the United Kingdom, food is often cooked in a microwave and rushed down by children sitting in front of the television. That is a way of filling up with food, rather than enjoying it. Sitting down to eat with classmates is an important communal experience for schoolchildren. It gives them the opportunity to develop the social skills that, sometimes, can be sadly lacking.

When we visited Reading, we found that one of the pupils' complaints was that children who brought in a packed lunch were not allowed to sit with the children who were having school meals. That creates many problems. It encourages children with packed lunches to eat their lunches quickly and go outside, rather than enjoy eating with their classmates. Children might be encouraged also to tell their parents that they would rather have a packed lunch, because they can sit with their mates. The Committee recommended that school governors should ensure that there is enough space to allow all pupils to eat together, even if it has to be in several sittings. The shortness of the lunch break may present problems, but it is important not to segregate children. I believe that children may decide not to have school meals because they cannot sit with their friends.

The challenge that we face is how to wean children off instant energy foods, such as burgers, chips and sweets, and build in fruit and vegetables. One suggestion, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn), was a national fruit and vegetable scheme, building on existing good practice. The Committee recommended such a scheme in the introduction to the report, and I am pleased that the Government's response was positive.

We said that the Department for Education and Employment should work with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to secure an expanded intervention stocks disposal scheme, so that we could use the mountains of surplus apples and pears to encourage children to eat fruit at school. Most children—certainly my 13-year-old daughter—are unlikely to choose an apple rather than an inviting pudding, so the fruit should be offered at break times. It is particularly important for teenagers who do not have breakfast to have a piece of fruit at break time to help them to carry on with full attention until lunch. Therefore, I hope that we can introduce that scheme. I hope that the Minister will be able to update hon. Members on the progress being made on the MAFF and DfEE initiatives. The intervention stocks disposal scheme clearly would be only a small part of a programme to improve diets.

Many of those who would benefit most from a nutritious school meal are missing out—the number is estimated to be more than 300,000—because they do not claim their entitlement to a free school meal. The Select Committee backed Unison and the Child Poverty Action Group in calling for research into the reasons for the low take-up. I am pleased that the Government have responded positively to that recommendation too.

I want to see a similar campaign to the pensions take-up campaign, in which we are encouraging pensioners to take up the minimum income guarantee. Such a campaign should be conducted in schools and at benefit offices to encourage parents to claim free school meals. The children of parents on working families tax credit are not entitled to free school meals, but I hope that we can ensure that such families will get them for their children, as well as those who have not claimed.

Schools can adopt many strategies to remove the stigma attached to the take-up of free school meals. In primary schools, many pupils pre-pay for their school meals, so it is not such a problem. In general, the teachers collect the money or it is taken to the school office, and no money changes hands at the counter. However, we should encourage secondary schools to introduce a swipe card, so there is no way of knowing whether pupils are having a free school meal or not.

In Reading, we saw some excellent food when we visited a local school. I was amazed how easy it was to pick out the pupils having free school meals, although it was for the best possible reasons. A paying child could go up to the counter and choose six doughnuts. We heard about one child who had parental support for choosing six doughnuts for his lunch. Pupils on a free school meal had to have a balanced lunch, so they had to have a vegetable, a main course item and a pudding. However, that meant that they were picked out, which clearly was not sensible. I would like that school to encourage all pupils to have a balanced diet. I appreciate that there is a problem, because some pupils might object and might leave the dining room empty. However, I hope that we can overcome the stigma attached to free school meals, even if the arrangements are introduced for the best possible reasons.

We have an opportunity to make a significant impact on the quality of school meals and to turn round the diet of our school pupils. If we do not, we will store up massive health problems for the future. There must be a middle way between girls who starve themselves to achieve the waif-like figures of fashion models—which led to the body image summit—and the fast-food junkies who are making the UK the obesity capital of Europe.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Three more Back Benchers want to speak before the winding-up speech. Hon. Members are being very attentive, so I am sure that they will bear in mind that if there is discipline we shall fit everyone in.

3.45 pm

Mr. Terry Rooney (Bradford, North): I welcome the report of the Education and Employment Committee. For far too long, the school meals service has been the Cinderella of children's education, yet it plays a vital role because in feeding the mind, one must feed the body as well. My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) mentioned the Education (Provision of Meals) Act 1906. That came about because, in the early 1900s, Bradford council had the temerity to introduce school meals. In a spirit of malice—there is no other word for it—the then Liberal Government said that it was illegal and that the council could not do it. The council went to court and won its case, which resulted in the 1906 Act.

Bradford was also the first local authority to introduce pre-school and after-school meals, which is an aspect that is ripe for development. In the list of evidence submitted to the Committee, I was pleased to see evidence from the dietician's department of our local hospital, which has played an important role over the past 20 years in trying to maintain nutritional standards, despite Government efforts.

I come from a generation that, perhaps unwittingly, benefited enormously from the 1945-51 Government, who introduced measures such as national health milk, orange juice and cod liver oil. One cannot overstate the contribution that diet makes at an early age to people's health in adult life, in relation to bones, teeth, cholesterol levels and the heart. That is why nutritional standards are so important. One cannot over-regulate for that, and deregulation should not even be on the agenda.

In due course, there will be 25,000 individual providers of school meals instead of 140 local authorities. I am worried about how to keep tabs on that. I know head teachers in my local authority area who have been jumping for joy at the prospect of school meal budgets being devolved to the school, because they see opportunities to extract money from that. By working with relevant food contractor suppliers, they will be able to do so. There is a real danger that the devolving of budgets, with the best of intentions, will have a negative effect.

We live in a society with a fast-food culture. I personally think that McDonald's is the enemy of the world. I can say that here, because I cannot be sued for libel. My six grandchildren—there is another one on the way—love McDonald's, but there has to be a balance. Once a week is probably all right; every day is not on.

Over the past 30 years, we have seen enormous changes in eating opportunities. In my city, there are Chinese, Thai, Indian, Italian and Caribbean

[Mr. Terry Rooney]

restaurants. There is even the odd fish and chip shop left. People's tastes and opportunities have changed, and children have been exposed to those new influences. There is no need to put dull, stodgy food on the table to give school kids a balanced, nutritional and healthy meal; it can be tasty and enjoyable. I am old enough to remember the time when rice was a pudding. Nowadays, nobody knows what rice pudding is or how to make it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Charlotte Atkins) suggested that the right setting in school can contribute immensely to children's social and personal development. Much has been said about stigma and whether it exists. About 40 years ago, I was receiving free school meals, which was the worst experience of my life, bar nothing—I have not lost an election yet, and that might be worse. A bowl of sago was placed in front of me and the head teacher stood over me and told me that the state had paid for that bowl of sago and that I would stay there until I had eaten it. I could not stand sago and, to this day, I can smell it at 100 yd and become nauseous. Such experiences may not be as frequent in schools now, but they still exist and they turn people off.

We should be worried that some 35 per cent. of all children who are entitled to free school meals are not receiving them. Somewhere, someone is suffering, because those children come from the poorest families. If they are taking money from the family budget to spend elsewhere or are receiving meals by other means, that is a failing. For many years, I have been involved with the Child Poverty Action Group and during the past couple of years I have been involved locally with its take-up campaign on school meals. The Tong school in Bradford is a progressive school in most matters, but it did not realise how discriminatory it was being until it became aware of our campaign. Its deputy head teacher wrote to me stating:

> We recognised the stigma still attached to the receipt of the pre paid tickets

and stopped separate queueing. The letter continued:

> Students, school staff and families are delighted with the improved provision, and we now feel we are catering properly for all the pupils who need, and deserve a satisfying mid day meal.

The letter also stated that

> the take up of free school meals increased by 25%. We now have a regular 100% take up, of the pupils in school, who are entitled to the meal.

That is a progressive school with a good head teacher and a good governing body who understand the world. Yet those practices had existed for 20, 30 or 40 years. Sometimes it is necessary for someone outside to look at what is happening.

It is worrying that 35 per cent. of children entitled to free school meals are not receiving them. The problem involves practices, different coloured dinner tickets and different queues. Kids are extremely sensitive to being made outsiders within their own environment. There is discrimination and we must recognise that.

I turn to the wider social exclusion agenda. Commendably, the Government have a target to eliminate child poverty and the thrust of that policy is to get parents into work. By and large, people are better off in work than on benefits. Calculations will show that someone who works 20 hours a week will receive this much and be that much better off, but they never include the fact that the right to free school meals is lost. That means £20 to £30 a week for someone with three children and those families, even with parents in work, are poor if they were entitled to that benefit. There is a deception.

It was wrong when the right to free school meals was removed in the Social Security Act 1988 for the children of parents on income support and when that right was abolished in terms of family credit. A notional calculation was made and when questions were tabled to the Treasury, the replies explained what those notional calculations were. However, that meant nothing to people. What matters to people is that if their children suddenly stop receiving free school meals, they must find £20 to £30 a week from a low wage. If we are serious about abolishing child poverty and about the welfare-to-work agenda, that bullet must be bitten. The measure would cost between £350 million and £400 million, which is peanuts. It is 2 per cent of the amount we got for the mobile phone licences. If we are serious about child poverty and welfare to work, that is the agenda that the Government must grasp.

About 200,000 people are employed in school meals services up and down the country. Admittedly, most of them are part time. But there is a tremendous job-creation opportunity in the school meals service if it is developed properly. There was a time when 60 per cent. to 70 per cent. of children stayed for school meals. It is now down at about 35 per cent. Where are they going? Most parents work, so where are those kids going at lunchtime? It is all right if they are 14, 15 or 16 but seven, eight and nine-year-olds are leaving school at lunchtime. What dangers are they being exposed to?

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax mentioned the Black report in the 1970s and how it was ditched and quietly buried. Another report was published in 1988—the Acheson report on health inequalities. It showed that, in 20 years, nothing had changed. Health inequalities were, if anything, worse than in the 1970s. A fundamental element of health inequality is the school meals service and the amount of money that people can spend on food. That is why the agenda must include the working families tax credit and whether people will have enough money to pay for school meals.

3.56 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman), I was not a member of the Select Committee when the report was prepared, so I claim no credit for it. It is an excellent report and I wanted to say a few brief words because, like my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon), I believe that this country used to have a proud and honourable tradition of providing good school meals. We should return to that tradition because, as has been said many times already, it is important for children's health and their educational prospects.

The Select Committee received plenty of evidence that good school meals are vital for children's health and

should be an important part of our public health agenda. The National Heart Forum has been quoted several times already. It said that

> the risk of developing chronic disease is established early in life, making a focus on children and their diets essential to any effective prevention strategy.

It estimates that a third of serious heart diseases and a third of cancers in this country can be attributed to poor nutrition. That is the scale of the problem that faces us. We also know that a diet high in fats and sugar is causing obesity. Not only do many of these problems begin in childhood, but they are overwhelmingly the diseases of poverty.

The Child Poverty Action Group pointed out that the diets of families on income support were far less likely to be adequate than those of families not on benefit. It quoted the 1999 survey by the Local Authority Caterers Association, which pointed out that 22 per cent. of parents still rely on a school meal to ensure that their children have a balanced diet, and 60 per cent. of parents consider it a vital part of their children's diet.

Good school meals play a vital part in ensuring that children can learn effectively. They should therefore be seen by the Department for Education and Employment not simply as a peripheral issue, but as an important part of raising education standards in schools. The hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) quoted Dr. Nelson's evidence that poor diet had been shown to impair cognitive functions. That could be put right by simple nutritional intervention.

The BMA also gave evidence to the Select Committee to show that children who were anaemic had a lower IQ. That could be equivalent to at least a grade at GCSE. One does not need to read the academic evidence. Anyone who has seen children in schools knows the effect that a lack of food has on their concentration. Any teacher, and I was one for 10 years, knows which children have not had breakfast. Any teacher can see a child's concentration dip mid-morning if he or she has not been adequately fed. We want to put that right.

The deterioration that took place in the school meals service over 18 years of Conservative government was an attack on the poorest in our society. It affected not just their health, but their education and life chances. It hit at their chances of getting themselves out of poverty through education. The Education Act 1980, which abolished nutritional standards for school meals, was one of the most retrograde steps in both health and education policy. I must tell hon. Members who dispute that that some of us were there at the time, and we watched children's diets change.

Before the 1980 Act, a school meal was by and large the main meal of the day not only for children, but for teachers as they were fairly low paid. Young teachers often relied on it. It changed almost overnight from fresh vegetables and decent meat to frozen pizzas, the chicken dinosaurs that my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax described, chips and pasties. School children ate those foods day after day. It was made even worse under the Social Security Act 1986 when 500,000 children lost their entitlement to free school meals. It was legislation by spite, which has never been put right. Children paid the penalty for that, which is why I welcome the Government's response to the report and the fact that they have accepted many of the Select Committee's recommendations. It is an important part of the anti-poverty agenda, but much more needs to be done.

As the Select Committee said, there needs to be a whole school policy on teaching about healthy eating. We must try to ensure that children learn to deal with advertising and to assess properly the messages that many advertisers give them about food. My hon. Friend the Minister will appreciate that we must start teaching young people to cook in schools again. The decline in cooking has been one of the most awful things that has happened in the past few years. People do not learn about food and healthy eating.

When one in nine children go without breakfast, and one in six do not go home to a cooked meal, it is appalling that the take-up of school meals, particularly free school meals, is falling. The reason is clear from the evidence: there is a stigma attached to taking free school meals. The Select Committee heard a lot of evidence about how that can be overcome by using tickets, smart cards and so on. I hope that the Government will give clear guidance to schools now that they have devolved budgets on how they should administer free school meals, so that children are not deterred from taking them up because of the stigma. I also hope that they will reconsider their attitude towards hot meals, because children are far less likely to take a free school meal—or their parents want them to—if only cold meals are provided. A hot meal is far more attractive and provides better value for money.

More important, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney) said, many of those who are not currently entitled to receive free school meals should be. The Acheson report recommended the extension of free school meals to children whose parents are in receipt of working families tax credit as an important way of improving health. The cost would be about £400 million, as my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary said on 4 April. That substantial sum must be weighed against the cost of treating diseases that arise from nutritional deficiencies, and against the loss to this country of educational attainment. It is cheap at the price, and the Government should accept that.

I also want to speak about the educational and social value of children eating school meals. That is so important, but the environment in which they eat is often not conducive to learning social skills. Dining rooms are often too small, so children are rushed in and out in shifts. The decoration is often appalling because of years of neglect of school buildings. The crockery and cutlery is often abysmal. I pay tribute to school meals staff who have struggled to provide a good service in those conditions. Many of them are good at providing decent school meals, but also perform valuable social functions within a school. Children often provide dinner ladies with information that they would not give to their teachers. They are often the first to pick up children's problems.

I also pay tribute to schools that have tried to improve the atmosphere in which their school meals are delivered. The William Beamont community school in my constituency has set up a proper dining room with tablecloths and flowers on the tables, proper crockery and cutlery. Children have to earn points in the school's behaviour management programme in order to eat in it—and they queue up to do so. That shows that young people respond when they are given proper facilities.

[Helen Jones]

Much more needs to be done to make school dining rooms more attractive. I cannot complain, because we have recently received funding for a new dining room and kitchen in another of my constituency's schools—the Beamont infant and junior school—but many schools still need new buildings. I have seen the Government's response to the Select Committee's recommendation on using the standards fund to improve school dining facilities, and I hope that the Government will also take advantage of the new opportunities fund.

We must update school meals. We must provide a proper environment in which to eat and we must ensure that children eat properly. The Government have made an excellent start, but they must regard it as the beginning, not the end, of a continuing process that is so vital for children's health, well-being and education.

4.8 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): It has been an interesting debate on an interesting report. I shall be brief and not reiterate what other hon. Members have said. We appreciate the need for joined-up government for the operation of schools and the health service, so I hope that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will confirm that she is working with her ministerial colleagues. I am not sure whether the Chairman of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman), was right to ask for a member of the Department of Health team to be present today, but I know that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will inform Ministers in other Departments about what was said here about taking matters forward.

I shall not speak for long on the nutritional aspects of the report, because other hon. Members have covered them well. However, as an aside, I shall remind my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney) of the lobbyist who spoke to us on a recent trip to the United States with the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport. The current criticism of McDonald's in the USA is that it is not fast enough. People who go to McDonald's are arguing for even more convenient food. The time between placing an order and receiving that order is now down to 42 seconds, which says something about humanity. The argument is that people who go to McDonald's want to spend more time with their families and therefore need their food quicker. It would be better if they sat down with their families to eat, rather than tried to place the convenience factor higher up the agenda. We all face such problems as parents and as people interested in the operation of our schools.

One important aspect of the report has not yet been touched on. I shall tread gently in talking about it, because of the accusations about a nanny state and about new Labour's views on telling people what to do. The operation of school meals is important to the evolution of food policy. We have no food policy, because the Government have been wary about the subject. My friend Tim Lang, a professor at Thames Valley university, argues that we will always have problems associated with eating until we have a proper debate. It is time that we had that debate, so I will take it forward, even if I do so gingerly.

It is little known and perhaps less understood that many rural local education authorities, based on the remaining county council areas, still have county farm estates. In my authority in Gloucestershire, I have pushed for those estates to be used to provide food for our children. For far too long, we have centralised the food chain. Now, there is a big demand for a return to local production, and county farm estates could help to develop that. Of course, that is difficult, because we have grown used to obtaining produce, whether it be bananas, oranges or other foods, at the drop of a hat. However, our farms can grow many vegetables that could be provided to children. Dare I say that we could understand and rediscover seasonality? Many of us grew up with that, but it is no longer part of people's dietary habits. People are now supposed to have everything whenever they want it.

Choice and the availability of provision are important issues that we cannot underestimate. There is something of a secret garden about the provision of food through the school meals service. I learned about that through my involvement with the Meat and Livestock Commission, which rightly argued with local education authorities and contractors for the restoration of beef to school menus. I tried to do what I could to help that process. I was involved because of my association with agriculture, and my involvement was interesting because it must have been the first time that a long-standing vegetarian had argued for the reintroduction of beef. Life is full of interesting asides. Some LEAs have been a bit negative and restrictive in their unwillingness to take beef back on to the menu. They should give children the choice. We should advertise the fact that our beef is the safest in the world wherever we can.

I am glad that the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) has just returned. I concurred with much of what he said, but I disagreed about the suggested advantages of contractualisation and of producing food in one place for distribution elsewhere. The problem is that the facility is often lost to the community.

School canteens can be a useful community facility. If we have pre-school and after-school provision, those facilities—I do not like the word "canteen"—could be important in providing children with meals that would not otherwise be available. Those facilities are so important to rural areas, because they are the main areas that have lost them. That has led to two problems. First, there is less choice, because the meals that are brought in are not as varied as they could be. Secondly and more particularly, there are problems with free school meals, which we have often discussed. My experience is that it is even more difficult now to prevent segregation. It is blatantly obvious which children receive free school meals. If there is only cold provision, it is clear that the kids with the sandwiches laid before them are the ones who receive free school meals. That is absolutely awful.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Does the hon. Gentleman not recognise that if village schools had had to find the capital required to upgrade their school kitchens to meet modern requirements, it would have been too great a hurdle for some of them? I suppose that if those schools could not provide any meals, they would ultimately have had to close. The hon. Gentleman has described the

disadvantages, but the current more efficient and economic approach means that there is still an option to have a village school.

Mr. Drew: I do not disagree entirely, but I am arguing that school canteens should not have been the first sacrifice. When schools need additional space to do other things, it is often the canteen facility that has to go, always because of the capital costs. I challenge my hon. Friend the Minister: the Government have said in response to the report that they want to use the new deal for schools money to help catering facilities. I genuinely hope that that will be the case and that we will move away from this nonsense that the food facility can be sacrificed. There is a downside to that.

I agree entirely with what a number of my hon. Friends have said, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, North, about the importance of passported benefit. The kids who do not take up free school meals because of the problems often live in rural areas. I am not saying that such children do not live in urban areas. I accept that some of this is apocryphal, but we all know—I have seen it—that kids are sometimes listed on the register as receiving free school meals and their names are called out for that reason. As I have said, those meals are sometimes provided in a different way, and children are made to sit in different places.

That situation has improved, and it had to do so. As my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) said, teachers are much more sensitive and people are more attuned to the problem than they were previously. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, North said, a child needs to experience such discrimination only once to remember it for the rest of his life, as my hon. Friend has remembered it. Quite simply, we must not allow that to happen. Anything that we can do to prevent such discrimination must be done.

This is a good report, with a lot of ideas. I hope that the Government will treat it seriously. For all sorts of reasons, we should provide children with decent school meals. For many children, the meal that they receive at school is their only substantial meal of the day. That is true in rural and urban areas. That situation may be getting worse instead of better, because people are less likely to eat together and know what their children are doing. A lot of good could come out of the report, and I hope that the Government will push it along. Criticism may have been voiced that that process is not moving quickly enough. My hon. Friend the Minister should take that on board, and I am sure that she will.

4.18 pm

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I, too, must confess that I was not a member of the Select Committee when the report was prepared. I joined just after the current Chairman, the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman), who spoke so eloquently. I watched the process of publication with a great deal of interest. I would have supported the report in its entirety, had I been on the Select Committee at that time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) was on the Committee. He is disappointed that he cannot be present, but he is speaking at an education conference in Harrogate today. However, he wants to join me in paying tribute to the members of the Education and Employment Committee, and to the previous and current Chairmen, for their work.

It was interesting to hear occasional attacks on the provision of fast food. As an eater of such food, I may be on the defensive, but there is no such thing as bad food, only a bad diet. On that basis, I hope that I can continue regularly to purchase fast food from the Burger King outlet at Paddington station, as I did on the way here today. The right attitude to nutrition should not be "ban this, ban that": it is all about balance. Whenever I consume a burger product, I try to eat several tangerines on the same day. It makes me feel better and full.

Mr. Sheerman: The hon. Gentleman knows that I, as Chairman, have sometimes referred to his hyperactivity: all is now explained.

Dr. Harris: I get criticised for hyperactivity and sometimes for the opposite in the Select Committee. A novel development has taken place at Thameside school in my constituency, of which I am a governor. The breakfast club for pupils—many of whom are on free school meals, come from deprived backgrounds and are not getting hot breakfasts—was sponsored by the local franchise holder for Burger King. He may regard me as one of his best customers, but he sponsored the club without any wish for publicity. I hope that my reference to Mr. Silver of the Oxford banqueting group will not be picked up by the media, but I nevertheless pay tribute to him. Sides should not automatically be taken on the issue.

The hon. Member for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney) made an excellent contribution to the debate on free school meals. I am grateful to him for giving me the opportunity to apologise for the actions of the Liberal Government in 1906. I look forward to further opportunities to apologise for more up-to-date approaches with which he has difficulty. Both he and the hon. Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) mentioned the loss of free school meals when people move from welfare to work as a contributor to the poverty trap. I have noticed that problem in my constituency work too. The costs of £300 million to £400 million will give the Government pause for thought, but they may be maximum costs. It may encourage greater welfare to work by removing the poverty trap though, sadly, there may not be a full take-up of free school meals.

The allocation of funding would be redistributive. Perhaps we are not supposed to use that term, but the hon. Member for Bradford, North recognises that the Government could extend free school meals to people on working families tax credit, which would be highly redistributive. Recommendation 7 relates to the importance of taking steps to encourage school lunches to be taken together as a school community. Both the hon. Members for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Charlotte Atkins) and for Warrington, North spoke eloquently about that. I concur that it is an important part of social training. The Select Committee examined how care and education in the early years can encourage social behaviour. Meal times provide an excellent opportunity

[Dr. Harris]

for such behaviour—the sharing of milk and other provisions during the part of the meal when people take from a communal source.

It is important that children who bring packed lunches to school, be it for religious reasons, preference or food allergies, should not be made to feel different and forced to sit apart. The report itself and contributions today point out that the size of the school dining hall can restrict that feeling of community. I saw the Minister raise her eyebrows when the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) said that it was the legacy of previous decades of underspending on capital that our school buildings are not fit for the purpose in many cases. There are other drives to deal with the problem of inadequate school dining halls.

Mr. St. Aubyn: The period of underspending to which I referred was before the deregulation of the school meals system in 1980. It was a period under the Lib-Lab pact when there were budget cuts for schools around the country.

Dr. Harris: That is very amusing, but those of us who listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman's speech understood that the 20 years to which he referred were 20 years of Tory spending plans: 18 years under Tory Governments and two years under this Government. That trend has been reversed in the past two years, which is welcome. At Dunmore primary school in my constituency, a good proportion of the school dining hall has had to be taken over by desks for the computers that it has been given or has raised funds to buy. Excellent teaching is done there, but it further reduces the capacity of the dining hall and it affects the school's ability to be a community.

On the subject of packed lunches, I should like to draw attention to the excellent work on food allergy carried out by the Fair Play campaign in Harrogate, and in particular by Mrs. Johnson who has corresponded with my colleagues and me. She is concerned about the need for more allergy awareness among catering staff and the provision of adequate first aid for the very rare, but serious, anaphylactic attacks that can occur. She also wants to ensure that children, who because of allergy, particularly peanut allergy, bring a packed lunch when many of their friends have a school meal are not excluded or isolated. I pay tribute to her and the campaign. I hope that the Minister will pay careful heed to it.

There have been many helpful contributions about recommendation 3, which is about the low take-up of school meals and the wish to find mechanisms at least to research the reasons for it. Anecdotally we feel that it is because of the stigma, although the Select Committee found conflicting evidence about that. One can see why. I welcome the Government's acceptance of that recommendation and I look forward to hearing what funds they are putting into research on why that happens and on the identification of best practice, such as smart cards, to improve matters.

It was a helpful coincidence that the Government held their summit on body image for women and young girls yesterday. I entirely support that campaign. Some of the media criticism about some aspects of that campaign has been unfortunate. Clearly a balance needs to be struck, because part of the concern that forms in girls' minds about weight may result from the warnings about eating fatty foods. Prevention is better than cure. Our concerns about the health of young people refer to the particularly obese. Many of those affected by eating disorders, particularly the epidemic in bulimic disorders, are of normal weight. The perception of body image is at fault.

It is important that hon. Members recognise the fact that concern about obesity must be consistent with concern about body image problems. Manufacturers could play a role in achieving that. There is a profusion of diet this, diet that and diet the other. Why is Diet Coke not called sugar-free Coke? Pepsi managed to call its drink Pepsi Lite, a name not associated with diets. Pepsi Max is actually Pepsi Min in terms of some of its sugar and calorific content. Therefore, manufacturers can attract young people without appealing to the fad for diets.

I agree with the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew): many local education authorities have been too sensitive to public opinion on food content. At the first sign of trouble over beef, which was probably unwarranted, and because of the slowness to reassure about beef content in diets, political gestures were made and motions were passed. I may not be fully supported by all members of the Committee in my view that there is little scientific basis for similar action taken over food with genetically modified ingredients. However, I am not saying that there is no scientific basis for fears about the effect on health of the currently commercially available food with genetically modified ingredients.

Like other hon. Members, I shall focus on some of the history. The Tory Government's response to the 1982 Select Committee report that recommended that they introduce minimum standards enforceable by LEAs was remarkable. They said that

> even if recommended standards were promulgated there is no evidence that they would result in pupils eating the food so prescribed: previous experience with national standards showed that much of the food provided was wasted.

That view was based on the idea that a child can be taken to good food, but she cannot be made to eat.

If one substitutes the idea of providing good nutrition with the idea of providing good teaching, one can see that such an approach is nonsense. All Governments need to uphold minimum standards of education. Not every child will learn as much as one hopes, but minimum standards and adequate training are a basis for levering up quality. It is illogical to say that we should not bother to set minimum standards because some children will not benefit.

On the subject of logic, I will expand on the point that I made in an intervention on the hon. Member for Guildford, who showed complacency on dental health. Dental health has improved, mainly through fluoridation—I know that merely by saying that, I shall receive a series of letters, many from members of my party—but despite that improvement, children's teeth still have severe problems, particularly in non-fluoridated areas.

Charlotte Atkins: I am glad to say that when the hon. Gentleman's constituents who are opposed to

fluoridation write to him, he will be able to turn to the York university study, which will prove that fluoridation improves dental health.

Dr. Harris: I am in no doubt that fluoridation not only improves dental health, but tackles the problem of inequity in dental health. Young children from poorer backgrounds are particularly liable to have bad dental health. That is partly diet related, as dental health studies comparing areas of fluoridation and non-fluoridation have shown. The dental health profession is in no doubt that the increased consumption of soft drinks rows against the tide of improved dental health. As dental health has generally improved because of fluoride in toothpaste and fluoridation of water, we must be careful not to allow children in non-fluoridated water areas to have high-sugar diets.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Does the hon. Gentleman think that it is more important that children consume sufficient fluids during the day, or that they consume only fluids that will not damage their teeth, even if they drink too little of those fluids?

Dr. Harris: Clearly, a balance must be struck. The same applies to the argument cogently made by the hon. Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands about fruit. Given a choice at lunchtime between fruit and pudding, those without a guilty conscience will probably choose the pudding. However, people do not feel that need for choice at break time, and if something is offered, it may be taken up. I think that those fair concerns can be tackled in that way.

I share the concern of many hon. Members who have spoken and many members of the Committee, including the hon. Member for Huddersfield, about the Government's five-year delay in introducing standards. I think that those standards will be welcomed, but five years is a child's experience of primary school. There is an argument for prioritising child health issues, not only because of the health gain, but because people would otherwise miss out on an opportunity—a snapshot while children are growing and developing. The same arguments apply in education.

Hon. Members are used to the Government saying that they cannot do everything quickly, because they do not have the money. They find that hard to understand, particularly given the austerity of Labour's first two years in government. However, this is not a cost-related policy. It could have been, and could still be, introduced more urgently.

The Government's rejection of a nutrient-based approach to standards is regrettable, and I question whether the explanation in their response to the Committee's report is logical. In the words of one respondent—presumably specifically selected and possibly selectively quoted—nutrient-based standards can be a tyranny of numbers. However, we must not run scared of numbers, because numbers and data are the basis of a scientific evidence-based approach to policy. That is why I support the Minister and her colleagues in trying to obtain data on body image and people on television. It is no good seeking to obtain numbers and data on one issue that has caused criticism, while regretting that approach on another.

I think that the Government are guilty of selectively quoting again in the draft regulations and guidance. In paragraph 24, which the hon. Member for Guildford mentioned, the Government point out that food versus nutrient-based standards was not an issue for consultation:

> Many responses were, however, generally supportive of the Government's intention to introduce nutritional standards for school lunches and... raised no objections to setting food-based standards...Of these, over half (24) expressed explicit support for food-based standards, and the minority (20) for nutrient-based standards.

Surely the Government do not claim that that is a statistically valid sample. It is a selective sample of people who chose to respond. It would take only an advocate of food-based standards, perhaps someone in their office, to encourage five respondents to state that preference for that majority to exist. If an issue has not been consulted on formally, I question whether it is valid for the Government to mention it. If the evidence went the other way, they would be reluctant to do so.

In general, there is more to welcome in the Government's response than to challenge. Therefore, in welcoming the Select Committee's report, and with the qualifications that I have made, I look forward to the Minister's reply.

4.38 pm

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): I join those who have congratulated the Select Committee on its choice of subject and on the report, which has eventually been prepared. Going back to our early lives, we are all familiar with the subject, which is of everyday importance and of great importance to many people.

We have had a good debate on the report. I congratulate the present Chairman of the Committee, the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) on the way in which he opened the debate. He certainly showed that he had done his homework on this subject even though he was not the Chairman of the Select Committee when it conducted the inquiry. Subject to the one reservation that I have already entered, I do not want to revisit the past, even the 1906 Liberal Government, I am happy to refer to that Government because they were returned with an extremely large majority, but became divided and were followed by a long period of Conservative predominance.

The hon. Member for Huddersfield opened the debate in a thoughtful, constructive and balanced way. As he made clear, the Government have accepted a number of the Committee's recommendations, but by no means all of them, and they have accepted them with a varying degree of commitment. The hon. Gentleman described some of their response as disappointing. It is important to consider the action that the Government propose to take in the light of those important recommendations.

There is a divergence of view between the Government and the Select Committee about the central recommendation contained in the conclusion of the report. In paragraphs 15 and 16 the report recommended that the compulsory element of the regulation should be based on scientific, nutrient-based guidelines, rather than the food-based approach taken by the Government. The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) has commented on that, and in his opening remarks the Chairman of the Select Committee said that it was very disappointing.

[Mr. James Clappison]

The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon spoke about the nature of scientific-based evidence. I note that the Select Committee preferred the evidence of the expert witnesses who appeared before it under the auspices of the National Heart Forum. They represented the health interest, and were in favour of the nutrient-based approach. We should bear in mind the Chairman's opening remarks about the link between diet in childhood and illness later in life, particularly coronary illnesses, cancer and other significant illnesses.

In the course of her evidence, Maggie Sanderson, the secretary of the National Heart Forum and a lecturer in nutrition, said that the food group approach, preferred by the Government, would be difficult to monitor. There appeared to be little in it to regulate the amount of fat and sugar in the menus, and the high fat intake among schoolchildren meant that obesity was increasing. Those are important points, given that that comes from an authoritative and expert source. The Government owe the Committee and the House an explanation of why they chose not to prefer the evidence that came from the health experts.

Whether one takes the nutrient based or the food group approach, we should remember that what is important is what is eaten, rather than what is provided. It is accepted on both sides and in the evidence that it is no use providing healthy food if it is not eaten. We are all familiar with the sight of children, especially older children of secondary school age, opting out of any form of school lunch and leaving the school often to visit shops where what they buy is not always good for their health.

The Select Committee was also reminded that some children who opt for school lunches leave most of it. I quote briefly from the evidence of Ms Pat Fellows of the Local Authority Caterers Association who described how

> we cooked all this nutritional food all morning, and we spent the afternoon putting it in the pig bin.

The evidence from LACA contains some useful suggestions on the marketing of school catering and the ways in which schools could provide healthy and nutritious meals that appeal to children. The Committee deserves to be congratulated on opening up the subject. I hope that it can be taken forward.

I do not want to go through all that evidence, or through all the evidence and the recommendations in the report. In the time available I want to stress three points arising from the report and the Government's response.

The first is free school meals, a subject that has been raised by a number of hon. Members. Free school meals are likely to be particularly important for the nutrition of children from lower-income families, which is a major consideration. It is of concern that nearly one in five of the children entitled to free school meals do not exercise their entitlement, although it may be their one opportunity in the day to have a hot and nutritious meal. The Committee was right to reflect on that concern.

It is not clear why that should be the case. Hon. Members, among them the hon. Member for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney), have suggested a number of reasons for that from personal experience. He and the other hon. Members who have said that it might be because of the stigma that attaches to free school meals may be right. I do not know whether that is the reason, and I know that the evidence presented to the Committee was conflicting. However, what is important is the Committee's recommendation that there should be research into the attitudes of children and their parents to claiming their entitlement. In the light of this debate that is a valuable recommendation.

I note that the Government accept the recommendation in principle. However, they do not give a commitment to funding such research. The hon. Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) said that the Government's response was slightly disappointing. I hope that the Under-Secretary will be able to go further than that when she winds up the debate, because such research is justified. Life is a struggle for children and their families when the parents are on income support, and it is a shame if they do not take advantage of the opportunity of free school meals. We must discover why they do not, as it may have major implications for the rest of their lives.

My second point is the vexed question of persuading children to eat fruit and veg. We have heard a number of contributions on that, and particularly on the national fruit and vegetable scheme, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Charlotte Atkins) and is contained in the report. We know that children from all social backgrounds do not eat enough fruit and veg. The Committee recommends that greater efforts should be made to provide an attractive choice of fruit at break times. That is welcome. It also recommends that the Department for Education and Employment should work with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to introduce an expanded intervention stocks disposal scheme as the basis of a wider national fruit and vegetable scheme for schools. I note that suggestion, which I believe should be debated and possibly explored. In their response, the Government say that they accept the recommendation in principle, but it is noticeable that they give little detail about the use of intervention stocks in the way recommended by the Committee.

The Government's response has come more recently than a written answer on 19 July 1999 from the then Minister of State for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker), who said that

> it is hoped that it will be possible to distribute fruit to schools in the coming season, following a recent change in the rules which allows transport costs to be claimed.—[*Official Report*, 19 July 1999; Vol. 335, c. 436W.]

It would be interesting to know whether any fruit has been distributed to schools in England and Wales since that reply was given. We understand that last month the Scottish Executive announced a pilot project, apparently based on a Finnish scheme, to provide free soft fruit for children at meal times in Scotland. Have Ministers any plans to do something similar in England, with fruit from European Union intervention stocks or any other source? That leads me to observe that a massive amount of such stock is disposed of in ways other than for the nutrition of children. Last year in the EU, 350,000 tonnes of apples were disposed of at a

substantial cost to the taxpayer, without doing anyone any good. One wonders whether there is scope for a common-sense investigation into this matter.

Thirdly, it is important to note the Committee's recommendation that the Government should not be over-prescriptive in their approach to implementing minimum nutritional standards for school lunches. It would be all too easy for prescription in this area to go over the top and become impractical and unrealistic. There is a balance to be struck, and my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) made some important comments about that. He made the case for realism in persuading children to eat the right things.

The Minister admitted that many respondents to the consultation found the Government's proposals too detailed, and said that the Government would bear that in mind. We hope that they will bear in mind the need to avoid over-prescription, and that some common sense can be brought to bear in this matter. We need common sense when deciding how to persuade children to eat healthy meals.

As the Chairman said in his concluding remarks, which I endorse, there is also a need for this important subject to be kept under investigation. This was a brief report on an important subject, and there is a case for keeping the matter under investigation to see what progress is being made. It is incumbent on the Government to give us a response to these points and, perhaps, to take a little further their response to some of the recommendations made by the Committee.

4.51 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Jacqui Smith): I am pleased that I ate a healthy and filling lunch before coming to this debate, because I shall clearly need all my energy to respond to the important points that have been raised. This has been a good debate, and I should like to congratulate the Select Committee on its work in gathering the evidence and producing a report on a matter that we would all agree is important. We all want a nation of healthy young people and the education service has a key role to play in promoting health among schoolchildren in a number of ways. As hon. Members have said, the knowledge, skills and attitudes learned at school stay with us for life and affect our health for life.

Naturally, I also want to do what I can in partnership with other Departments, agencies and external partners to remedy the deficiencies. I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman), the Chairman of the Select Committee, that I have had detailed discussions with colleagues from the Department of Health on the recommendations on school meals and on a wide variety of other issues that I hope to have time to discuss later. I say to my hon. Friend, with a feeling of mild sadness, that the nature of joined-up government means that we can talk to each other as Ministers, and we do not necessarily need to line up in order to show that we are taking a cross-governmental approach. However, I assure my hon. Friend that we are.

I shall refer first to the need for compulsory standards for school lunches. In our consultations, there was overwhelming support from all quarters—including nutritionists, caterers and parents—for the reintroduction of nutritional standards for school meals. We believe that, in taking this action, we are trailblazing in the public sector, and putting back in place an important factor for children's health.

School meals are part of a wider picture of promoting better health, in which the education service has an important part to play. The standards, which are to be enshrined in law for the first time in almost 20 years, signal the importance that the Government attach to the health of our young people. I accept the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) that this is not only a health issue, but an educational standards issue. I accept the argument that well-fed young people are more likely to be well educated and well behaved.

On compulsory standards, many catering contracts already specify healthy food requirements, and many catering staff do a marvellous job in terms of the meals that they provide. I should like to take this opportunity to commend the work that goes on in many of our kitchens and catering companies and to thank their dedicated staff. However, practice does vary, and the new standards will ensure that a national minimum standard throughout the country is established in regulations.

As the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) pointed out, we must not forget that school meals are optional. However, to suggest that enforceable standards could result in children not eating their meals is the wrong conclusion to draw. In my experience, parents who provide their children with a packed lunch do so because that is the only way to guarantee the standards that they expect. The standards that this Government will put in place will enable certainty about the nutritional value of school meals, which will help to boost take-up and provide an important opportunity for the school meals service.

My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman), the Committee Chairman, chided the Government about the timetable for introducing nutritional standards. He is right to say that May 2002 is our ultimate, published target, but he will be pleased to learn that we will lay regulations in respect of standards this Session. They will come into force in all education phases in April 2001, together with the new duty to provide paid meals. To help school caterers prepare, we will issue comprehensive guidance in the autumn. However, it is important to get matters right, and I should point out to those hon. Members who criticised the extent of the consultation process that we consulted on two separate occasions. The results of the first consultation were published in April 1999, and the results of the second—which hon. Members quoted today—were published recently.

Hon. Members have rightly pointed out that the way in which the standards were designed has proved controversial, and has given rise to the question of whether they should be food based or nutrient based. It is important to note that these are the first standards for school meals in 20 years, so it is not surprising that the form that they should take has been the subject of much debate.

The debate stems from the common objective that standards need to make a difference and improve nutrition for our children. The standards should provide

[Jacqui Smith]

a sensible basis for the caterers—who will be responsible for their implementation—to plan school meals and bring about an overall improvement in children's nutrition. They must also fit with other healthy eating messages given out by the Government in general and schools in particular.

We want flexible standards that will make a difference in schools. We believe that food-based standards will be easier for caterers to understand and interpret when planning menus, purchasing supplies and preparing meals.

Mr. St. Aubyn: In describing the standards, will the Minister explain how much the compliance costs associated with her system of regulation will add to the cost of the typical school meal?

Jacqui Smith: We believe that, in respect of monitoring, a food-based standard is more efficient than a nutrient-based standard. That conclusion was supported by the response to our consultation exercise, and I shall explain our thinking on that in a moment. More importantly, it is easier for pupils to identify with that—it fosters a wider understanding of food and is more meaningful to them.

Although we are to introduce minimum standards, schools and authorities will be free to exceed them if they choose. The proposed food-based standards, which are widely used by the Government in our messages about the need for a balanced diet, will be able to accommodate any nutrient-based standards that are already in place in local education authorities and schools. We are not trying to dictate or prescribe best practice, although we have clarified what should be promoted in schools. LEAs and schools should decide what works best for them, but they should operate within a minimal legislative framework that is understandable by all and, importantly, enforceable and deliverable.

Several people who lobbied me suggested that nutrient-based standards—in particular, those that were devised by the Caroline Walker Trust—are often used as an ideal to which we should aspire. I applaud the trust's good work; its guidelines contain important information and targets. Caterers will have to comply with our regulations. It will not be good enough simply to aspire to meet them, because those who do that will be breaking the law. The regulations must be designed so that caterers can comply with them.

Several hon. Members mentioned consultation. We have consulted widely on the draft regulations and the guidance on nutritional standards for school lunches. That consultation process showed that a majority supported the use of food-based standards. During the first round of consultation, we asked for comments on the use of food-based, rather than nutrient-based, standards.

The caterers who provide the school meals service are—naturally, one might say—more enthusiastic about the use of food-based standards. The school cooks who they employ do a terrific job, but they are not necessarily trained dieticians. Dieticians also support the use of food-based standards. For example, one dietician commented:

> They are best simply because everyone understands them.

That is not to deny the importance of essential nutrients in a child's diet. I earlier discussed how our standards would fit in with a broader Government message about healthy eating. We believe that the use of food-based standards complements the Government's healthy-eating messages, which emphasise the need for balance and variety of foods in the diet, rather than specific nutrients. When making decisions about health diets, that is the easiest way to make the relevant choices understandable. That lesson has clearly been learned by the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris), who has an admirably balanced diet.

The hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) raised a point that is contained in the Select Committee report, suggesting that our original proposals and guidance were too prescriptive and patronising. We have heard that criticism and reviewed the terms in which the regulations and guidance are couched. As I said, we want the regulations and guidance to make a difference, but they should do so in a way that involves flexibility for caterers and builds on current best practice.

My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield rightly said that it was important to monitor and review the success of standards. We shall introduce light-touch standards. Monitoring is important, but that, too, should be light touch. For example, our guidance to caterers will include simple checklists to help them ensure that they are meeting the standards. Local education authorities and schools will ensure that caterers comply with the standards set out in their contracts.

Dr. Harris: I read with interest that part of the Government's response that deals with this issue. It states:

> Light touch standards will require light touch monitoring.

Why? I would have thought that the lighter the standards, the more important it is that the monitoring should be tough, to ensure that the standards are met.

Jacqui Smith: As I shall explain, the monitoring process has a range of prongs. I am sure that the Select Committee will agree with our approach, as we are emphasising the need for schools to concentrate on raising standards in a non-bureaucratic way. Anything that puts extra pressure on governing bodies and schools would be unsatisfactory. However, I recognise the importance of monitoring. Although we shall prescribe light-touch, day-to-day monitoring for local education authorities in respect of caterers, our guidance will include also details of the recommended weekly nutrient content for school meals. Schools, LEAs and caterers will decide how to monitor school meals, using those guidelines. As a result of my meeting with the National Heart Forum, I believe that we might be able to encourage schools and caterers to use information technology packages to help them. I am keen to pursue that.

The Government want to make a difference to children's nutrition. When the new standards have settled down, we shall undertake an evaluation of school

meals, using sample school surveys. That could include nutrient analysis of food offered and consumed, as we recognise that food will be nutritious only if the children actually eat it. We would then consider the regulations again, in the light of the outcome of the survey. We want the standards to make a difference, but it must be possible for the people who deliver school meals to implement them. We will also work closely with the Food Standards Agency and other relevant bodies.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Charlotte Atkins) for her important contribution to the report. She referred to her own experiences in this area. I, too, was a governor and helped to determine a school meals contract. I taught and, as the mother of a six-year-old boy, I have a strong personal interest in the food that he will receive at school. My hon. Friend referred, rightly, to the way in which the expertise of school caterers can be used to provide healthy but enjoyable food that our young people will eat.

My hon. Friend gave the lie to the accusation made by the hon. Member for Guildford that healthier school meals necessarily would be more expensive. We do not believe that. My hon. Friend gave examples that showed that it was possible to provide healthy meals, such as cheese and tomato tagliatelle, curry and rice, shepherd's pie, pizza—which can, in fact, be healthy—cauliflower cheese and baked potatoes with various fillings. All of those are enjoyable, nutritious meals that can be provided by imaginative school caterers.

We have made significant progress with regard to the fruit and veg scheme. I have spoken to colleagues from the Department of Health not only about how we develop the MAFF scheme, but what we need to do, taking a common-sense approach, to ensure that children are able to eat more fruit and vegetables in school in a way that does not impose bureaucratic pressures on those schools. I assure hon. Members that we are actively working on plans to take that forward.

My hon. Friends the Members for Halifax, for Staffordshire, Moorlands, for Warrington, North and for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney) eloquently expressed the importance of free school meals to many of our children. New nutritional standards will ensure that all children are able to have healthy and enjoyable school meals. Children from less well-off families, including those who receive free school meals, are likely to benefit most from new nutritional standards. Those standards thus play an important role in eradicating child poverty and in dealing with the issues that affect children from some of our poorest families.

A strong argument was made for the extension of eligibility for free school meals to the children of parents receiving working families tax credit. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, North recognised, working families tax credit contains a provision for free school meals. People across Government will have heard the passion with which that case was made. However, it is an expensive option, and one that any Government would need to consider carefully.

Mr. Sheerman: My hon. Friend will probably cover this point, but the real passion arose because the Department could easily take the step of putting out an edict of anonymity in relation to free school meals. The Department already sends messages to schools and local education authorities, so why cannot there be such an edict? Would not my hon. Friend be proud if she managed to achieve that quickly?

Jacqui Smith: My hon. Friend is right. I was coming on to the important point that, for a variety of reasons, not all eligible pupils take up their free school meal entitlement. I am sure that hon. Members will therefore be pleased that, following the Government's response to the Committee's report, we are now providing funding for a research project with the Child Poverty Action Group. The project aims to identify the reasons for low levels of take-up of free school meals in some schools and high levels of take-up in others—in other words, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, North pointed out, to identify the actions that schools can take to increase their take-up. The project also aims to highlight successful strategies for models of good practice employed by schools that are successful in increasing their take-up.

I assure hon. Members that the research project aims specifically to offer practical evidence on ideas to school meals providers on ways to maximise free school meal take-up. We intend that the project should be completed by February 2001, when we shall disseminate its results. It will be an important contribution, and a link to the Government's target on reducing child poverty.

Mr. Sheerman: I am sorry to press the Minister, but she did not answer my question. Research is not needed to prove that anonymity is important in terms of free school meals. She could achieve that much sooner than 2001; it could happen very soon indeed. Research is not necessary; many people whom we know in our constituencies have personal experience of the humiliation involved. If that could be eradicated one week or one month quicker, so much the better. Common sense should tell us that it is wrong to mark such people out.

Jacqui Smith: We already make it clear to LEAs that schools and LEAs should be taking such action to ensure that all children who are eligible to take up free school meals do so. One point that arose from the Select Committee report, as hon. Members have mentioned, is that there was no consensus in the evidence about the best way of increasing that eligibility. It is not enough simply to issue edicts from Sanctuary buildings. We must find examples of good practice and ensure that those are put into operation.

Dr. Harris: The Minister should understand that there are two issues. It may not be clear that the marking out of people reduces the take-up of school meals, but there is merit, as the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) said, in not marking people out, regardless of what the research shows to be the effect on take-up. Surely, the Minister could agree to look at that.

Jacqui Smith: I shall certainly look at it, but if anonymity is not delivered because of different queues, raffle tickets and so on, schools should have the common sense to realise that they should not be doing that. We have told them clearly, but there may be a range of other issues. It is not helpful to jump in before the research

[Jacqui Smith]

backing and the good practice guidance is available to enable us to go further in ensuring that children who are eligible for free school meals take up their entitlement.

Mr. Clappison: I do not want to take the matter too much further, but is there not a case for the Department simply issuing an edict, as the hon. Member for Huddersfield suggested, to look at every way possible in which to disguise the identity of children who receive free school meals? Surely the Minister's Department could consider whether it is possible to issue general guidance along those lines without going into matters that may be subject to research.

Jacqui Smith: I shall certainly consider ways in which we can ensure that those messages get through to local education authorities and schools. We are not in the business of issuing edicts, but we are in the business of collecting good practice and ensuring that that is disseminated to schools.

I want to move on to whole-school approaches to healthy eating, which was helpfully raised by several hon. Members. Of course, school meals do not exist in isolation and we need to educate and encourage our children to be able to make informed food and life style choices. My Department is involved in a number of initiatives. We work closely with the Department of Health and we shall work with the Food Standards Agency and with external partners to promote good health and broader messages about food throughout schools.

For example, the Chairman of the Select Committee eloquently argued that we need to bring health and education together in the way in which we work in schools. I am sure that my hon. Friend knows about the close collaboration between the Department of Health and the Department for Education and Employment on the healthy schools programme, which now operates and is funded throughout England. The programme brings together health authorities and local education authorities in local partnerships to support schools in meeting standards laid out in the national healthy schools standard.

A key theme in the guidance on the standard relates specifically to healthy eating. It suggests that schools that will be recognised under the standard—all schools now have access to the support to enable them to do so—should present consistent, informed messages about healthy eating. For example, food on offer in vending machines, tuck shops and school meals should complement the taught curriculum. Various examples suggest that that is working.

Newall Green high school in Manchester, for example, decided as part of its local healthy schools work to improve the atmosphere in school during lunch time by boosting the uptake of healthy food in various ways. Pupils were surveyed, school kitchens were refurbished, teachers were encouraged to eat with pupils and organisers were trained in positive behaviour management. That returns us to the important points that were made by my hon. Friends the Members for Staffordshire, Moorlands and for Warrington, North about the relationship between behaviour, a child's social development and what happens during school meals.

Local sports celebrities were brought in to talk to pupils about the importance of healthy eating, and many positive messages were promoted, not least of which was the suggestion that healthy eating in pleasant surroundings can be fun. The results went beyond the school's expectations. The school cook could confirm that children were eating more healthy food options, and parents and children were impressed by the changes that resulted. We work closely with the Department of Health and various companies, including Kellogg's, to promote breakfast clubs in schools. The national curriculum gives lots of room to schools to promote healthy eating.

Helen Jones: Will the work that the Department for Education and Employment is carrying out with the Department of Health include a cost-benefit analysis of the effect of extending free school meals to families who are on working families tax credit? If we know the cost of treating future diseases, it should not be too difficult to carry out that analysis.

Jacqui Smith: Those arguments have been heard across Government. This matter is not solely the responsibility of the Department of Health and it could not be delivered by the joint effort of that Department and the DFEE; as my hon. Friend knows, Treasury decisions are also involved.

My hon. Friend stressed the importance of teaching children how to cook. That often helps children, when they become adults, to prepare healthy food. We are introducing food to the curriculum in various ways, including the Government's focus on food, which has given pupils hands-on experience of cooking with professionals. The programme has used a fully equipped bus, which has visited more than 100 schools and prepared food for a reception at No. 10 Downing street. The cooking for kids initiative, which has benefited more than 10,000 children since its launch in February 1999, is also significant. However, we still have further to go.

We should come up with new ways in which schools and external agencies can help children to learn the important skill of cooking. A whole-school approach to healthy eating and to life style is vital in the promotion of good health among schoolchildren. I hope that that is demonstrated by the initiatives in which we are participating. We want to play a full part in the new national task force for children's nutrition, which was recently announced by my hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health.

The hon. Member for Guildford had a bit of a cheek, dare I say it, when he emphasised the importance of increased capital spending on school kitchens. However, he has a point; we should compare this Government's approach to capital spending with that of the previous Government. We are already making money available through the new deal for schools. Kitchens and dining areas are important because children are more likely to eat a school meal if the dining area is pleasant and the kitchen provides good food.

Under the new deal for schools, the Department is currently funding 42 projects that involve a major kitchen or dining area component. That investment is worth more than £12.5 million, and 117 schools are benefiting.

To give just one example, in an infant school in Halton, new deal for schools money is funding the provision of a new kitchen, serving directly on to the dining area. The school, which has a high proportion of pupils on free school meals, will now be able to provide all its pupils with hot food in comfortable surroundings, whereas previously meals had to be imported from a nearby school.

Despite the significant increases in funding, it will not be possible for all schools to receive that amount of investment. Sometimes even a lick of paint or imaginative decoration by the children can make all the difference to a dining area. I agree that we must give children good surroundings if we are to encourage them to take their school meals.

Mr. Drew: The key point is access to the community. I know that there are health and safety issues and environmental health issues, but if the facilities could be made more widely available, I am sure that we would all have the benefit of the virtuous circle.

Jacqui Smith: My hon. Friend is right. He will know that we are trying to promote access to school facilities for the community in a range of ways.

I welcome the opportunity that the debate has given us to talk about school meals and food issues in the education service generally. The ground-breaking introduction of nutritional standards for school lunches provides an exciting opportunity for the education service, in tandem with the opportunity provided by the delegation of school meal budgets. Caterers and all those involved in the provision of school food can use this opportunity to review and update their services. It is a focus from which I hope many new initiatives will spring, such as many of the good suggestions that have been made in the debate today, to improve the health and educational chances of our young people. I hope and believe that this work will herald a new, modern era for school meals.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-seven minutes past Five o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 27 June 2000

[MR. MICHAEL J. MARTIN *in the Chair*]

RAF Chinook Crash

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Betts.*]

10 am

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): I wish to speak on a matter of some importance, and I am somewhat dismayed to note that a Minister is not yet here to reply. I hope that a Minister will attend and listen to what is said, rather than simply reading a prepared text.

This is not a party political issue. It is a time not for recrimination, but for common sense and justice. The incident occurred on the watch of one Government and must be dealt with on that of another. That is why I, as an hon. Member without a party, have the privilege of making the case for action by the Ministry of Defence. [*Interruption.*] I am delighted to see that the Minister has now joined us.

On 2 June 1994, the RAF Chinook helicopter ZD576 crashed on the Mull of Kintyre, killing all 29 people on board, most of whom were Army and police intelligence officers based in Northern Ireland. Why they were travelling together in one aircraft, and thereby presenting a potential target for sabotage, is another issue. The crash was the worst peacetime accident in RAF history, and inquiries were begun immediately. The helicopter was not carrying a black box recorder, and the only evidence was in the thousands of pieces of wreckage lying on the hillside.

The Scottish fatal accident inquiry said that the cause of the crash could not be determined, and the RAF board of inquiry concluded that the most probable cause was the crew's selecting an inappropriate rate of climb for safe overflight of the mull. However, it also concluded that there were

> many potential causes of the accident,

and was "unable to determine" a definite cause. Because they were dead, the two pilots, Flight Lieutenants Jonathan Tapper and Rick Cook, were not represented at the inquiry, and nor were their families. That was how the rules stood in those days.

The report was couched in terms of probabilities, rather than the certainties or near certainties that are required to sustain a verdict of gross negligence. The rules in force at that time stated that

> only in cases in which there is absolutely no doubt whatsoever should deceased aircrew be found negligent.

However, two air marshals, Sir William Wratten and Sir John Day—the senior officer responsible for Chinooks—had the authority to overrule the verdict of the board of inquiry, and accused the pilots of "gross negligence" in not obeying helicopter flying rules. Sir William, who has now retired, has not changed his mind. Two weeks ago, he wrote in *The Sunday Times*:

> we stand by every word we wrote.

Mr. Frank Cook (Stockton, North): I am grateful to the very honourable Gentleman and commend him for securing today's debate. However, I must apologise to him and other hon. Members—I am unable to attend the entire debate because I am chairing this morning's sitting of the Finance Bill Standing Committee, which begins at 10.30 am.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, in overruling the board of inquiry, the reviewing officers ignited a torch that has burnt vividly, and which has been fuelled by disinformation and the changing and progressively evasive attitude of the Ministry of Defence? That attitude has resulted in 90 signatures on an early-day motion, 60 letters to Ministers, 500 articles published in prominent newspapers and magazines in less than two years, and 100 reports on television and radio. Does the hon. Gentleman also agree, and will he impress on the Minister, that the torch of inquiry that has been fuelled by the disinformation and evasive tactics of the Ministry of Defence can be extinguished only by truth and openness?

Mr. Bell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention—he makes some sound points. Some people should be searching their consciences because, as I shall explain, this issue will not go away. It will remain until it is satisfactorily resolved.

The air marshals stood by what they wrote, but many people were disturbed by the ruling, and their doubts have increased as the years have passed. They include former and serving officers of the RAF, people with expertise in the flying characteristics of the Chinook, and, of course, the families of the two dead pilots—outstandingly well qualified young men, both cleared for special forces operations, who stood accused of killing 27 others. The verdict was close to manslaughter, or worse.

Ever since the verdict, the families, led by Michael Tapper, father of Jonathan Tapper, and John Cook, father of Rick Cook, have been campaigning to have it set aside. It dishonours their sons and is, in my view, unsafe. Concerns have been expressed by a growing number of parliamentarians and others, joined together in the newly-formed Mull of Kintyre group under the excellent chairmanship of Lord Chalfont. They include senior members of the House of Lords and of this House. I am delighted to see so many hon. Members in the Chamber today.

In the past year, 89 Members of Parliament signed an early-day motion, proposed by the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock), calling on the Government to reopen the board of inquiry. Only last week, Sir Malcolm Rifkind, who was Secretary of State for Defence at the time of the inquiry, went to see the Secretary of State for Defence to express his concerns about the massive uncertainty surrounding the case. That was a highly unusual turn of events, and I hope that its meaning was not lost on the Secretary of State and other Defence Ministers, including the Minister who is here today.

So far, the demand for a reopening of the inquiry has been stonewalled by the Ministry, on the grounds that there is no new evidence. I hope that the Minister will not repeat that argument today, because it is unsustainable. A mass of new evidence has come to light that undermines the verdict against the pilots, including the evidence of two accidents in the United States

[Mr. Bell]

involving the same type of Chinook. That evidence was not available to the RAF's board of inquiry, because the accidents had not then happened.

The first accident took place in 1996. A US army Chinook crashed in Kentucky, killing all five crew members. Accident investigators ruled out technical malfunction and blamed the crew. However, a subsequent investigation revealed that a technical malfunction had been overlooked. The families successfully sued Boeing for more than $4 million. At this point, I should say that we are talking not about litigation, but about natural justice. The case showed that investigators can make mistakes.

The second case, which occurred in 1997 near Corpus Christi in Texas, was equally disturbing, although it involved a crash that, mercifully, did not happen. A Chinook was being flown by four experienced crew in clear weather. At 1,100 ft, it suddenly and inexplicably flipped upside down. What happened next is best described by one of the pilots, Pat Nield, in his own words:

> The aircraft was tracked really smooth: it flew better than anything I'd ever flown out of Corpus. I was looking down at the map when I felt the nose pitch down, and I got a bit of a shudder. I looked up and saw that the airspeed had picked up...the nose pitched up and continued to yaw really strong. At this point I knew things were really bad. All of a sudden, the aircraft just snapped over, it felt like it went upside down. Maps were flying everywhere. I went ahead and got on the controls, but nothing would bite ... I couldn't see inside the aircraft because everything was shaking too much. There was lots of noise, lots of vibration.

At about 250 ft above the ground, the pilots managed to wrestle back control of the aircraft and brought it safely down. Despite eyewitness accounts and months of investigation, the cause of the incident was never found. I ask hon. Members: if the crew had not regained control and had been killed in the resulting crash, who would have defended them against the charge of pilot error, or of gross negligence, in the absence of proof of a technical malfunction? What is the mindset in such cases—"blame the dead"?

In *The Sunday Times* last Sunday, John Nichol, a Gulf war hero and RAF navigator for 15 years, described a similar incident. A Tornado in which he was flying malfunctioned on take-off, but responded just seconds from disaster. He asked:

> If I had not been so fortunate on the day my aircraft did something it shouldn't, I wonder who would be defending my reputation now.

That is the whole point. We have here a grave situation—which denies natural justice, and is of concern to all aircrew—in which pilots are presumed to be guilty unless proven innocent.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): The hon. Gentleman is discussing technical concerns about the Chinook. Does he agree that his argument is enhanced by the work that has been carried out by many aeronautical experts, including my constituent, Captain Ralph Kohn, who is a fellow of the Royal Aeronautical Society?

Mr. Bell: I am indeed aware of that. I shall discuss expert testimony later.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): During the hon. Gentleman's powerful speech, he referred to other people's concerns. Contemporaries of the two pilots thought that they were very competent pilots, and share the concern on the grounds that, as they might put it, "There, but for the grace of God, go we."

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that point, but I should add that, shortly before the flight, one of the two pilots expressed concern about the condition of the aircraft in question.

The incident over Corpus Christi was an extreme case of what is called a UFCM—an uncommanded flying control movement—which occurs when, in effect, an aircraft takes on a life of its own and defies all the actions of its pilots. During the past seven months, with the crash of Chinook ZD576 in mind, I have set out on a patient paperchase and tabled many written questions to the Ministry of Defence about UFCMs. On 8 December 1999, I asked the Secretary of State for Defence whether he would list the incidents of UFCMs that were reported by RAF pilots since 1994 and break them down by helicopter type. The list of such movements in Chinooks is revealing and the numbers are eloquent. There were six in 1994, five in 1995, six in 1996, five in 1997, seven in 1998 and six up to the relevant date in 1999. There is a steady pattern, which suggests something disturbing and mysterious. There have been 35 incidents in all, the cause of six of which was never found.

On 28 January 2000, I tabled a written question asking whether the air accidents investigation branch, which acted as the technical adviser to the RAF board of inquiry, had

> considered and...ruled out the possibility of an uncommanded flying control movement, that left no trace as having occurred prior to the fatal crash of RAF Chinook ZD576.—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 28 January 2000; Vol. 343, c. 384W.]

The Minister for the Armed Forces said that he would answer my question in a letter that he would place in the Library. That letter said:

> The possibilities of pre-impact systems jam or detachment of control pallet inserts were not positively dismissible...The Board could not dismiss other possible causes of a control restriction...but the most probable flight path of the aircraft indicated that the controls were functioning at impact...and the Board of Inquiry concluded that the most probable cause of the accident was that the crew selected an inappropriate rate of climb.

I draw the attention of hon. Members and the Minister to the language that is used by the board of inquiry. It is the language of probabilities. That language is not sufficient to sustain the verdict of gross negligence to which the air marshals put their names. I do not know them personally, and I have no doubt that they are honourable men, but why they departed from the safer area of probabilities to the less defensible ground of certainty or near certainty that is required for a conviction—make no mistake about it, a verdict of gross negligence involves a conviction—remains a mystery to me and to many others; hence the campaign, the unease among the families and hon. Members, the Mull of Kintyre group and this Adjournment debate.

I have seen an internal MOD memorandum advising that the best answer to my questions, and to other questions about the verdict of gross negligence, is the fact that, prior to the crash, no messages or signals indicating that there was an emergency on the Chinook were sent. My answer to that suggestion is that, as with

the Kentucky and Corpus Christi incidents, no such messages would have been sent. The pilots would have been too busy fighting to regain control during the very few seconds that were available. It was literally a matter of life and death.

Most hon. Members, including myself, are laymen in these matters—we acknowledge that. However, the beginning of wisdom is to know how much one does not know. We pay heed to the experts, and our doubts were reinforced earlier this year in a report by three fellows of the Royal Aeronautical Society, who concluded that the verdict of pilot negligence in the case of the Mull of Kintyre crash was not sustainable in light of evidence that pointed to other problems that might have caused it. Air Marshals Sir William Wratten and Sir John Day resigned from the society, accusing it of bias and failure to publish relevant and balanced information. The case has shaken, and continues to shake, the aviation and aeronautical establishments and, I do not doubt, the Royal Air Force. The reputation of the air marshals is at stake and both men have served the state, but the pilots also served their country, with no less dedication, in the short time that fate allowed them.

I shall be brief. One of my other and, so far, unsuccessful campaigns is for shorter speeches and I want other hon. Members to have an opportunity to contribute. Before I finish, I have an interest to declare. With the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key), whom I am delighted to see in his place, I am a patron of the Association of Air Force Wives. That admirable organisation, which operates regardless of rank, acts as a channel between the Royal Air Force and its families and helps the RAF to work better. It deals mainly with welfare matters but has a wider role in its involvement in the RAF's exercise of its duty of care. It is important not only to serving men and women, especially aircrew, but to RAF families. When bad things happen—as they do from time to time, because that is the way of the world—it ensures that matters are dealt with fairly, equitably, severely if necessary, but without prejudice. That applies especially in this case and as much to the dead as to the living—perhaps more to the dead, because they are not here to make the case for themselves. It is up to us to do that for them.

To those who argue that the Royal Air Force has better things to do with its time than to reopen an inquiry into a crash that happened six years ago, I would say that it has not, and that perhaps this case matters more than anything else. The way in which it is dealt with will tell all of us, especially serving aircrew, a great deal about the meaning of the duty of care in today's expeditionary Royal Air Force in the new millennium.

Repeated representations to the Ministry of Defence have been met with a blanket and unworthy refusal to reconsider. The argument is that the crash of ZD576 happened such a long time ago that the issue is time-expired and there is nothing more to be said about it. However, it is not time-expired and there is a great deal more to be said about it.

This is a matter of principle, honour and natural justice, which is never time-expired. It is not a commodity with a shelf life. It is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. The board of inquiry should be reopened with a view to setting aside the verdict of gross negligence. I know that I speak for all members of the Mull of Kintyre group in insisting that the matter does not go away, because our swords will not sleep in our hands until it is properly dealt with.

10.17 am

Mrs. Ray Michie (Argyll and Bute): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute briefly to the debate, which I congratulate the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) on securing. It concerns a matter so serious that it will return to haunt us again and again until it has been properly resolved.

I am sure that hon. Members will be aware that the appalling tragedy occurred in my constituency. On that fateful evening on 2 June 1994, a Chinook helicopter crashed into the Mull of Kintyre, killing all on board—25 passengers, Ulster's most senior intelligence personnel, and four crew. The pilots were highly experienced, having flown many hours in Chinook helicopters.

At the time, I was in close contact not only with the local emergency services but with the then Minister of State for the Armed Forces, the right hon. Jeremy Hanley, who promised a full inquiry. Not only was it necessary to try to establish the cause of the accident, but, in the immediate aftermath, the question was being asked why so many experts—the cream of Ulster intelligence—were crammed into one aircraft. We were subsequently told that that was not a departure from standard practice.

It was thought locally at the time that the helicopter might have been heading for Machrihanish RAF station because the normal flight path north to Inverness and Fort George would have been over the water following the west coast of Scotland. Why, therefore, did it not turn left as it would usually have done? My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) has also subsequently pursued the matter in the interests of justice.

It is not for me to rehearse all the technical details, but many questions remain unanswered. Was there an equipment failure? Were the pilots unable to manoeuvre the machine? Why was it flying so low? The weather does not appear to have been a crucial factor. I and my constituents remain deeply troubled that, in the absence of eye-witnesses to the crash, accident data and cockpit voice recorders, and despite the conclusions of the RAF's internal inquiry, which did not attribute blame, and the sheriff at the fatal accident inquiry in Paisley, which cleared both pilots of blame, the final verdict was, extraordinarily, that both pilots had been negligent to a gross degree. We were stunned.

The heather is now beginning to grow again on the scorched hillside where the memorial cairn stands. However, the scars on that hillside will never completely disappear, and the pain of the families and friends of the pilots will remain until this shameful and sorry affair is corrected. The verdict is a serious miscarriage of justice. The bottom line is that there is no proof positive that the pilots were negligent. So many people—experts, lay people, and my constituents who mourned deeply with the relatives—believe that the verdict, the accusation, is unsafe and should be withdrawn forthwith. I hope that the Ministry of Defence and the Minister—a considerate, thinking person—will look at the matter again. If they do withdraw the verdict, they will be highly commended and congratulated on doing so.

10.22 am

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): I shall let hon. Members into a not-too-well-guarded secret. When I spoke yesterday to the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell)—I learned from a previous intervention that he is a very honourable gentleman, and I would certainly subscribe to that—he said that he intended to speak for 17 minutes. Not only did he do that, he also took all interventions. He has said that he is running a campaign for shorter speeches, and within his 17 minutes plus interventions he has covered practically all the ground that the rest of us might wish to touch on.

I wish to make a single point. There is a fundamental difference between the position of those of us contributing to the debate and the unfortunate position in which my hon. Friend the Minister finds himself. We are disputing the Ministry's finding that there was gross negligence on the part of the pilots. To win, we need only establish doubt in one area, however small. The Government, given the position that they have adopted, to which I shall return in a moment, have to refute everything put forward. They cannot concede any of the doubts that people raise. They are, therefore, in the position in which the country found itself in the inter-war period, when poor old Stanley Baldwin said to the nation, "The bomber will get through". As my hon. Friend the Member for Tatton said, this campaign will get through: doubt will be established to a degree that the judgment must be overturned.

The Ministry of Defence put forward three technical arguments in an attempt to shore up its position. It says that, if one examines the simulation model that the manufacturer constructed for all those who wished to observe it, one can conclude that there was nothing wrong with the aircraft itself. However, the simulation model assumed that the pilots were in control, and doubt has already been cast on that. It ignores what we know from the wreckage about the position of the rudder, it ignores what we know about the intercom being switched off, when it was assumed that it was switched on, and it ignores the huge surge that occurs in these engines some of the time. When the Ministry of Defence did its own simulation, it did not do it on a Chinook model, nor did it even use a twin-motor helicopter. Therefore, there is at least a question mark over the safety of the plane.

What about the software—the FADEC system? We now know, although the inquiry did not know at the time—it found differently from the Ministry of Defence judgment—that the Ministry of Defence was suing the software suppliers. Does that not suggest that only someone very foolish or with much to hide would continue to maintain the position held by the Ministry of Defence?

What about the tactical air navigation system? There is a dispute about whether it was switched on. Whether on or off, we know that it was not much good in detecting where the crash had taken place.

The Ministry of Defence depends on those three areas of technical information in rebutting the simplest of questions: is there not enough doubt to overthrow the Ministry's decision? Those three technical areas look pretty shaky to me, a layman.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tatton referred to the problems with the Chinook reported since the crash, and to the difficulties that pilots have had in flying it. In one example the pilot thought that the aircraft had turned 180 deg. The one thing that my hon. Friend may have missed saying was that, when the pilots got that aircraft safely back to base, no one could account for that extraordinary manoeuvre. As he said, had it crashed, there would have been an all-too-easy answer to put forward in the public debate.

We come to the extraordinary role being played by Sir William Wratten in the public debate in selecting information that is good for his cause, while accusing us of doing exactly the same. That brings me back to the point that I wish to contribute to the debate. If we merely want to establish doubt, selecting information is what we are about. Only if one is in what I regard as the impossible position of saying that there is not reasonable doubt here can one not be caught in the game of selecting information to support one's case.

Of course, the Ministry is up against it with the crash, which was the worst in peacetime. My hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie) said that the plane was carrying some of the crown jewels of our security services, so one can imagine the horror back at base when what had occurred was reported, but that still does not account for the Ministry of Defence's stance.

At the moment, our campaign is focused narrowly on having an injustice rectified. However, what the Ministry must realise is that the longer the campaign goes on, the more serious the questions raised about the Ministry itself will be. We must ask whether Ministers would be able to overturn the decision, even if they wanted to, given the stance taken by senior officials in the Department. My experiences as a Minister do not rank with the seriousness of the matter, but departmental culture and the civil service hierarchy can lead such officials to take positions that thwart the wishes of Ministers.

Soon after the election, I asked the Department of Social Security to carry out a survey of fraud relating to family credit, a benefit that we were about to lose to the Treasury. In the 14 weeks towards the end of my period in Government, during which I had responsibility for dealing with fraud, I insisted that the benefit inquiry be undertaken. Not so long ago, I learned in this Chamber that, as soon as I had ceased to be Minister, papers went out to the Minister who succeeded me, and the decision was overthrown. I do not think for one moment that the Minister who succeeded me knew that the decision that he had made overthrew mine, but the Department was determined that the review should not take place, and it has not taken place.

Compared with what we are discussing today, that is an unimportant matter, but the Government should feel uneasy. We are coming to the end of the beginning of our campaign to have this decision overturned. The longer our campaign continues, the more serious it will become. It will move from a simple matter of rectifying a gross injustice to the more fundamental question of how Departments of State can operate against elected Ministers. If we do not win on the crucial point of natural justice soon, the campaign will fan out to the bigger issue. In that scenario, there will be some big losers.

10.32 am

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I support the moves made by the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) to raise this issue. I was in the Ministry of Defence, as special adviser to the Secretary of State, when the crash happened. Since the general election in 1997, I have been on the Defence Committee and have supported my right hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot) and the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) in the efforts that they and the hon. Member for Tatton have made to have the issue reopened.

The more I have examined the issue, the clearer it has become that the judgment of the Royal Air Force's board of inquiry and of the two senior officers concerned turns on the issue of doubt. At the fatal accident inquiry, the sheriff found that he could not, on the balance of probabilities, find the pilots guilty of negligence. The criminal standard of proof—beyond reasonable doubt—was not used, so in effect that represents a criminal conviction hanging over the pilots' reputation, as the hon. Member for Tatton said. The RAF's regulations stipulate that there should be "no doubt whatsoever" if dead pilots are to be found guilty of gross negligence. The evidence simply does not stack up. The verdict cannot reasonably be sustained.

How did we get into such a position? As the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) said, we need produce only one interpretation of events that is realistic, or even possible, for that verdict to fall. A most experienced Chinook pilot, Squadron Leader Bob Burke, who has taken a prolonged interest in the matter, has described a scenario that would fit the description of the drama that may have occurred on the aircraft as it approached the Mull of Kintyre, and the reason why it did not turn to follow the sea route to Inverness, as expected. He said that seats in the Chinooks are dampened to work against the vibrations of the aircraft; if there is an on-board emergency, the dampening reinforces the bouncing motion, which makes control of the aircraft much more difficult. The hon. Member for Tatton said that the same thing had happened in an accident in the United States.

Reference was made to the Ministry of Defence briefing note, which stated that one reason for rebutting the views of those of us who have doubts about the accident was that no emergency signals were given. I understand that the IFF—identification friend or foe—setting was within one digit of the code used to signal an emergency on the aircraft; that is a small piece of evidence to rebut the Ministry of Defence position.

I want to examine the influences on Air Marshal Day and Air Marshal Wratten that led to their taking what now seems an extraordinary decision to overturn the verdict of the wing commander who conducted the board of inquiry and fly in the face of the evidence before them—in effect, to gainsay the sheriff who conducted the fatal accident inquiry. The first influence is the appalling embarrassment of the Royal Air Force being involved in an accident that killed the prime movers in internal security in Northern Ireland, which was a disaster for those operations. The second influence is the informal reputation of the special focus flight of the Royal Air Force—pilots who fly at the "full envelope" of their experience and ability. My experience is informal and entirely subjective, but their reputation when I was in the Army was that they were the best pilots. We would get them to do more for us than other pilots flying helicopters in the services because of their unique ability.

Perhaps it was thought that a lesson had to be learnt, that the culture in the SF flight had to be curbed, and it would be done on the back of the verdict. That may have been in the back of the air marshals' mind, but it would have been an unfair lesson if the verdict had been used for that purpose.

There is also the problem that if the pilots were not responsible, the focus would be on the management of the Chinook fleet. The Royal Air Force management was taking proper command decisions about the operational employment of the Chinook fleet at the time. There was the enormous difficulty of sending aircraft to Boeing to be upgraded from Chinook 1 to Chinook 2. There were all sorts of problems involved in bringing Chinook 2 into the fleet. There was thus an operational shortage of Chinook aircraft available for service on operations in Bosnia, Northern Ireland and elsewhere. I believe that the fleet was being flown with an acceptance of risk that those responsible would not have accepted in other circumstances. The decisions taken were entirely proper operational decisions.

There has to be a balance of risk in such circumstances, and if the helicopter is not working at its optimum but is still needed on operations in Bosnia, a decision has to be taken whether to use it. In my judgment, the proper decision was taken. If a small amount of risk has been accepted and an accident happens, one is faced with a problem. It takes a brave person to turn round and say, "Well, we knew we were managing this risk, but we accepted it, knowing that there were difficulties with how the Chinook 2 fleet was being brought into operation in the Royal Air Force."

I make those few points, which are based on my experience, simply to suggest why the air marshals may have arrived at their decision. One must accept the point that Air Marshal Wratten made in another inquiry. As I understand it, he refused to accept the verdict of gross negligence by a pilot in a single-seater aircraft, because he might have had an epileptic fit before he flew his aircraft into the side of a cliff. That is the standard of proof that he requires in such judgments. However, he says in this case that he was unable to find any explanation except gross negligence. That simply does not stack up. In this case, a verdict of "no doubt whatsoever" cannot be established.

The Ministry of Defence is understandably anxious to support the RAF chain of command. Of course Ministers do not want to let down air marshals who have put themselves in an exposed position. Perhaps it is to Ministers' credit that their initial reaction is to try to find ways of supporting the chain of command and discipline within the Royal Air Force. However, the verdict of "no doubt whatsoever" is simply not sustainable in this case, and it is time to reconsider it.

10.41 am

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): I congratulate the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) on securing this debate. I am sorry that I missed his remarks because I was delayed. However, I have a rough idea of what has been said, as a number of hon. Members have been pursuing

[Mr. Martin O'Neill]

the issue for some time. When I first raised it in February 1997, in a debate on the RAF, I took the trouble of warning the relevant Minister that I planned to do so and I expected a reasonably full reply. To say that I was rather annoyed when I did not receive such a reply on the night of the debate is an understatement.

Those days are gone. Now we receive replies whenever we want them, and no end of briefings. In recent years, the Ministry of Defence has not been slow to make its case.

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire): This is an unusual intervention. As the Minister who gave the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) that reply in 1997, I want to take this opportunity to apologise to him. I was wrong to give an inadequate reply and in the stance that I took as a Minister. A gross injustice has been committed and it must be put right.

Mr. O'Neill: I am grateful for that intervention. It takes a great deal of political courage to make such a statement, and I appreciate it. I was not making cheap capital out of the issue, although I was rather annoyed at the time. I imagine that it is not easy for people to move from government to opposition. They must reflect on decisions to which they were party that they subsequently felt were wrong. It is significant that so many former Ministers think differently on this issue now that they have left office.

I shall not cover the technical details again, because we have already had the "too fast, too low, in bad weather" debate. Those issues have been addressed. The question of "no doubt whatsoever" must be the starting point.

There was some disquiet on the part of the Tapper family about what a fatal accident inquiry involved, whether a Scottish sheriff was like an English high sheriff and so on. I first became interested in the issue because of Mr. Tapper's concerns. I was able to allay the family's fears and I think that there was a sigh of relief when the FAI result came out. When they discovered the somersault that was done in the MOD following the board of inquiry, there was not just disquiet but anger. However, perhaps we have occasionally focused unduly on the plight of the two pilots and not thought enough about the two other service personnel who lost their lives, to say nothing of the 25 other people who were lost.

This morning, it was said that the incident was the biggest peacetime accident in RAF history. I do not agree that the accident took place in peacetime. We were in the middle of a war, and some of the most valuable assets involved in that war died as a result of the accident. At the time, most of us assumed that terrorist sabotage was involved. Thankfully, no such attack was shown to have taken place. It is significant that our debate takes place the day after the ground-breaking evidence about the armaments cache of the IRA was provided to the investigation team. Yesterday's evidence justifies the belief that that war may have ended. We no longer live in circumstances that could be regarded as war.

The hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) said that when the RAF's resources were placed under strain, judgments had to be made and equipment had to be employed even though the RAF was not 100 per cent. certain about its safety, if the risks were calculable and the chance of fatalities was assumed to be minimal. As I understand it, those harsh judgments must be made in times of such stress. That supplies a context for some of the decisions and the reactions of some of the personnel involved.

I do not question the probity of the individuals who took the decisions, but I associate myself with the criticisms of opinions presented as facts. Such criticisms have been made repeatedly in the columns of respectable journals such as *Computer Weekly*, which went to great lengths to examine the software debate.

I have always been uneasy about the decision. I am not in a position to say whether those men were innocent, and I cannot say that there is no doubt whatever. However, I think that we should reopen the issue and start an independent inquiry that is acceptable to all concerned.

For a long time, some felt that we should not rake over the coals again, because an inquiry would unduly distress the families of the 25 security personnel, disquiet those of the two other service personnel, and at best reach a verdict that was merely satisfactory to the families of Mr. Cook and Mr. Tapper. Those days are past. We are now hearing from several families who want to find out once and for all why their loved ones died and whether anyone was responsible.

The Government must take a step of the character that the Opposition Chief Whip showed this morning. I support the Government, and some of my closest and oldest friends have been responsible for laying out their case. I have had passionate and occasionally distressing arguments with some Ministers, but not with my good friend the Under-Secretary. My fierce arguments about the issue with previous incumbents have given me no pleasure.

The security argument that if this incident had been shown to be the fault of the RAF, it would have been a propaganda coup for the IRA, or the forces of terrorism in Northern Ireland, no longer applies. There was also an argument that, if it had been shown to be caused by narrow procurement considerations—the availability of kit, the expenditure on defence— people could have made great political capital out of that. Those issues are no longer relevant.

We must return to the fundamental point that a great deal more evidence has emerged since the decision was handed down by the air marshals. I am sure that the Minister will attempt to discredit some, if not all, of that evidence. Time will probably prevent him from dealing with it all. However, it is fair to say that the evidence must be looked at dispassionately. Too many people in the Ministry of Defence have a vested interest in continuing to rubbish the evidence without adequate examination. Such examination can be afforded only by a full, open, credible inquiry. The form of inquiry that was held behind closed doors at the MOD is now a thing of the past. The families concerned would now have access to legal representation and there would be a proper weighing of the evidence by people other than those who take the final decision. That was not available at the time of the inquiry, and it should be available now.

I urge the Government to consider carefully the possibility of setting up an inquiry that would enjoy the confidence of the families of all concerned, of service personnel and, indeed, of the air marshals, whose credibility would be put on the line. The wealth of evidence that has emerged since the original decision demands reconsideration, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will look sympathetically at this issue.

10.52 am

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): I am delighted to have the opportunity to take part in this debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) on securing it. This important subject has raised a great deal of concern among Members of Parliament as well as outside the House.

The concern relates to whether this is a case of the top brass in the armed services trying to divert blame from themselves, for their faults, on to those who, sadly, are no longer in a position to defend themselves. There are considerable worries that that might be behind the failure to reopen the inquiry.

My interest in the case first arose from a Public Accounts Committee hearing following a National Audit Office report on the way in which new military software and hardware was brought into use following its development. A large part of that hearing related to the Chinook accident. People outside this Chamber might think that they have identified the cause of this tragic accident as pilot error, but no one in this debate has suggested that the cause has yet been properly identified. I say that because I do not believe that it has been identified in any direction. I am not going to suggest that the cause has been identified as a technical malfunction. Everyone has accepted that it is at least possible that the cause was pilot error. However, the point is that there is no proof either way. A high degree of doubt still exists as to the real cause, and I want to concentrate on one significant aspect of that doubt.

The FADEC system—fully automated digital electronic control system—was introduced as a new engine control system in Chinook. The way in which that system was tested is of interest for today's debate. The system was to be tested by the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency based at Boscombe Down, which gave a contract to EDS-Scicon to look at the software. EDS-Scicon decided to use a system of testing known as static code analysis. Having tried to test the code by that method for some time, once those in the EDS-Scicon team had got through about 18 per cent. of the code they gave up. At one point they said that they were so concerned about the safety implications of their findings that they would stop testing and raise their concerns immediately with Hawker Siddeley, even though they had got only a short way through it. Later on they said that there was

> an unquantifiable risk associated with the unverifiable nature of FADEC software.

They concluded that the rewriting of that software was—I use the word advisedly—"essential". When one is told that the tests on one's software have shown that its rewriting is essential, one can accept that suggestion, go through a rewrite and try to improve it; or one can do what the MOD did, which was to say that the testing method was unacceptable and use an alternative method.

Having seen that the static code analysis threw up a huge number of problems, the MOD decided instead to go in for dynamic testing of the code. It put the code through 70,000 hours of dynamic testing and, when that failed to throw up any problems, said that that proved that FADEC was a safe system for introduction. Since then, I understand that it has gone through over 100,000 hours of operational use, and the MOD is still saying that it has shown up no problems.

Those figures may sound large—testing a computer programme for several thousand hours without showing up any errors—but we have recently all become aware of a problem in the air traffic control system, which apparently showed up a fault in the software for the first time after 20 years. Those of us who have been involved in writing or analysing computer programmes know only too well that sometimes it takes a long time for a bug to show up and that sometimes circumstances occur so infrequently that a failure in the programme takes a long time to come to light. Therefore, the suggestion that the dynamic testing of this system over some 200,000 hours is sufficient to prove beyond all doubt that the system is safe in all circumstances seems a ludicrous exaggeration. The MOD should certainly take that into account in considering this sad accident.

The MOD's argument is that there has been no other FADEC-related failure and that, therefore, it must be a safe system. However, just before its meeting, the Public Accounts Committee was privileged to receive a letter from three members of the Select Committee on Defence, in which they made the following points. They say that after the Chinook Mk 2 was brought into operational service in November 1993

> pilots experienced serious FADEC-related problems. Engines would cut out or suddenly run out of control. Sometimes these problems left no trace.

The members of the Defence Committee quoted from an internal MOD memo, dated 11 January 1995, in which Captain Brougham of the Procurement Executive stated that the Chinook Mk 2 suffered from

> a series of problems...many of which were traced eventually back to software design and systems integration problems.

Indeed, according to the letter from the members of Committee, the board of inquiry concluded:

> Nevertheless, an unforeseen technical malfunction, which would not necessarily have left any physical evidence, remained a possibility and could not be ruled out.

I do not suggest that any of that proves that FADEC was the cause of the accident. Sadly, we will probably never know whether that was so. Equally, however, we cannot say that FADEC was not the cause of the accident.

The issue is not simply a technical one concerning computer software, but one of fairness and justice. What happened is a travesty of justice, and the matter must not be left where it is. That would be grossly unfair—not only to the two pilots concerned, but, almost more importantly, to their families. The inquiry must be reopened.

11.1 am

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): We are not here today to question the honour or integrity of air marshals, nor are we discussing money or compensation. This is about natural justice, future morale in the Royal Air Force and

[Mr. Robert Key]

a particular failure of Government. I congratulate the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) on securing this important debate.

I was surprised by Air Marshal Sir William Wratten's article in *The Sunday Times* of 18 June. He stated:

we stand by every word we wrote in reaching the judgment we did.

He then demolished his own case by saying:

there is inevitably a degree of speculation as to the precise details of the events prior to impact.

He also said:

Why they elected to ignore the safe options open to them and pursue the one imposing the ultimate danger, we shall never know.

But that is all that we are saying. The RAF's own rules state that there must be "no doubt whatsoever"—a higher standard of proof than that required for murder.

Sir William also wrote:

The evidence taken by the board of inquiry with witnesses under oath, cannot now be replaced by hypotheses.

Yet that is precisely what he and Air Marshal Day did when they overturned the verdict of the board of inquiry and substituted their own judgment. The air marshals have never explained why they did that—not even at the countless briefings that were given to some of us, and which they clearly found so laborious.

That is one of the many reasons why the board of inquiry should be reopened. I have a great deal of sympathy for the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy (Dr. Moonie). He has to hold the line maintained by his predecessors and others—including the previous Secretary of State, Lord Robertson, the right hon. Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid), the hon. Members for Warley (Mr. Spellar) and for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson), Lord Gilbert and Baroness Symons. The members of the Mull of Kintyre group represent a greater continuity of interest and experience in this matter than current Ministers or most of the officials concerned. We intend to stay put for some time yet.

The Chinook crash verdict has all the hallmarks of a miscarriage of justice. Opposition Members believe that it should be overturned, or, if that is not technically and legally possible, that a new inquiry should be established. In the end, the Prime Minister will have to square up to this matter. Whatever Defence Ministers say, either an independent inquiry should be held now, or the verdict should be overturned. Otherwise, the issue will rumble on with claim and counter-claim, which will undermine RAF morale for years to come.

Like the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), I too, as a Minister, have come up against the departmental culture and the civil servants who are the guardians of policy. Ministers come and go, but civil servants go on for ever. That is a great strength of the British system of government, but it can also be a great weakness. That weakness has been recognised by Sir Malcolm Rifkind, who was Secretary of State at the time, by my right hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot) who today gave a brave speech, and by Lord Trefgarne, who was also a Minister in the MOD. I, too have an interest in this matter—the reputation of Boscombe Down, where aircraft testing and evaluation are carried out, has been impugned.

Every time more evidence is produced, the MOD says either that it is not new or that it is irrelevant. The official line is to adopt a stonewalling position, but that is untenable. Sir Malcolm Rifkind said on "Channel 4 News" on 13 October 1999 that it was an error of judgment not to tell the fatal accident inquiry about the EDS-Scicon report, the 3 June Boscombe Down memorandum, which grounded the Chinook fleet, or the Textron case. I entirely agree. As recently as 19 June, on the "Today" programme, Sir William Wratten said:

We can never know precisely what happened.

Exactly so.

There are still some 38 Chinooks flying. No one suggests that they are unsafe aircraft, but it concerns me that the majority of them are still to be fitted with cockpit voice recorders or accident data recorders, which were promised for the fleet some years ago and mentioned in the Defence Committee's report. On 18 November 1997, I asked the Minister for the Armed Forces how the programme was going. I was told:

The equipment will be fitted to the first 6 aircraft by December 1998, and embodied on the rest of the fleet by late Spring 2000.—[*Official Report*, 18 November 1997; Vol. 301, c. *153*.]

On 19 May 1999, I asked where we had got to in this regard, and the Minister for the Armed Forces referred me to a letter from Sir Robert Walmsley, which stated:

We now plan on having the first six helicopters fitted by late November this year. The plan to fit the remainder of the Chinook fleet by the end of 2000, remains as previously advised.—[*Official Report*, 19 May 1999; Vol. 331, c. *345*.]

On 1 February, Baroness Park of Monmouth asked in the other place how things were getting along. She was told by Baroness Symons:

Cockpit Voice and Flight Data Recorders have now been fitted to four of the RAF Chinook Mark 2/2a Fleet ... This reflects the six-week period required to fit and test each aircraft.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 26 June 2000; Vol. 614, c. 51W.]

Most of the RAF's Chinooks have not been fitted with that equipment. What is the latest position?

Much has been made of the Defence Committee's report on the Chinook crash on the Mull of Kintyre, which was published on 13 May 1998. It has subsequently become clear that the Committee was misled—unintentionally, I am sure—on at least five, if not six, major points. Nevertheless, events have moved on and new evidence has appeared. That is important—we should not simply let the matter run, and people should not continue to believe that what the Defence Committee was told was beyond doubt. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) for drawing attention to the fact that members of the Defence Committee are fully aware of that.

The many technical arguments that have been used, not least in the press, are at least as important as the moral arguments. They point to doubt in this context. In the case of the Chinook that crashed, there was no flight data recorder, no cockpit voice recorder, no radar trace, no emergency call and no information from the wreckage that showed for certain how the aircraft was performing on its flight path on the approach to the mull. However, the decision was taken to blame the pilots and thereby to exonerate the equipment. From little more than two pieces of information—a waypoint changed in respect of an unknown position and a height reading, also taken in respect of an unknown position—

and in the absence of clear contradictory information, the MOD said that the aircraft was under control and travelling in a straight line directly towards the mull. Officials have made much of computer simulations, but they provided clues about the last three or four seconds only, and assumed that the aircraft was under control until that point.

The main issue is whether the pilots flew into the mull compulsorily or voluntarily, and no one can answer that on the basis of the wreckage. What is known is that the helicopter's FADEC engine control software had a history of problems, and some of the most serious design flaws were not drawn to the attention of accident investigators. In conducting its formal inquiry, the air accidents investigation branch relied on the assistance of FADEC's manufacturers, and was unaware that the Ministry of Defence was suing the manufacturers at the time of the crash for failing to show a duty of care in the design, development and testing of FADEC.

Those and many other concerns have not been addressed satisfactorily, and we are alarmed by the many incorrect statements that were made at various times.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Mr. Brian Trubshaw, the Concorde experimental pilot, who is a constituent of mine, wrote to me on 12 October 1999. The letter, a copy of which I sent to the Ministry of Defence, refers to the Chinook crash in the United States in 1996. It states:

> Subsequent investigation found electrical failure and the pilots were cleared of blame. Boeing settled for $4 million. The Minister—

that is the Minister for the Armed Forces—

> also makes no reference to Boeing's admittance that all Chinooks flying between 1992 and 1996 were subject to power problems due to salt water seepage. ZD576 flew over a lot of salt water.

It is clear that technical doubts exist about this particular Chinook.

Mr. Key: Of course, my hon. Friend is right and I am grateful to him, because he has saved me the need to go into further technical detail. Surely we have established beyond reasonable question that doubt, at least, surrounds the matter.

Why does this issue continue to matter to serving RAF personnel and their families? If you are in any doubt, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you need only read the personal testimonies of service men in the RAF, and I shall quote from one or two. The first states:

> After serving in the RAF myself for 12 years, I can't believe that the Government, MoD and RAF have ruined the reputations of a flight crew and their families in this manner. It makes me angry to think that the time I spent in the service of my country was for nothing...current service personnel and their families serving the country are apparently doing their "bit" for nothing.

Another e-mail states:

> As a former Flight Lt who served at RAF Aldergrove at the time of the crash, I most certainly support your campaign to have the pilots names cleared...the techniques of half-truths employed by the MoD in this case came as no surprise.

This issue really does matter. According to one submission to the military pilots' internet site,

> it may have been pilot error, it may have been something else. Until we know for sure what happened we can not blame the crew. A sad decision that reflects badly on both the Minister—

of the day—

> and those who advise him.

RAF Odiham's Chinook Wokka website is very good, but if one turns to the Links page, one discovers that the official RAF Odiham site has been deleted. Why has it been deleted?

What is the way forward? In the other place, Lord Jacobs asked the Government a number of questions. He asked whether the deceased pilots could be found guilty of gross negligence if the inquiry were reopened under current rules, and if not, why not. The Minister of State, Baroness Symons, replied:

> The terms under which the inquiry may be re-opened, in the event that new evidence came to light which justified that course, would need to be considered at that time.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 June 2000; Vol. 614, c. 29W.]

It seems that the Ministry of Defence is not closing the door on this inquiry.

There is one other clue to the way forward. William Tench, who was chief inspector of the Civil Aviation Authority in 1986, was commissioned in the late 1980s by Lord Trefgarne to review the procedures pertaining to service boards of inquiry. His report was never published, but it was critical of the process and stated:

> involvement of some Station Commanders, Air Officer Commanding's Staff Officers and even the Commander-in-Chief, is an unwelcome intrusion upon what should be the complete independence of the Board of Inquiry.

The relevance to ZD576 is that both air marshals concerned were involved in the introduction of the Mk 2 into service and some believe that their independence was compromised from the start.

I hope that the Minister will now agree to publish the Tench report. It would be possible to reopen the inquiry. The Secretary of State recently wrote to my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) and stated:

> The power to convene, or re-open a Board of Inquiry may be exercised by any two members of the Air Force Board of Defence Council—of which I am a member. The other 10 members include

Air Marshal Day and the Minister for the Armed Forces, the hon. Member for Warley.

I believe that the answer lies in Ministers' hands. There is no technical reason why they cannot reopen the inquiry and, in the interests of the dead pilots and of the future morale of Royal Air Force personnel and their families, those Ministers should now do so.

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): May I apologise to the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) for my inadvertent discourtesy in arriving late, and for the absence abroad on departmental business of my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces, who would otherwise have responded to the debate.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) and others who have contributed to it. As we pass the sixth anniversary of the tragic crash on the Mull of Kintyre, the matter continues to attract attention. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman's sincerity and the measured and thoughtful way in which he made his points.

[Dr. Lewis Moonie]

Much has been said and written about the accident over the years, often reflecting the unswerving determination of the fathers of the two dead pilots to clear their sons' names. None of us can feel anything but sympathy for them and their families. Equally, we remember the families of the other 27 people who died in that crash on 2 June 1994.

The hon. Member for Tatton and others raised a number of issues and I shall do my best to respond to them. I hope that he will forgive me if I say that none of them is new. Sadly, some of the reporting in the media about this accident has not reflected the profession's high standard of regard for proof and accuracy to which he subscribed with such distinction over the years. I want to take the opportunity to correct some of the inaccuracies.

The circumstances of the crash, as established by the Royal Air Force board of inquiry are as follows. On 2 June 1994, Chinook ZD576 departed from RAF Aldergrove on a flight to Fort George, Inverness. The aircraft had a crew of four and carried 25 military and civilian passengers who were to attend a conference in Inverness. It took off at 17.42 and at approximately 18.00 it crashed on the Mull of Kintyre. All on board were killed.

Before departing RAF Aldergrove, the pilots obtained an accurate weather forecast for their flight. They elected to carry out the flight under visual rather than instrument flight rules. Under visual rules, aircrew must remain clear of cloud and are required to keep the surface in sight. The weather forecast was suitable for a flight under those rules, but it warned of poor conditions affecting the Mull of Kintyre, as is often the case, and a bad weather contingency plan would have been required. The highest point of the Mull of Kintyre is 1,463 ft above sea level. Instrument flight rules stipulate that an aircraft must be least 1,000 ft above the height of the highest obstacle along the intended track if the crew is not in visual contact with the ground. Transit across the Irish sea was uneventful and conducted in clear conditions, but, as forecast, there was very low cloud and poor visibility around the mull.

A witness reported that, at a distance of about two nautical miles from the mull, or about 40 seconds from impact, the aircraft was flying at a height estimated to be between 200 and 400 ft. The witness estimated that visibility was about a mile and noted that the mull was covered in cloud and fog. Other witness statements from those who were on the mull at the time, including that of the lighthouse keeper, also refer to the fog and poor visibility.

The first waypoint or landmark that the pilots entered on the on-board navigational computer was the Mull of Kintyre lighthouse. At 0.95 nautical miles, or about 20 seconds before impact, the crew released the computer from its fix on the Mull of Kintyre and set it to indicate the bearing and distance to the next waypoint at Corran, 87 miles to the north. At that point, the pilots knew how close to the mull they were, and, given the deteriorating weather and the strict visibility requirements of visual flight rules, they should have already chosen an alternative course. As they had not done so, they could—and, under the rules, should—have either turned away from the mull immediately or slowed down and climbed to a safe altitude.

At 15 to 18 seconds before impact, the aircraft was at a height of only 468 ft, as recorded on its tactical air navigation system. The pilots would have seen the same information on the radio altimeter, but even so, the aircraft was climbing only gently at that point. At four and a half seconds before impact, the crew performed an emergency manoeuvre and climbed about 150 ft in those final seconds. The aircraft crashed at a height of 812 ft, at a ground speed of 151 knots, or 174 mph.

The evidence given by the eyewitness about the situation 40 seconds before the crash, and the evidence that the crew reset the navigational computer about 20 seconds before the crash are telling indicators of the fact that, at the time, the pilots were not grappling with an in-flight emergency, yet they flew on, contrary to instrument and visual flight rules. The evidence is that they were already too close to the cloud-covered mass of the mull and were travelling too low and too fast. Had the aircraft been flying over the sea, as it should have been under visual flight rules, none of the relevant factors or scenarios would have had an influence strong enough to prevent such an experienced crew from maintaining safe flight.

Those are the findings of the Royal Air Force's board of inquiry, duly convened and constituted under statute for the purpose of investigating such accidents. The board of inquiry had available to it a wealth of expertise and experience in all the relevant disciplines, including helicopter and aircraft operations. In addition, there was the considerable technical expertise of the air accidents investigation branch. Other authorities, such as the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, and the manufacturers of the aircraft—of its engines, equipment and avionics—made evidence available to the inquiry. The board's findings, together with a mass of technical and supporting information, have been made public.

Two years ago, the Defence Committee produced a helpful report on the lessons to be learnt from the Chinook crash. The Committee considered the suggestion that the crash pointed to the existence of fundamental flaws in the design of the Chinook Mk 2 and its components, but found no compelling evidence to support it. The Public Accounts Committee, whose report we await, recently inquired into the Ministry of Defence's processes for the acceptance of equipment into service and took the Chinook Mk 2 as a case study.

I shall turn to the points raised today. I shall answer them as fully as possible, and I shall write to hon. Members on any matters on which I do not have the necessary technical informati .. The hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) raised a point about the Tench report. The report's recommendations were not acted on when it was issued in 1987. We cannot rewrite history. The board of inquiry was conducted under the procedures that existed in 1994, which also applied to other inquiries at that time. I am aware of requests for the release of copies of the report, but hon. Members will be aware of the convention that existing Ministers cannot be made aware of advice given to previous Ministers, nor of those Ministers' views on the report. That convention may exasperate us, but it has always been applied, irrespective of the Administration.

Officials are carefully considering whether the report can be released. I appreciate that it has been outstanding for a few months and I hope that the Department will provide an answer in the near future.

Much reference was made to uncommanded flying control movements and other technical problems with the Chinook. The AAIB investigated in detail all relevant technical aspects of the crash and carried out a thorough assessment of control system components, but found no sign of pre-impact failure or malfunction. The hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel), who went into detail on the matter, missed the point. He and others suggested that in less than 20 seconds after the waypoint change that preceded impact, there was a major emergency that cleared itself and yet left no trace. As Air Chief Marshal Wratten said, negligence on the part of the pilots preceded the waypoint change; had the aircraft been flying as it should have been over the sea under visual flight rules, or at safety altitude under instrument flight rules, any temporary problem of the sort described could easily have been dealt with.

I shall write to the hon. Member for Newbury on the technical points relating to the FADEC process and the checking of the software sensor, because it is not an appropriate matter for a debate when time is limited. He may, of course, distribute copies of my letter to other members of the Committee. The suit mentioned by the hon. Member for Salisbury concerned a case of negligence by the manufacturers during a ground test of one of the helicopters—it was not about the FADEC system itself. The IFF setting was considered by the AAIB but thought to be of no significance in the crash.

The hon. Member for Salisbury suggested that the Ministry of Defence was dismissive of information provided and did not give it proper consideration. I refute that: all arguments and theories were examined compassionately and in depth. Ministers and officials went to unprecedented lengths to explain the rationale behind the board's findings and will continue to do so whenever points are raised with us.

What I have said will seem unsatisfactory to those who believe passionately that the Ministry of Defence is wrong in this case. I came to my job after a lifetime in an occupation in which I was taught to question severely any information that I was given—I was taught always to be sceptical and to look for alternative answers. I adopted that attitude in considering the information before me recently. Somewhat reluctantly, as a natural sceptic, I concluded that the findings of Air Marshals Wratten and Day and the board of inquiry were correct, and that there was negligence on the flight prior to the vehicle entering cloud which, sadly, was responsible for the death of 29 people.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. The Minister described this as a Committee and said that the hon. Member for Newbury could pass a letter around. This is not a Committee, it is a Chamber of the House and if the hon. Gentleman wants the information to go to all Members he should put it in the Library.

Global Warming

11.28 am

Mrs. Helen Brinton (Peterborough): The potentially devastating effects of world climate change through global warming are becoming increasingly clear. The world will be 3 per cent. warmer in a hundred years' time and the sea level is projected to rise by 40 cm by 2080. Sixty million people will be at risk of flooding and many will have to flee their homes permanently.

The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution has only recently underlined the starkness of the threat and the scale of the challenge. Refrigeration is contributing significantly to the problem. Under the Montreal protocol, chlorofluorocarbons and hydrochlorofluorocarbon refrigerants were to be banned because of their potential to damage the ozone layer. Most users of refrigerants decided to switch to hydrofluorocarbons, which do not deplete ozone; however, they have a significant global warming potential or GWP. The Government estimate that, on average, HFCs have 2,274 times the GWP of carbon dioxide. If anything, the trend of recent scientific research is to rate the GWP of HFCs ever higher.

As long ago as 1995, the United Kingdom Government panel on sustainable development recommended phasing out HFCs. Kyoto included HFCs among the emissions that must be reduced to stop global warming. As "Climate Change: draft United Kingdom programme" published in March stated, the trouble is that as the mass change to HFCs projections show, there is

> a strong underlying upward trend in emissions, as HFCs are used as a replacement for ozone-depleting substances.

It continued that the Government

> believes that this trend is unsustainable in the longer term and that action should be taken to limit the projected growth

A recent study by Atlantic Consulting concluded that, by 2010, HFCs might represent 4 per cent. of the United Kingdom's greenhouse gas emissions. On that basis, phasing out HFCs would help us to achieve more than a third of our legally binding target reduction of 12.5 per cent. of greenhouse gases.

We will not learn to live without refrigeration unless we really have to, so what can we do? Fortunately, there are alternatives: technically, they are known as NIKs—not in kinds—most of which are represented by hydrocarbons, or HCs. HCs do not damage the ozone layer; their GWP is negligible. They are extremely efficient and effective refrigerants and, most importantly, the technology is available and they are in increasingly wide usage. There is no refrigeration application for which NIKs cannot be used. That is why they are being used in supermarkets, petrol forecourts, art galleries, banks and people's homes, and even in the McDonald's restaurant in the famous dome.

The Government have toughened their stance on HFCs. In the same publication on climate change they said:

> HFCs are not a sustainable technology in the long term—the successful phase out of ozone-depleting substances is being achieved with a range of technologies and HFCs are only necessary to replace ozone-depleting substances in some applications. The Government believe that continued technological developments will mean that HFCs may eventually be able to be replaced in these remaining applications. HFCs should be used only when other safe, technically feasible, cost effective and more environmentally acceptable alternatives do not exist. HFC emission reduction strategies should not undermine commitments to phase out ozone-depleting substances under the Montreal protocol. HFC emissions will not be allowed to rise unchecked.

The balance of evidence in the HFC debate has shifted. For many years, the discussion centred almost entirely around the availability of alternatives to HFCs. The HFC producers, of course, asserted that there were none. However, after years of successful development and use, much of it in the United Kingdom, it is clear that a range of alternatives is available and that the burden of proof is on the chemical industry to prove that HFCs are necessary.

That leaves us with two challenges. Those who make and profit from HFCs will want to fight their corner. They have alleged that HFCs will prove to be an insignificant part of the global warming issue. However, the current volume of HFCs in the atmosphere is 1.6 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent, which is rising by 5 per cent. a year. That is not insignificant. They have also said that the energy efficiency of HFCs more than offsets their direct GWP. Yet an analysis of some 50 studies of the relative energy efficiency of HFC and environmentally benign HC refrigeration shows that, on average, HCs give an improvement in energy efficiency of 6 per cent. in domestic use, 15 per cent. in commercial use, 9 per cent. in air conditioning and 10 per cent. in heat pumps.

It is true that HCs are highly flammable, but so are many other substances that we use every day. The technology is well proven and safe. In Germany, which has some of the strictest attitudes and laws on health and safety, more than 95 per cent. of domestic refrigerators use HCs, and after more than 70 million operational years, not a single accident has taken place. The polluters continue to promote their pollution, but I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to stand firm, because the Government's policy is right.

However, a second challenge awaits. How do we progress from having good intentions to achieving the needed market shift? I suggest that we consider incentives to change. Will my hon. Friend confirm that supermarkets that want to reduce their climate change levy might be able to negotiate away part of their liability if they use HCs in refrigeration? Will he consider including NIK refrigerant and air-conditioning systems in the technologies covered by the enhanced capital allowance scheme and in the definition of low-carbon technologies, which will determine eligibility to receive encouragement from the £50 million energy efficiency fund?

Will the Minister study the Danish proposal to tax the consumption of refrigerants in accordance with their global warming potentials? Lord Marshall had more than one economic instrument in mind when he examined the problem, and he was highly sceptical about the ability of voluntary measures to reduce HFC leakage.

Companies investing now should not be locked into capital stock that does not meet good environmental standards. Action taken this year can prevent pollution that will otherwise cause global damage in the next 20 years of equipment life. Developing countries such as

China, India and Indonesia are moving straight from CFCs to HCs, without bothering with the now dated technology of HFCs.

I shall now speak wearing my Select Committee on Environmental Audit hat. Only some Departments and quangos are shaping up to the challenge by installing green refrigeration where possible. I do not yet see a central push covering all the Departments and the devolved Administrations. In hospitals alone, there must be enormous potential to convert refrigeration to environmentally benign systems. Is a mechanism available to co-ordinate such a scheme? That would show genuinely joined-up government, to use the common phrase.

I endorse the Government's policy. It is right to get tough on HFCs. I do not blame the manufacturers for defending their vested interests, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will listen carefully to their arguments. I urge him to consider a range of incentives to produce the market shift that we need to avoid decades of unnecessary pollution.

Last, but by no means least, it is pleasing that the United Kingdom is the world leader in developing the alternative technology. Our technical advantage presents us with an opportunity to take a rewarding industrial and political lead. The sooner we move, the sooner the benefit will arrive.

11.38 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): My hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton) raises an important matter. Global warming is probably the most important environmental issue facing the world. I shall begin by making a few general points about the action that the Government are taking to tackle the threat of climate change, then respond briefly to some of the points that my hon. Friend made.

Evidence mounts that climate change has begun. Globally, the past decade was the warmest recorded. In the United Kingdom, four of the five warmest years ever measured fell in the past decade. We are now continually reminded of our vulnerability to climate events. We cannot say for sure that events such as the storms that hit Europe at the end of last year or the floods that devastated Mozambique are the direct result of man-made changes, but we can expect such extreme weather events to become more frequent and more severe as temperatures rise.

Despite the milder winters that we have recently enjoyed, the United Kingdom will not escape some unwelcome effects, which could also involve huge costs. We know that we shall not be able to avoid some climate change. Greenhouse gases that have already built up in the atmosphere will make some rise in temperature and sea level inevitable. We must work together to ensure that we are best placed to adapt to the impacts that we cannot prevent.

However, all is not doom and gloom. The worst effects of climate change can be avoided if every country, Government, organisation and individual acts now to cut emissions. That will be a major challenge, but it is one to which we must all respond. At the Rio Earth summit in 1992, countries agreed voluntarily to return their emissions to 1990 levels by 2000. The United Kingdom will be one of the few OECD countries to meet that target.

At Kyoto in 1997, developed countries agreed collectively to reduce emissions by 5.2 per cent. during the period 2008 to 2012. For the first time, targets will be legally binding and different countries have taken on different targets to reflect their national circumstances. Following our negotiations at European level, the United Kingdom agreed to a 12.5 per cent. cut. Although the Kyoto agreement was a significant step, it is only the first stage in an effort that will need to continue throughout this century and beyond. Much bigger cuts in emissions—perhaps 60 per cent. or more—will be needed globally if we are to avoid devastating climate change.

The draft climate change programme that we published on 9 March provides a new, strategic focus for action against climate change in the United Kingdom. It sets out the way in which we shall meet our Kyoto target and move towards our domestic goal of a 20 per cent. reduction in carbon dioxide emissions. It builds on the positive action that business, local government and other organisations are taking. It signals that changes will be needed in the long term. It also provides a framework that draws together existing actions and a series of new measures that will ensure that the UK's emissions continue to fall during this decade and beyond.

The draft programme covers all sectors of the economy, and we have focused on flexible, cost-effective policies that will be good for the economy and for people, as well as for the environment. The refrigeration sector, on which my hon. Friend focused, is important. We all recognise the huge social benefits that refrigeration brings. We all use and need refrigeration, but it has an impact on the environment in terms of energy usage and emissions of refrigerants. Over the years, the industry has made great efforts to improve the energy efficiency of refrigeration and air-conditioning systems, and we hope that improvements will continue to be made. However, we also face the challenge of reducing HFC emissions from refrigeration and air-conditioning equipment.

As my hon. Friend explained, HFCs are powerful greenhouse gases and, as they are increasingly being used as replacements for ozone-depleting substances such as CFCs and HCFCs, emissions are forecast to grow strongly in the near future. This trend is unsustainable in the longer term, and action must be taken to minimise emissions. That is why we announced our new position on HFCs in the draft climate change programme. I am aware of the concern expressed by industry in relation to this announcement, and I am grateful for this opportunity to explain what we are trying to achieve.

It is vital that our position on HFCs is seen as a whole, in the context of the proposed measures set out in the draft programme, which states that

> HFCs are not a sustainable technology in the long term.

However, it also recognises that they are necessary to replace ozone-depleting substances in some applications, and that HFC emission reduction strategies should not undermine commitments to phase out ozone-depleting substances under the Montreal protocol. This is very

[Mr. Chris Mullin]

important, as the new European Commission regulation on ozone-depleting substances, which comes into force later this year, will ban CFCs and introduce tighter controls on HCFCs.

For some, it will be necessary to switch to HFCs, but we are now asking industry and users to look closely at all the alternatives and select those that are more environmentally acceptable. Safety, technical feasibility and cost-effectiveness should be taken into account before investment decisions are taken. Some businesses have already made the move. I think that my hon. Friend mentioned the example of Iceland Frozen Foods.

I want now to respond to some of my hon. Friend's suggestions for encouraging the move to alternative refrigerants. In relation to the climate change levy, she mentioned reduced liability for supermarkets using hydrocarbons. Eligibility for a discount in respect of the levy is based on the sectors covered by parts A1 and A2 of the Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations. That has a clear rationale, because it covers the main energy-intensive sectors, and firms covered by those parts of the regulations must operate in an energy-efficient manner not required of other firms. The climate change levy is designed to improve energy efficiency in the business and public sectors. The Government welcome improvements that may flow from using hydrocarbon refrigerants, but they do not intend to open eligibility for a negotiated agreement to those who take action in this area.

As I am sure my hon. Friend appreciates, decisions under the enhanced capital allowance scheme are a matter for the Chancellor. However, refrigeration equipment is one of eight technologies listed in the March Budget that the Government intend to make eligible for the enhanced allowances. Decisions on which low carbon technologies will be supported through the energy efficiency fund will be made in the light of the outcome of the forthcoming spending review, on which I am not in a position to elaborate.

As regards the tax on refrigerants, the Government share my hon. Friend's aim in tackling the issue of climate change and, as a matter of course, will keep a close eye on environmental developments and proposals in other European Union countries. I should add, however, that Lord Marshall's report focused on the business use of energy rather than on refrigerants. The Government have set out their environmental tax policy in their statement of intent on environmental taxation.

As regards the public sector's use of alternative refrigerants, Departments are encouraged to avoid HFCs wherever they can, although, as for other organisations, there may be occasions when a non-HFC solution is not feasible. My hon. Friend is right to identify hospitals as significant users of refrigerants, and I shall ask my officials to explore with their counterparts in the Department of Health the scope for further reductions in HFCs.

In the long term, however, as a result of continued technological improvement, HFCs may eventually be replaced in the applications where they are still needed. In the meantime, we shall discuss with industry the measures that can be taken to minimise emissions from these sources. We hope that that can be done by strengthening our voluntary agreements with industry.

The consultation on the draft climate change programme has now ended, and we are carefully considering the responses. We plan to publish a final programme later this year, which we hope will provide a framework that enables the United Kingdom to face the challenge of climate change and ensure that we safeguard our planet for the future.

11.49 am

Sitting suspended.

Beta Interferon

12 noon

On resuming—

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): Provision for people with multiple sclerosis is an issue that has concerned hon. Members of all parties throughout the lifetime of this Parliament, and doubtless before that. The specific issue of beta interferon has been raised a by a number of hon. Members. It was raised last year by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), and more recently by my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow).

Today's short debate is timely, given a recent leak from the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, suggesting that NICE will recommend that provision of beta interferon for new applicants should not be funded by the national health service. That announcement was one of the few that has made me genuinely angry since becoming a Member of Parliament, because the hopes and expectations of MS sufferers had been raised by the involvement of NICE. Given the drug's effectiveness for particular groups of sufferers—which I shall discuss in a moment—the assumption was that there would be a positive outcome. I know from first-hand experience that both those who receive and those who might receive the drug were angry at the leaked announcement.

In this short debate, I want to discuss three aspects. The first is the effectiveness or otherwise of beta interferon, the second is why and whether the drug should cost so much, and the third is the process through which any Government must decide whether to pay for expensive drug treatments of this type.

On the drug's effectiveness, I shall begin by reading an excerpt from a letter that I received from a constituent. She first contacted me more than two years ago, at a time when her health authority, Avon, would not pay for beta interferon, although she would have got it had she lived in a neighbouring authority. She and I, with the Multiple Sclerosis Society and others, waged a campaign and were delighted when Avon health authority agreed at the beginning of last year to fund a limited number of courses of treatment—about 12.

My constituent was one of those who benefited. She now receives beta interferon, and it is paid for on the national health service. She said that the drug

> is effective in slowing down the progression of my disease.
>
> During 1997 I suffered several attacks and was unable to work for three months. I was faced with the prospect of having to use a wheelchair within months. Since starting with Beta Interferon in December 1997—

at which point, she was paying for private treatment—

> I have had only two attacks and I am still managing to walk and work.

It is easy for those who do not suffer from this disease unthinkingly to use the phrase "a relapse", but it is clear that relapses can be devastating to MS sufferers who, as a result, cannot work or look after their children. Any drug that can reduce the number and frequency of relapses will make more than a marginal difference to those concerned. I am not saying that beta interferon is a cure, but it is clear that, for some, it can bring about a real and substantial improvement in the quality of life.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the many MS sufferers who feel that beta interferon treatment results in reduced relapses. Does he agree that the Minister needs to explain why NICE has apparently refused to take evidence from MS sufferers on the drug's impact on the quality of their lives?

Mr. Webb: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Clearly, anecdotal, individual experience does not provide the cast-iron proof that, say, a double-blind controlled trial might provide. If a body that is charged with assessing the consequences of spending money on a drug does not hear at first hand about the effects of that drug and the benefits that it can bring to real people in their real lives, it misses part of the story. It is therefore regrettable that that does not appear to have been fed into the process.

After I had secured this debate, my office received a phone call from a head teacher in Essex, who said that three members of staff in his school suffer from multiple sclerosis. Two of them receive beta interferon, and have benefited greatly from it. One had previously taken six months' sick leave. Since receiving the drug, one has taken just two days off sick and the other has taken three days. Furthermore, they are less dependent on steroids.

The head teacher pointed out that at his school the public sector pays £150 a day for supply teaching, and remarked on the cost to children in terms of disruption. His closing comment was that, as an employer, he feels that the Government need to do some joined-up thinking. One of my concerns about the process is that the cost-benefit comparison does not take a broad enough view of the potential benefits to people who receive the drug—not only to their individual lives, but to society and the economy as a whole. NICE is receiving only a partial picture.

I discussed the drug with Dr. Malcolm Campbell of Frenchay health care trust, who is one of the leading MS specialists in my area. His key point was that there is no alternative to the drug. People who can benefit from it have access to no other form of treatment to make their relapses less frequent. I accept that NICE is considering general provision for people with MS, and that there is a strong case for greater and improved provision for such people. However, it is a false dichotomy to say that some people can have a drug that prevents the disease from progressing, slows it down or makes it less awful, or other people can have proper community care—as though there is a fixed pot for MS sufferers, which can supply drugs or support, but not both. NICE is not there to make those kinds of decisions.

The consultant said that in the rest of Europe about one in eight MS sufferers typically benefit from the drug, whereas in the United Kingdom the figure is around one in 30. That leads to a fundamental question. Is the rest of Europe wrong, in that the drug is being given to people who do not need it or benefit from it, or we are wrong? During last week's Prime Minister's Questions, the Prime Minister said that only 12 per cent. of sufferers in France, Germany and Italy receive the drug. However, in this country the figure is only 3 per cent. He argued that the treatment will not benefit everyone, which is true, but it could certainly benefit more people than are currently receiving it.

There is currently no viable alternative to beta interferon. It clearly benefits people who suffer from relapses followed by periods of remission. In the long

[Mr. Webb]

term, the situation is less clear. The consultant told me that some people have been taking the drug for five years, and that we do not know much beyond that in terms of whether it wears off or has long-term beneficial effects. However, the potential is there, and it would be disturbing if funding were to be cut off at this stage.

I want to refer briefly to the vexed issue of the cost of the treatment. I believe that a figure of £10,000 for a year's course is frequently used. Dr. Campbell told me yesterday that £8,500 is now more accurate, because of the Government's efforts to put pressure on suppliers to bring the cost down. The Government are to be applauded for that. However, he also told me that whereas the figure is £8,500 in the United Kingdom, it is $8,500 in the United States. For some reason, the same drug is substantially cheaper in the US. I have been told that the same is true of Portugal, but I do not know whether that is so.

In all debates on expensive drugs, questions must be asked about the prices that are charged by drug companies and manufacturers, and whether the Government are doing enough to apply pressure to bring those prices down. I accept that companies need a return on their research and an incentive to do that research, but is the balance right? If they are prepared to sell the drug for $8,500 a year in the US, why should the figure in the UK be £8,500?

My final point concerns the process by which the Government, or any Government, should decide about such issues: the NICE approach, so to speak. The principle that there should be an independent body that can do what dozens of individual health authorities across the country cannot reasonably be expected to do—that is, to review the written clinical evidence, take oral evidence and spend time and money evaluating the clinical effectiveness of the drug—is right. It will help to reduce unevenness in this country, of which we are all aware.

Of what should the institute take account? I believe that it is taking account of matters that are not its legitimate concern. Hon. Members do not have the clinical expertise to judge whether the treatment works, although such evidence exists. It is widely accepted that it reduces the number of relapses by about a third.

Originally, NICE had a remit for clinical excellence and effectiveness, but its remit has been extended. In August 1999—I do not suppose that August is prime time for hon. Members to scrutinise legislation—a short statutory instrument was laid before the House stating that NICE's constitution should be amended. It stated:

after the words "promotion of clinical excellence" there should be inserted the words "and of the effective use of available resources".

In a sense, no one could object to that—rather like motherhood and apple pie, all of us approve of the effective use of available resources. The question is, who should decide what is available? The answer must be that the elected Government of the day, rather than clinicians, should do so. If NICE took such decisions, it would be second-guessing political decisions on the Government's behalf. For example, the Government could have decided to put up the standard rate of income tax by 1p, and they could have put approximately £2.5 billion into the health service, which would have increased available resources. NICE could say, "Available resources are greater, and the health service should pay for beta interferon," but would it do so in that context? That would affect the resources that were available.

What is going on? Are not the Government abrogating their responsibilities? No one doubts that such decisions are difficult, and that prioritisation is needed, but the Government should not palm off such decisions to what is, in effect, a quango. Should not the Government accept responsibility for such decisions? They should say to the electorate, "We shall increase taxation to pay for the expensive drugs that we want in the NHS, or we shall not increase taxation, and you cannot have those expensive drugs." People elect us to take such decisions—they should not be handed to an allegedly independent third party.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): Obviously, the Government have increased resources to the NHS. On transparency, does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would be helpful if the clinical guidelines on the overall management of MS, which the Government have asked for, were made available before a decision was taken about the availability of beta interferon?

Mr. Webb: I am sure that greater openness in this whole process would be advantageous. I have no problem with making more explicit the criteria that are used to take such decisions—in a sense, that is the thrust of my argument. A body is needed to examine clinical effectiveness and excellence, and it cannot exist in a world in which there are no financial constraints. Cost-effectiveness involves saying, "If £1 is involved, that is great, but if £1 million is involved, that is silly." We need to sort out the finer details concerning political priorities and available resources.

Why was the statutory instrument produced during the summer recess, when there was limited scope for scrutiny? I accept that the instrument was subsequently debated, but why was the provision introduced as an afterthought? My concern is that the Government felt that they had let the cat out of the bag—they had set up NICE and asked it to examine effectiveness, but they were worried that it would give the wrong answers. The provision was designed to stop it from doing so—that is what it was doing with regard to beta interferon.

I hope that the Minister will assure us that clinical judgments will be made by clinicians and that political judgments will be made by politicians. Those decisions affect my constituents and those of many hon. Members. I welcome the fact that many hon. Members have attended this debate in an effort to show their solidarity with those constituents who need beta interferon. I see many nods around the Chamber. I hope that the Minister agrees that clinical effectiveness is the key and that the Government will not simply say no and abrogate their responsibilities. They should take the political decision and decide whether money should be found for a treatment that many of our constituents need and expect.

12.15 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): I congratulate the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on securing this debate. This

is a good time for me to place on record a few comments following the controversy aroused by the unauthorised release—the leak—of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence's provisional guidance on beta interferon.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman will understand that it was a leak, and that the Government do not intend to comment on it at this stage. There are further stages to be completed in the National Institute for Clinical Excellence's approval process. We have not made public comment on any of the draft appraisals so far circulated by NICE, and we do not intend to change our position on the issue. However, it is a matter of great public interest and I recognise how this discussion must appear to those who face this disabling condition and whose hope for any relief is entirely understandable.

Multiple sclerosis, as we know, is a disabling neurological disease affecting about 85,000 people in the United Kingdom. We have great sympathy for those patients and their families. It usually strikes early in adulthood, and affects about twice as many women as men. The course of the disease is unpredictable, and it varies in progression rate and severity between patients. It has a major adverse impact on the patient's quality of life, especially during relapses, which may require hospitalisation. Disabilities that arise can include weakness, chronic fatigue, impairment of speech, vision and movement, incontinence and complete paralysis, as the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) said. The hon. Gentleman also said that there was no cure for MS.

A variety of services exists to minimise the suffering from this distressing disease, including skilled nursing support, physiotherapy and symptomatic drug treatment to help to manage symptoms such as fatigue, spasticity, pain and depression. Acute relapses are managed, when necessary, with corticosteroids. All those provisions require close collaboration between primary and secondary care services, and the development of pathways of care that we are promoting is well suited to foster the right management of care.

There are three beta interferon products. They are licensed for the treatment of the relapsing remitting form of the disease and one of them, Betaferon, is licensed for the treatment of the secondary progressive disease. The treatments are targeted at modifying and possibly slowing the course of the disease. The beta interferons commonly cause some side effects. The cost of beta interferon treatment is about £10,000 a year per patient.

Clinical trials have shown that all three products reduce the relapse frequency in patients with the relapsing remitting disease. The drugs may also reduce the severity of relapse. Disability progression also appears to be delayed by active treatment, but the longer-term effects are not certain, in part because of the production of neutralising antibodies whose clinical significance is still uncertain. Studies of the secondary progressive disease also show reduced frequency of relapses. There are inconsistent findings in the available clinical trials about the effects on slowing the accumulation of disability in secondary progressive MS.

However, the experts have so far placed differing emphasis on the evidence from clinical trials. Some neurologists are keen to prescribe these products, at least to some patients, but others remain sceptical as to the value of prescribing beta interferon or argue that available resources for MS care would better be used in providing alternative forms of health care support such as specialist nursing or physiotherapy.

The various policies adopted across the country for the use of this treatment confirm that clinicians disagree. There is also widespread agreement that we do not know as much as we would like about the longer-term effects of prescribing beta interferon year after year. These differences in clinical opinion were graphically illustrated only last week in interviews broadcast on the BBC news, when two consultants expressed diametrically opposite views on the clinical value of the drug.

Betaferon was the first product to receive a licence, in 1995. Differing views about the evidence from clinical trials were apparent at the time. The previous Government issued guidance in 1995 that left many of the key decisions to be taken at a local level. It recommended that prescribing should be initiated by hospital neurologists when clinically appropriate and asked health authorities to develop local arrangements with hospitals for purchasing and prescribing the treatment. Resource implications were left for local assessment.

The emphasis on local decision taking is the origin of the lottery of care often referred to as postcode prescribing. We continue to receive a steady influx of complaints across a range of issues from patients and clinicians, who cannot understand why there are wide divergences in local policies. All health authorities currently have policies in place by which some patients can receive beta interferon, but some are more restrictive. The percentage receiving beta interferon varies from about 0 per cent. to about 7 per cent. That amount of variation has given rise to great concern.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Does my hon. Friend accept that the beta interferon decision will be critical to the future of NICE? If NICE loses public confidence over this issue, that will undermine its important work in providing medical solutions that are clinically rather than politically or financially led.

Mr. Denham: My hon. Friend will understand that one reason why I believe it is inappropriate for me to comment in this debate on what is currently a draft proposal is that the integrity of the NICE decision-making process must be seen to be intact and not subject to guidance, expressions of opinion or anticipation of outcomes from Ministers. The credibility of NICE is indeed important.

On this issue, as on a number of others, the Government believed that leaving decisions to local health authorities without any guidance or support was an evasion of the Department's responsibility at central level. That is the background to the development of NICE and the referral of beta interferon to it.

We have acknowledged on a number of occasions that priority setting is a necessary part of any health care system. It has always been done in the national health service and will continue to be. It is right and proper that priorities are set that make the best use of the NHS's available resources. We do not deny that difficult issues can arise that generate controversy, as when we are

[Mr. Denham]

dealing with a devastating condition such as multiple sclerosis. That has been made worse in the past when the significance of the evidence has been uncertain.

That is the situation in which we found ourselves. It was an unfair situation and we were determined to tackle it. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence was set up to ensure that the NHS's resources could be used to maximum effect and to remove inconsistent and unacceptable variations in care.

Mr. David Watts (St. Helens, North): Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be ironic if NICE were to replace a system based on postcodes with a system based on whether one developed an illness or medical condition before a certain date?

Mr. Denham: Let me deal with a number of issues that have been raised about affordability and with the comments about the patients receiving the drugs.

The institute's extensive programme of work will set clear standards to ensure that the NHS can focus on treatments that are clinically and cost-effective. It is right to have a single source of authoritative guidance and information to assist health professionals in making complex decisions about patient care. NICE has begun its work. Its guidance to date relates to a number of topics such as wisdom teeth, Relenza, on which the guidance has been restrictive, and ways of promoting the wider use of drugs and technologies such as taxanes and stents, for example.

The hon. Member for Northavon asked about affordability and the changes made to NICE's directions last summer. We have been over this ground before. We made it clear on many occasions well before last summer that NICE would advise on clinical and cost-effectiveness and would issue guidance to the NHS. As we have always said, it is right and proper that NICE should consider clinical and cost-effectiveness side by side.

The hon. Gentleman also said that Ministers should decide the level of resources that are available to the NHS. We have already done so. We recently announced the largest ever injection of resources into the NHS, amounting to an average growth of 6.1 per cent. over four years.

The Government have always said that NICE guidance would take account of cost-effectiveness. The amendment order that we laid in August was a clarification, because we recognised that the original wording of the establishment order did not fully reflect our policy intention to take cost-effectiveness, as well as clinical effectiveness, into account. The amendment simply ensured that the order reflected the policy position that the Government had previously taken.

Mr. Webb: The Minister gave the example of wisdom teeth, on which NICE had made a recommendation. Is there not a difference between that and beta interferon? The argument is that taking wisdom teeth out does not work, not that we cannot afford to do so. That does not appear to be the argument on beta interferon. Is there not a danger that NICE is taking a decision that should be taken by Ministers?

Mr. Denham: Of course I recognise the difference in magnitude between the issues of multiple sclerosis and wisdom teeth. The hon. Gentleman will understand that. We established NICE to advise the service on the clinical and cost-effectiveness of a range of treatments and procedures. We asked NICE to review all the evidence on the clinical and cost-effectiveness of beta interferon for MS and to make recommendations on its use, based on that evidence. Those conclusions were issued in confidence on 16 June. The process is still running, and it would be premature to comment further.

However, following the leak last week of the draft appraisal conclusions, the institute's chairman, Professor Sir Michael Rawlins, said:

> In order to avoid any further uncertainty in the minds of patients and those who care for them, I have no option other than to confirm that the provisional opinion of the Institute's Appraisal Committee is that other than for those patients who are already receiving these medicines, they should not be made available at the present time. This is because, on the basis of a very careful consideration of the evidence, their modest clinical benefit appears to be outweighed by their very high cost.

Mr. Burstow: Given what the Minister has just said, does he not find it surprising that NICE did not seek evidence directly from MS sufferers in making that determination?

Mr. Denham: The exact way in which NICE seeks information is its responsibility. However, I know that NICE consulted patients' organisations directly as part of the appraisal process. Given that the Multiple Sclerosis Society in particular is a highly respected organisation, I am sure that it will have made adequate representation—although I have not seen it—about the impact on patients. It is also worth noting that from the outset NICE has been structured, through its partners council and in other ways, to ensure that patients' interests are taken fully into account in the way in which it takes decisions.

The final judgment will be taken by NICE. The current period of consultation ends on 17 July, and NICE will listen carefully to all the comments that it receives from those consulted. The procedures then allow for an appeal. It is only after those procedures have been exhausted that NICE will reach final conclusions.

A number of other issues have been raised, but I am not sure whether I can deal with all of them adequately. The hon. Member for Northavon asked about NICE's role in considering wider costs and benefits to society in making its appraisals. Again, I cannot comment specifically on the draft appraisal that is the subject of this debate. However, we have made it clear that companies are free to submit any relevant evidence to NICE that they want taken into consideration. NICE's task is to consider the evidence of clinical and other health-related benefits of an intervention and to judge whether a particular treatment can be recommended as a clinical and cost-effective use of national health service and personal social services resources. That is our position, which we have set out before.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) referred to our request to NICE to produce clinical guidelines. Our research and development division has undertaken some preliminary work on the guidelines which will shorten the period—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. Time is up.

Social Exclusion

12.30 pm

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): I am grateful that this subject was chosen for debate. It will highlight Labour's policy on exclusion as it applies to Barnsley, and to my constituency in particular, and allow me to bring to the Government's attention the progress that has been made by the Communities that Care project, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which operates in the Worsborough electoral ward in my constituency. It will allow us to consider the scope of future developments as well as the important issue of funding that important project.

I shall provide some background information against which the economic and social dislocation of the area can be understood. In the mid-1970s, the area was prosperous. The fortunes of the local economy were linked to the energy economy, which was defined at that time in relation to two sources—coal and nuclear energy—based on the security of supply and sustainability. That provided stability for the local economy. However, after the Coal Industry Act 1980, the bitter wind of competition from imports began to be felt. In its wake came the 1984-85 miners strike and the rest is history.

Inevitably, the Barnsley economy was hit hard over the next decade by colliery closures that followed in the wake of the strike. More than 20,000 jobs were lost in mining and the multiplier effect made the blow much wider and much worse. The social structure came under great strain. Unemployment, poverty, low esteem, low educational achievement, substance abuse, family break-up and a general loss of community followed. That was made worse in a borough with the highest rate of disability in the country.

The local economy went into a severe depression and there was little help from the Tory Administration. Statistics collected by the local authority in the mid-1990s graphically show how depressed the locality had become. The average household income per year on the council estates was between £5,000 and £6,000. The average across the borough was £11,000, which compares with an average in Yorkshire and Humberside at the time of £18,300. Almost 30 per cent. of households contained a disabled person, 12 per cent. of the population were carers and the locality had, and still has, one of the highest mortality rates in England. I draw attention to that because I want to make a point about the health action zone.

It was estimated that the area needed to create 19,000 jobs over three years from the mid-1990s just to reach the average national level of employment. Not surprisingly, a great deal of the work that the local authority undertook was directed towards creating conditions to attract new companies to the area to bring jobs. There has been some success: brownfield sites have been cleared and new roads have been built to provide access to the sites and to a route that will link them directly to the M1. However, too few companies, particularly high-growth and high-value companies, are being attracted to the area. I understand that the local authority recently undertook a survey that shows that Barnsley has a deficit of 2,500 companies compared with similar areas.

Although the new deal is admirable, it is less effective in Barnsley than in an area with a solid industrial base. Consequently, far more people in the area are without jobs. Even unemployment figures hide the real extent of the problem. For example, Sheffield Hallam university carried out a study when the survey to which I have referred was undertaken. The university calculated that the real unemployment level in Barnsley was 24.6 per cent., whereas the official rate was 8.4 per cent.

It is now three years since the Labour Government were elected. The policies that they have pursued have brought improvements, but there is still a long way to go. The minimum wage, the working families tax credit and the increase in child benefit have all contributed to raising the income of the most needy households in the Barnsley borough. Figures from the Budget show that 2,875 households will benefit from the working families tax credit. Of the 15,366 pensioners who will benefit from the increased winter fuel allowance, 6,147 will enjoy a free television licence from this autumn. In addition, 11,200 people will receive the increased child benefit. Labour's approach to tackling inequalities is beginning to produce improvements in Barnsley.

Historically, low educational attainment was associated with the heavy industrial base of the local economy. Now, it is recognised that low attainment levels impact adversely on work force skills. The local authority has responded by setting an ambitious target of reaching the national average level of attainment within the next five years. The Government have assisted in that by establishing an education action zone. I visited the education action zone with other hon. Members to see the work being done. It was commendable.

Barnsley people suffer from poor health. It is estimated that the illness rate is 43 per cent. higher than the national average and that the death rate from heart disease is 25 per cent. higher than the average. For that reason, the borough was included in the South Yorkshire Coalfield health action zone. It is therefore disappointing that that zone's budget was cut by 24 per cent. with immediate effect from 21 June. That is a reduction of £789,000 on the programme budget of £3.037 million. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will raise that matter with Ministers at the Department of Health and urge them to reconsider.

Since the civic hall was mothballed two years ago, the town has lacked a sizeable theatre. That deprives local children of access to live theatre and excludes them from a cultural experience that most children take for granted. Last year, the Arts Council of England turned down the authority's bid for funding to renovate the theatre. That was disappointing. A new bid is to be made and I urge the Arts Council to address the problem of cultural deprivation in Barnsley and ensure that it has facilities for children to come into contact with live performances.

I recognise that closing the gap and reducing inequality in Barnsley will take time, but the figures that I gave show that a step has been taken in the right direction. Bringing about a cultural change and reversing the trend of the past decade will take longer and the Communities that Care project in Worsborough in my constituency, which is funded by the Joseph

[Mr. Michael Clapham]

Rowntree Foundation, is important. It also provides an opportunity to roll out the benefits of the project throughout the borough.

I shall outline the way in which the Communities that Care project works. It is one of three similar projects in the country and was the first to kick off. It is a long-term programme and the intention is to deal with the pressures and stresses that young people face in their communities. The project takes a new approach and an important factor is that it is owned by the community. At the core of the programme is the objective of building safer neighbourhoods where young people are valued, respected and encouraged to reach their potential. It is evidence based and founded on a partnership between young people in the community, the community itself, and the statutory and voluntary agencies. It encourages social commitment and achievement and takes a step-by-step approach to map out the risk and protective factors that influence young people in their community. The risk assessment group was assisted in its research by Oxford university. Sheffield university is also involved in evaluating the project.

A survey was carried out among 1,600 pupils at the two secondary schools. They were asked a series of questions about their attitudes, views, families and neighbourhood. Sixteen risk factors were analysed from the returns to give a picture of the risk and protective factors that were influencing the behaviour of young people in the Worsborough community. Following the prioritisation, five factors were identified as high-risk factors in the community: poor parental supervision and discipline; low achievement in school; disadvantaged neighbourhood; individuals, friends and peers condoning problem behaviour; and parents condoning such behaviour.

When the risk audit had been completed, the next step was to prepare a final strategy in the light of the evidence that had been collected from the survey based on an action plan. The purpose of the action plan is to increase the level of protective factors with the redirection of existing services to tackle risk and the introduction of a new focused intervention. It must be emphasised that the Communities that Care project is not trying to reinvent the wheel and I need to get it over to my hon. Friend the Minister that redirection of services and the focusing of intervention are planned in accordance with a menu. It is accepted that services are already being provided in that community—housing, education, social services and so on—but in the context of the Communities that Care project, the intervention is refocused to provide greater effect.

The project is working well. It started in 1998 and was funded for three years. The funding from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation will come to an end at the end of May 2001. Hearing what I have said, my hon. Friend the Minister may say, "What's new? We've been targeting communities in the UK for a number of years." I would not disagree with him, but what is new in this project is the way in which we can identify overlapping risks and protective factors. We need the community and the programme to proceed in an holistic way.

After three years' funding by the foundation, it is crucial to complete the project. All the research and analysis work has been done. Long-term implementation is now needed, and it must be assured. Various types of funding are available and can be applied for—for example, single regeneration budget and European funding—but the project's future must be more secure. I am aware that the Government's crime reduction strategy includes a £540 million fund for the Sure Start project.

Sure Start is aimed at families and children. It has been approved in Barnsley, but is not under way. Now that it has been approved, that gives us an opportunity to move forward. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to consider ownership of the Communities that Care project after May 2001 and perhaps the extension of funding from the Sure Start project, so that we can ensure implementation and co-ordination of the Communities that Care project. I see no reason why we should not be able to extend the Sure Start scheme.

12.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham) on raising this subject. He is a persistent and persuasive advocate for his constituency, for Barnsley as a borough and for the coalfield communities as a whole. The way in which he keeps drawing the attention of the House to the needs of a community pushed flat on its back by Tory economic policies in the 1980s and 1990s is a credit to him and in the best traditions of Labour party representation in the House.

In passing, I pay tribute to the remarkable Rowntree family. Not only did they start the business that is now the biggest employer in my constituency—the Rowntree, now Nestlé, chocolate factory—but, when Joseph Rowntree, the founder of the dynasty, came to retire, instead of keeping private control of his huge shareholdings in the business, which had grown so remarkably, he put them into trust. He set up three great trusts which, between them, are the biggest independent private funders of social research, and social development programmes, such as the Communities that Care projects, the first of which is running in Barnsley. That was his major legacy to social policy. His son, Seebohm Rowntree, did the three poverty studies in 1901, 1936 and 1952 in York, as a fairly typical town. From those studies developed so much of Labour social policy, especially of the post-war Attlee Government that created the welfare state. They were two great social reformers.

I was interested to learn about the Communities that Care approach, which I like. It is right to build multi-agency networks to tackle the causes of deprivation and to concentrate on young people. The point at which escape from a life of poverty is most possible is when people leave home. That is when they either move into work and escape from poverty, or fail to do so and become trapped in a lifetime of benefits. That fact is recognised strongly in "Opportunity for All"—the Government's strategy to combat and defeat poverty. Everyone in every part of the country should have the opportunity to get on and prosper.

The Communities that Care strategy identifies what it calls the risk factors—such as school failure, teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, drugs and

crime—that undermine opportunity for all and the ability of individuals to surmount obstacles and make their way in life. It stresses the importance of skills, social inclusion and the protective factors that enable real opportunity for all. It also stresses the importance of listening to and taking account of young people's views, recognising and praising what they do, and allowing them to get involved in their neighbourhoods.

A similar approach was taken in the rejuvenation of the Bell Farm estate, which is one of the most seriously disadvantaged estates in my constituency. The project had some support from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, but the key was to knit together the agencies and give a voice to local people, enabling them to shape changes to the streetscape and decide on changes to individual tenants' homes. That approach has worked well. At the beginning of the project, only 4 per cent. of people who lived on the estate thought that it experienced less crime than other parts of York. In other words, almost everyone thought that the estate was a crime hot-spot. At the end of the project, 53 per cent.—a majority—thought that there was less crime on the estate than elsewhere.

The foundation has moved on from the Communities that Care approach, but it follows the same precedent by giving people in disadvantaged communities the opportunity to express themselves and their solutions. That approach dovetails well with the Government's strategy on poverty. In February 1999, the Prime Minister set the Government the ambitious and challenging goal of seeking to eliminate child poverty within a generation. Until the Government published "Opportunity for All", which outlines the strategy for eliminating poverty, people were sceptical about whether that goal could be achieved. If it is challenging for the country as a whole, it is particularly challenging for communities such as that represented by my hon. Friend, but there is a determination in all parts of the country to achieve it.

My hon. Friend described the damage and devastation that the Conservatives' economic policies inflicted on Barnsley in the 1980s and 1990s. He described the consequences for the health of the population of Barnsley in particular, and gave many indicators. This morning, I discovered that 8.6 children per 1,000 live births die in Barnsley. That is the fourth highest infant mortality rate in the country, and compares with 5.6 per 1,000 in England as a whole. It reflects the burden of deprivation that a neighbourhood can face. That is why the health action zone—

Mr. Clapham: I assume that my hon. Friend recognises the importance of trying to get the South Yorkshire Coalfield health action zone moneys back on track.

Mr. Bayley: That is why I mentioned that. I clearly heard what my hon. Friend said, and I will ensure that his views are conveyed to the Department of Health. The health action zone was established to address such problems.

The basis for achieving the Government's strategy to reduce poverty is the provision of the right macro-economic framework. When the Labour party came to power three years ago, we inherited a legacy of boom and bust from our predecessors. In just three years, we have made a major change to the nature of the economy. There is more stability. Throughout the country, 1 million more people are at work than in May 1997, and unemployment is falling. That is true even in places facing the highest burden of unemployment, such as Barnsley. In May 1997, the Barnsley travel-to-work area had an 8 per cent. unemployment rate, which has now fallen to 5.8 per cent. That is significantly lower than it was at its peak in the mid-1980s. In 1984, it stood at 14.5 per cent.

Mr. Clapham: I should emphasise that there is a great deal of hidden unemployment. The survey that was carried out in the schools at Worsborough showed that 50 per cent. of the households from which the children of Worsborough came had a head of the household who was not economically active.

Mr. Bayley: My hon. Friend stresses the nature of the problem.

It is not only a matter of Government policies taking a broad brush approach to unemployment and creating 1 million jobs, but of providing jobs at local level and targeting help where it is needed. That is one of the achievements of the new deal. In Barnsley, 1,251 young people are now in work as a result of the new deal, and 1,158 are in sustained employment. The new deal has worked. It has made the difference between long-term unemployment and employment. Long-term unemployment among young people in Barnsley is now down to 251. Those 251 people are the hard core of those who are most at risk of a lifetime on benefits, and therefore a lifetime of social exclusion. That is what my hon. Friend has highlighted today.

A wide range of initiatives is making a difference, as my hon. Friend knows, because he has argued for them and secured them for his community. The local education authority has secured rapid improvement in the education indicators since 1997, when the Government came to power. The learning gateway is providing opportunities for 400 young people. My hon. Friend also referred to the single regeneration budget, the education action zone and the confirmation of objective 1 status for South Yorkshire.

I stress that the Government's strategy to combat poverty lays a strong emphasis on work, because for most people of working age that is the best route out of poverty. Benefit expenditure tackles the immediate needs of those who cannot work, such as children, sick and disabled people and pensioners, and the Government have done a lot for those groups. Child benefit, having been frozen for years by the Conservatives, has increased by 26 per cent. in real terms to £15 per week for the first child and £10 per week for subsequent children. As my hon. Friend said, 11,200 families in Barnsley benefit from that.

The working families tax credit and the minimum wage will, in October this year, guarantee a minimum weekly income of £208 for a family with one child and one person at work. Couples on income support with two children aged under 11 will, by next year, be £1,500 a year better off. Those measures, taken together, have lifted 1.2 million children out of poverty. The Conservatives trebled the number of children in poverty, and we are taking action to reduce their number.

[Mr. Bayley]

We are providing more money, in real terms, for disability benefits, and £6.5 billion more for pensioners. We have started by helping the poorest pensioners. In Barnsley, 8,200 such pensioners gain the minimum income guarantee. They had a pension of £62.45 when we came to power; now it is £78.45. That is £16 more per week for the poorest pensioners in Barnsley as a result of Labour policies. Now we are targeting those whose incomes or savings put them just above the minimum income level, and they will get more too.

It being One o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 28 June 2000

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Organophosphates

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Kevin Hughes.*]

9.30 am

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): People all over Britain will be waking up today wondering about organophosphates as we debate the subject in this august place. I am sure that we shall impart some information this morning, so that the public know why we take the matter seriously. I welcome the chairman of the all-party organophosphate group to the Chamber. I pay tribute to the Countess of Mar, who has fought a continuous battle and has bombarded Ministers with questions for years. Indeed, she has distinguished herself in that campaign.

The organophosphate group of chemicals causes many problems. They are implicated in the Gulf war syndrome, and they affect agricultural workers. Organophosphates have been the cause of debate in rural communities about their effects on the people who live and work there. The chemicals are the cause of problems in animal welfare, medicine is involved and there are many other aspects to the problem. Indeed, I note that the Sunday papers report that organophosphates can be found in aircraft; not only can one get a pulmonary embolism four days after flying, one can also get a good whiff of organophosphates on the transatlantic flight. That is something for everyone to enjoy.

The subject also creates problems for Ministers. It covers so many areas, and many Ministers have something to say about it. We have got round that problem today by not having five Ministers here. That would have been too much to handle, and, perhaps, too radical. I am pleased that we can concentrate on the agricultural implications of organophosphates and how they affect people's health.

My interest in the use of chemicals in rural communities stems from work that I did some years ago, when young agricultural workers in Norfolk wanted to talk to doctors about impotence and about not being able to start families. That was in the early days of chemical use in the farmyard. Insecticides and pesticides were implicated, because they washed into the Broads and the rivers and fouled up plant life there. We wondered then whether the chemicals could have had some effect on people in rural communities. Although gloves and uniforms were available as a safety measure, I am sorry to say that people had problems with wearing chemical suits to prevent their bodies getting near chemicals. People were found to be using about 20 chemicals a day. We tried to ensure that they took precautions, and many of those young men successfully sired children a few years later.

It was difficult to nail down which chemical could have caused the sterility, and a doubt remains to this day. Because so many chemicals are used, it is often hard to find evidence that a particular chemical has caused a problem. I am pleased that organophosphates have been studied and that research has been carried out, but it is sometimes difficult to gain the scientific and medical surety of evidence that is needed to take matters forward.

Organophosphates were first shown to have biological uses in about 1937, and they are now widely used as pesticides in agricultural, public health, veterinary, domestic and medicinal applications. Some organophosphates are used as lubricants and plasticisers. The one thing that is clear, however, is that whenever and wherever they are used, humans are always exposed to them; people come up against them, and take them in through the skin or in other ways.

The organophosphate compounds used in warfare are chemically different. We do not want a chemistry lecture—goodness forbid that. I do not understand chemistry much, anyway. We are not going to talk about the organophosphates said to have had an effect in Gulf war syndrome. They are a different kettle of fish, have different chemical structures and probably work differently from those used on farms.

The use of organophosphates in arable and livestock farming has raised many concerns. People will know especially of the adverse effects on sheep farmers exposed to low doses for long periods while, for example, sheep dipping. Publicity on that subject has come in at a great rate. We also know that it is possible to be affected during crop spraying. It has been suggested that pesticides, including organophosphates, have appeared in water supplies and food. There is much concern about that, and the issue is still very alive today.

Research has shown that many organophosphates work by affecting a key protein or enzyme in the human body, which is involved in nerve function—the way in which nerves interact. Brain function and the nerves controlling muscles are affected through contact with the chemicals. Organophosphates are of great use on farms. They are used to eliminate scab disease and they kill insects and plants. They are used around cats' necks to kill fleas and they are used around the home to kill flies, wasps and ants. They are often used in soil to affect living organisms by working through that enzyme. They have a function. Today, however, we are discussing the other side of the issue—the aberrant effects on humans.

It is often asked what the short and long-term effects are. I will not give descriptions using medical terminology, but saying that organophosphates do your brain in might help people to understand. That is how people describe the effects in the media. Organophosphates cause muscular twitching. There can be effects immediately or in the long term on muscle and brain function, memory retention, learning skills and other aspects of life. Chemicals, including lead, have often been shown to affect the intellectual ability of young people in particular, whose brains and cells are forming to function properly in school.

We will no doubt learn much more as research informs us about the way in which the chemicals work. I am sure that different classes of the chemicals will work differently and have different functions. We will have to find a language for describing medically the way in which functions are impaired by different organophosphates.

[Dr. Ian Gibson]

There has been much scientific and medical research into the effects of the compounds, both with regard to the Gulf war and to farms. Many reports have been produced by august bodies. The argument has moved forward in some ways, but it has not progressed fast enough. I will illustrate some of the directions in which we might still need to carry out research. The questions being asked about organophosphates concern long-term toxic effects following low-level exposure. That is an area of great debate. There is good evidence that where there is high-level exposure to organophosphates, there are immediate toxic effects on the peripheral nervous system and the skeletal muscle. There is uncertainty about the mechanism of how they work, but there is no real argument that there is an effect on those functions.

As the implications of the human genome project explode around the world and we get more information, we are sure to find that some people are more susceptible to the chemicals than others. That will make it more difficult for us to say that everyone will be affected by organophosphates. It is like an airline that says that it did not create the blood clot on the passenger's lungs because the clot developed four days after the flight. Many delayed effects can happen after the body is subjected to some influence.

It is agreed that OPs have potential long-term effects that justify caution in their use. That is the base line on which we can all agree. There is good evidence, too, for delayed effects. Some effects appear in the short term—a matter of days, weeks or just hours—but exposure to high levels of the compounds can also have delayed effects on the nervous and muscular systems.

An explanation is needed for a range of reactions from different organophosphates. The debate is often clouded by arguments about the difficulty of knowing the extent of someone's exposure to a particular organophosphate. It is difficult to record that information. Studies have been rubbished because of the problem of arriving at figures for the level of exposure, and that compounds the confusion in obtaining evidence that could lead to legislation.

Another problem is defining the effects. Some, such as dizziness and twitching, can always be argued to have been caused by something other than organophosphate exposure. It is hard to tie down such symptoms to a low or high dose of a chemical. Some of the effects that are claimed, such as suicide and depression, are also hard to narrow down to one event in someone's complicated life. There may be multifactorial reasons for those problems. However, when one starts to add all the elements together, a picture emerges. Something is going on with the coming of organophosphates into rural communities and lives.

I am pleased that the Government are investigating ways to increase research. I know that research councils and other bodies are funding research into not just Gulf war syndrome but other aspects of chemical pollution. We need more biochemical research, which raises the question of using animals. I see no other way to obtain the necessary results about the effect on nervous systems and behaviour. We can study the way that mice run in mazes, for example. That is the nearest we can come to decent experiments without using human beings. Of course, we can look at tissue culture and ask questions about the enzymes and proteins that are affected and the resulting effects on nerve cells. We can examine brain tissue in post mortems and study the concentration of organophosphates in nerve tissue. We can use electrophysiology to study brain and organ function for the effects of toxic subjection to an organophosphate. At the same time, clinical trials are being conducted—more will be needed—on groups of people who have been affected by the substances, to find out how memory and behaviour develop in the short and long term.

All the research has resulted in many reviews, but the royal colleges and the Medical Research Council tend to focus on symptoms and treatment. The Medical Research Council has gone a little further and suggested in its report that there

> may be a correlation between occupations using OPs and learning problems.

The possibility of a correlation is about as far as one gets in this argument. One wonders what one would have to find out to establish a hard and fast link.

It is hard to define, using different studies from different countries, the general phenomenon of good mental health. That makes gathering evidence difficult and accounts for the many disagreements in academic circles. While admitting that there must be some effects from organophosphates, as they are not natural components of the human body, some authorities question their seriousness. They argue that the body has systems for dealing with the many foreign materials in food and that perhaps we can handle a little dose of organophosphate. However, I do not feel that that would ever be good for me and I do not believe that those who work on farms think that it is good for them. That raises an issue relating to those who say that a little new chemistry in the body does no harm.

How should we go about resolving the issues, given that the response to high or low levels of organophosphates is complex? As people agree that high doses can cause immediate, intermediate or long-term toxic effects, the regulations set about minimising those effects by attempting to limit exposure to sheep dipping or crop spraying. Those regulations often involve advising people to wear gloves, and so on. I understand very well why people are not too good at following that sort of health and safety advice. I am sure that every one of us in the Chamber has taken a risk at some time when we know that we should not have done so. I do not just mean by smoking, but when handling things in the home, spraying plants or whatever, because certain chemicals affect the person. Therefore, we have not resolved the problems of chronic and adverse health effects through regulation, and disagreement continues.

Although further research will continue to resolve some of the problems and find better answers so that we can say, "Yes, it does affect the system, so it is no wonder that people are feeling ill", we must have a much more determined approach.

There have been many suggestions about what we should do about organophosphates, especially in relation to sheep dippers. Many people have argued that there should be a moratorium. We have heard about moratoriums in relation to genetically modified crops, which expresses a certain attitude to tackling such

problems while we do not know much about them. The other argument is to look for alternatives, such as other chemicals that might be less harmful to human beings. Another suggestion is to introduce tighter regulation to ensure that people are protected and that the regulations operate properly. I have spoken about how difficult the latter option is and about how difficult it is to get people to play along. On farms, continuous monitoring would be necessary because activities change daily and are unpredictable; people are in a hurry and so they cut corners. That is sad, but that is the way it is. There are other approaches to dealing with that problem, which I shall not talk about now.

The alternatives have not proved to be very effective. There is evidence that some of the alternatives damage the environment, get into rivers, cause algal blooms and destroy plant life and animal life around rivers. Some people throw up their hands in horror at the idea of a moratorium because they worry about how we would handle the problem of sheep scab. The only answer is that, in some countries where organophosphates are not used, there is no problem with sheep scab, so people argue, "If it all right for them, why is it not all right for us?" That argument is batted back and forth by the warring parties, and we do not seem to move forward.

Science is one way forward, and we are all in favour of good science and understanding things at a deeper level. At the same time, legal cases are pending. Sadly, some of those legal cases are resolved in out-of-court settlements. I say "sadly" because, although I am glad that the cases are resolved, that does not help in bringing cases into the legal system, where other minds and sensitivities can become involved in trying to resolve the problems of people whose health has clearly been damaged by being subjected to such chemicals. I believe that we shall see more instances of that in the next few years. Gulf war syndrome is one such illness that is setting precedents. Farm workers are also bringing forward cases.

We are learning something from Europe—this is something that we have discussed before in the House—from the so-called precautionary principle. That relates to the situation in which 100 per cent. scientific evidence that one thing causes another is unavailable and considers how that situation should be handled until more information is available. I am fascinated by the precautionary principle. I find that there is no definition of the principle in Europe, but there are 14 alternative interpretations of it in Government legislation around the world. I shall mention just two of those interpretations because the principle is relevant in certain situations, and we have used it recently in this country in relation to radio frequency waves for cellular phones and mobile phone bases. In the absence of 100 per cent. scientific evidence, the Stewart report made recommendations to the Government on the basis of the precautionary principle, stating that radiation emanating from phones and bases was causing problems.

In regulating new technologies, whether they are chemical technologies such as OPs or physical technologies such as cellular phones, there must be something in the equation besides science. It is increasingly obvious that public understanding and acceptance that there are problems persuade Governments to take action. For example, the public have been extremely influential in fashioning Government policy in the GM debate and we should be grateful for that.

On the precautionary principle, I pick the two extremes that support my argument from the 14 alternatives—I am prepared to elaborate on the other 12, but I hope that no one is too keen for me to do so. When a hazard is appraised, any risk of harm is noted, built into the control measures and taken seriously. If it is assumed that the evidence is indicative of a problem, that will be taken into account in framing legislation. One alternative would be to ban its use, another to limit the exposure but to take it seriously and accept that something is going on, and that what has happened is not an accident or an act of God.

Another view is that there must be reasonable grounds to conclude that there is a risk, although that gives rise to an argument about what are reasonable grounds. Those who support that view believe that there must be a good reason for doing nothing.

The first approach to the precautionary principle is an alternative to risk analysis; it is assumed that something is a problem and that is built into the equation. The second approach is risk analysis. I do not know how people decide which approach to take; to judge from published literature, the second approach is favoured in respect of OPs, but the first approach was taken by the Countess of Mar when she gave evidence to various committees. She is a brilliant advocate of the precautionary principle.

The issue is political as well as socio-economic, and public opinion has a vital role in bringing matters to the attention of Governments. The precautionary principle had to be adopted in the case of cellular masts for mobile phones because Members of Parliament were hammered by their constituents about the issue; people are suspicious about cellular phones, and especially about the masts on school buildings. The OP lobby, although it is laudable, may not yet have been voluble enough to make that kind of impact on political decisions.

In the three years since I have been a member of the all-party organophosphate group, which was formed eight years ago, the balance of the argument on OPs has been swinging towards a ban on their use, and to other methods of handling the problem of sheep, cat fleas and so on. I hope that the debate will support the argument that these harmful chemicals should be eliminated.

I welcome the Government's action on the issue. They are taking it seriously and tackling the problems, unlike the previous Administration. I urge them to take the final step and act to reduce exposure to harmful organophosphate chemicals.

9.54 am

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I congratulate the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) on securing the debate and on an excellent speech. He has scientific expertise that I, as a layman, certainly do not. That is one of the reasons why he and the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill), who is also present, have been such valuable members of our all-party group.

I do not have the scientific background of the hon. Member for Norwich, North, but I want to follow his definition of the precautionary principle in relation to

[Mr. Paul Tyler]

long low-level exposure to organophosphates. My simple, layman's translation of that principle is, "If in doubt, don't". I have learned that that principle has not applied in many areas from meeting a huge number of people over the past 10 years who have been exposed to these extremely damaging chemicals.

The focus in the recent past has been on the use of organophosphates in agriculture, but they have a long history and are used in several other ways, both domestically and commercially. I want to consider the use of OPs as a lubricant in aircraft engines. The hon. Member for Norwich, North referred to that subject, but he would agree that it has not received the same attention as the agricultural use. It is worrying that some aircraft that use those lubricants are especially susceptible to problems. One of those aircraft, the BAe 146, is used by the Queen's flight, so the House will recognise that the issue is important. The health of pilots, crew and passengers could be affected.

In its evidence to the current House of Lords inquiry into aircraft cabin environment, the Aviation Health Institute—a reputable body—has admirably summed up the situation. Its document states:

> Passengers and crew on some aircraft are being subjected to organophosphates exposure from oil seal leaks into the air conditioning systems. The most common aircraft models involved are Airbus 320 MD-80 and the BAe 146. In the case of the latter, Professor Chris van Netten has demonstrated that filters had sometimes been overloaded allowing fumes to enter the cabin.
>
> It is known that organophosphate pesticides have a significant deleterious effect on the human immune system as well as being a neurotoxin. In the UK the DETR has confirmed that the failure of oil seals occurs in one in every 22,000 flights, resulting in organophosphate exposure. At Heathrow, where there are 440,000 aircraft movements, this could effect 20 aircraft a year or some 2,000 passengers.

That is not a tiny minority. The document continues:

> In Australia a senate committee is investigating the neurotoxic effect of BAe 146 and lawsuits are pending in the US and Canada on leakage of organophosphates into aircraft cabins.

I am in touch with the chairman of that Australian senate inquiry, whose report is imminent. He is visiting this country shortly, and I hope that he will have the opportunity to meet others of us who are concerned about the issue.

I find alarming the apparent complacency of the United Kingdom authorities. We have known for some time that those potentially lethal chemicals are used as lubricants in aircraft engines—not only fixed-wing aircraft but in helicopters. I notice from this morning's *Hansard* that, in the debate about the RAF Chinook crash that took place in this Chamber yesterday, the reason why pilots took the action that they did was not identified. There may be a connection with organophosphates.

Early in 1999, I obtained information from Ministers at the Department of Health and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Since then, we have sought assurances about the use of OP lubricants and safety precautions. Last December, I received a disturbing report from Sweden, which stated that, on 12 November, an unidentified toxic gas almost caused a catastrophe in a BAe 146 passenger aircraft operated by Braathens Malmo Aviation. The Minister may be able to correct my Swedish pronunciation, as she is a known linguist.

On the first leg of a three-part trip, the cabin attendants felt strange and experienced incredible pressure. One attendant described the experience as like a "moonwalk." On the second leg, the discomfort returned, and the two pilots experienced it too. On the third leg, to Sturrup airport, the cabin manager realised that something was seriously wrong, went forward to the cockpit before landing and found that both pilots were wearing their oxygen masks. The captain was so near to blackout, in his words:

> feeling dizzy and groggy despite the oxygen

that he had instructed the first officer to take over the controls and land the plane.

The Swedish board of accident investigation, the airline and the aircraft engine manufacturers all treated the incident as very serious, as well they might. The initial investigation pointed to a leak of a potentially toxic engine lubricant. I was anxious to establish whether that was an OP. We already know that they were originally intended only for helicopter engines, which operate at relatively low altitudes—therefore without the air pressure problems—and at lower speeds.

That incident and others have been drawn to the attention of our Ministers, but there seems to have been no effective analysis or dissemination of information to warn aircrews and passengers. In evidence to the House of Lords, the British Air Line Pilots Association writes:

> Our concerns have been raised with both the CAA and the DETR, however, their response was that any such contamination could be controlled by either isolating the air conditioning unit or shutting down the affected engine. This action, however, can only be taken after exposure has occurred and this would be experienced by not just one or two individuals, but possibly all of the passengers and crew.
>
> Due to the flight safety issues raised by the symptoms of exposure such as disorientation, blurred vision, impaired memory and altered coordination, attempts have been made to address these problems worldwide. These include changes in design, maintenance and operation procedures. However, while the problem persists, exposure of staff and the public to levels of toxicants that may affect safety and health continues.
>
> Despite the flight safety issues and health risks associated with the use of toxic compounds and reported incidents of cabin air contamination, neither the Industry nor Government has fully investigated this issue. We, therefore, feel that the use of these substances should be investigated and reconsidered.

I apologise for reading a long extract from that evidence, but I think that hon. Members will agree that its influence and importance are considerable, as it comes from such an authoritative source.

However, Ministers still show the most extraordinary and breathtaking complacency. As long ago as last December, I asked the Ministry of Defence and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to investigate the implications of the BAe incident. A Minister from the MOD replied:

> We have no record of any recent military aircraft incidents relating to the use of organophosphate lubricants. The organophosphate compound tricresylphosphate is present in almost all military aero-engine lubricants and, as no viable alternative products are available, appropriate measures are taken to avoid the exposure of air and ground crew to any potential health hazards. We understand that BAe systems is investigating the incident involving a civil BAe 146 aircraft on 12 November and we will consider any recommendations that emerge.—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 20 December 1999; Vol. 341, c. 363W.]

I will not repeat the DETR's answer, because other hon. Members want to speak, but I hope that they will accept that it is similar. Again, acute exposure high-level dosage is mentioned, but there is no recognition of the damage that can be caused to human health by low-level exposure over a long period.

What conclusions have been reached? It is now many months since the incident, and presumably there has been at least an interim report. What advice has been given to airlines that operate those planes or, indeed, those who operate the Queen's flight? Are there maintenance or flying instruction implications? Who knows? Ministers continue to disclose the minimum of information. I have again questioned them and received equally sketchy answers. I tabled written questions to ask the Secretary of State for Defence and the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions whether their reviews of the incidents involving possible organophosphate air pollution on board aircraft had reached conclusions. On 13 June, the Minister for the Armed Forces said:

> We have no evidence of organophosphate pollution on military aircraft affecting personnel, but we will consider carefully any conclusions from an on-going BAe Systems investigation into an incident involving a civil BAe 146 aircraft last year.—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 13 June 2000; Vol. 351, c. 564W.]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), said:

> The investigation of these incidents is still under review. The report will be published following its outcome. I am unable to comment until that stage has been reached.—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 13 June 2000; Vol. 351, c. 555W.]

The emphasis is on allowing the commercial operators or manufacturers of the aircraft or the engines to do their own research. It worries me that there is no sign of any external, objective and authoritative analysis of that incident.

In the meantime, I have received an interesting letter from BAE Systems. It does not deny any of the information that I have related, but, in a revealing phrase, it claims that the implication in a recent report that the issue is specific to the BAE 146 is inaccurate. In other words, other craft may be involved. Two wrongs, let alone 2,000 wrongs, do not make a right. There was no attempt to suggest that the media or those directly involved as air crews had encouraged the concern. BAe Systems accepted that a problem exists. Of course, it, too, awaits the outcome of the Swedish investigation.

As the hon. Member for Norwich, North said, official research reports dating back to the 1950s identify OPs as potentially extremely dangerous toxic chemicals. In concentrated form, they have been proved to have acute effects on human health. Low-level dosage over long periods is still being investigated, and I, too, pay tribute to the Government for accelerating such research in the past three years. There is widespread evidence of chronic effects in at least a substantial proportion of those exposed to OP vapour.

If the legal and official inquiries produce firm evidence that the health and safety of aircraft crews and passengers are being risked regularly by exposure to toxic fumes, the consequences will be far-reaching. This summer, tour operators, those responsible for military aircraft and perhaps the officials responsible for the Queen's household should be made aware of the facts. I hope that as soon as the current investigations are complete, the Government will produce a full report.

Investigations by the OP Information Network, an extremely effective voluntary organisation which has done much pioneering work, have revealed a hiatus at the heart of the Government. The Department of Health, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Health and Safety Executive, the Environment Agency and the Civil Aviation Authority do not accept responsibility for threats to human health once an aircraft has left the ground. People are on their own. A request that the application of the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 1999 be checked has remained unanswered.

The OP saga remains a chronicle of disinformation, dither and delay over many decades. The continuing failure of the United Kingdom authorities to insist on a withdrawal or moratorium on the use of OP products until they are proved to be safe will expose Ministers to renewed claims for compensation. Meanwhile, as the hon. Member for Norwich, North said, research at Imperial college London, and University college, London shows new evidence of damage to human brain and nervous systems, even from long-term low-level exposure to OP sheep dips. The many victims are now asking, "When will Ministers ever learn?"

10.9 am

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): As a fellow vice-chairman of the all-party group on organophosphates, I congratulate the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) on having obtained this important debate.

I also congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), who was the driving force behind the formation of the all-party group. I should like to voice my appreciation of all the time, effort and sheer hard work that he has put into the topic over a long period. It is rare in this place for compliments to be handed across the Chamber, but I would like to give credit where it is due, and he deserves some recognition for his work on this issue.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about OP use in relation to aircraft, and I am sure that hon. Members were interested in what he had to say. I will confine my remarks to OPs in the sheep industry, of which I have first-hand experience. Colleagues will recognise that the sheep industry is valuable and important in the Ludlow constituency.

Based on my experience and from talking to many farmers, I can say that a generation of farmers, shepherds and others involved in sheep dipping were totally unaware of the risks of using organophosphates for a long time. Although it might be feasible for the Government to claim that individual users of OPs should have taken greater steps to satisfy themselves that they used materials safely, the investigation of the past few years has shown that successive Governments have failed to impress the dangers on the users. To this day, it is emphasised that the user should take all reasonable precautions and, for example, read the instructions on the label. I shall describe in a moment how the guidance is not practical and has not had the desired effect. I shall mention some cases of people in my constituency affected by OPs.

[Mr. Christopher Gill]

As an officer of the all-party OP group, I welcome the decision made by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in December to put a temporary ban on the production and sale of OP sheep dips, pending the industry designing safer containers. I was surprised at the reaction of the National Farmers Union, which I gathered from the farming press was critical of Ministers' decisions. I understand why; there is no question but that OP sheep dips have been efficacious and relatively cheap. If a product that is effective and cheap is taken off the market, sheep farmers and their profit margins—if they have any—will obviously be affected.

I have received no representations from the NFU or individual farmers to say that the Government were wrong to make that decision. That puzzles me somewhat. I would have expected some of my sheep-farming constituents to approach me, knowing my involvement in the all-party group. The fact that I have received no such representations suggests that the majority of sheep farmers, at least in my constituency, recognise that the decision may have been right and understand the serious effect of the chemical on the health of their colleagues.

I shall quote three examples: first, the case of Mr. Evans of Lydbury North who kindly convened a meeting of farmers in my constituency who had various tales to tell about OPs. Mr. Evans believes that his health was impaired as a result of using organophosphate sheep dips, and one of his greatest difficulties was that the medical profession refused to accept that. For a long time, doctors said, "You have all the classic symptoms of Parkinson's disease. Go away and do not trouble us again." That is a common experience. One of our problems in the industry has been persuading general practitioners and others in the medical profession to accept that the symptoms displayed by sheep farmers are more likely to have been caused by the use of organophosphate sheep dips than by more conventional, recognised diseases or illnesses.

Another case involves a constituent who drank from a work mate's pop bottle on a very hot day. Unfortunately, the contents were not pop but sheep dip, which had been bottled by the farmer for use on another occasion. That case, which will shortly come to court, is technically sub judice, so I shall say only that between drinking the contents of the bottle, which my constituent thought was pop, and his life being saved in hospital a few hours later, technically the man "died" several times, because the effect of concentrated OPs on the human body is dramatic and devastating.

My next case concerns a constituent who suffers from a condition caused by low dosage absorption of OPs over a long period. The man ran a pregnancy testing service for sheep farmers. He went round farms testing the ewes to see whether they were in lamb, which helped the farmer to decide on their nutritional requirements. They need less feed if they are not in lamb and more if they are carrying twins or triplets.

My constituent operated the sheep pregnancy testing service for 10 or 11 years until he began to feel unwell. He concluded that he became ill as a result of his contact with sheep, especially their nether regions, to which the sheep dip migrates. The man possibly never saw the sheep dipped because he would be carrying out the pregnancy testing at a later, indeterminate stage. It is unlikely that he ever saw a tin of dip with the instruction on the label that Ministers are keen to tell farmers that they should have read. That man was not technically a sheep farmer or a shepherd, but he was closely involved in the sheep industry. He is convinced, as I am, having heard him speak about his experiences, that his health has been impaired because of his provision of that service.

As the hon. Member for Norwich, North has said, organophosphates potentially affect the human body in all sorts of ways. They are obviously invasive of the nervous system and there is no doubt that they affect memory. They cause intolerance to alcohol, affect muscular processes and, as the hon. Gentleman said, lead to mental health problems. There is circumstantial evidence that such health problems lead many farmers and shepherds to take their life.

People suffering from the ingestion of OPs are shy about telling others about another aspect of the symptoms. The chemicals can affect libido. Such people might not feel quite themselves. I was going to say that they might feel under the weather, but that would take us back to the pregnancy tester. Naturally, someone in that situation would not want to tell their family and local community that they had lost their sex drive. He might be thought to be rather an odd fish. We are considering just the tip of the iceberg. For that reason and others, there is great reluctance among people affected to declare their concern about the use of organophosphates.

Has the Government's reaction to OPs been proportionate? How does the action taken compare, for example, with the action on BSE or CJD? As the hon. Member for North Cornwall said, it appears to many people that there has been complacency on the issue, even though there has been so much circumstantial evidence suggesting that people's health has been seriously impaired by the use of the chemicals.

10.23 am

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) on introducing the debate on what is an important topic for me and my constituency because organophosphates are produced in King's Lynn.

As ever, my hon. Friend has given a balanced view of the topic. However, that is not always what we find in the media. I have been made especially aware since my election of the dangers of hype and of what I refer to as junk science. For their own reasons, the media, businesses, politicians and individual scientists sometimes wish to use faulty scientific data and, in particular, to group together chemicals that should not be grouped together. I would like to make it clear that I do not want to argue with the need for caution or that some organophosphates are not dangerous. We must not conclude that we should be frightened of using chemicals because some are dangerous, but we must be careful to act on real evidence and not to be pushed or harried by exaggeration into actions in our role as regulators that are detrimental to the wider interests of not only agriculture, but all our constituents.

This morning's debate is timely because the product that is made in King's Lynn has been in the international news. In the United States, the Environmental Protection Agency, through agreements with Dow Chemical Company, has introduced changes to its regulations, which remove the single most used insecticide from the domestic market in the US and restrict its use in agriculture. I was aware that chlorpyrifos was part of an insecticide named dursban, which has been produced in King's Lynn since 1978. Last year, as a result of scare stories, I checked what was made at Dow Chemicals and looked at some of the chemicals' properties.

Chlorpyrifos is not emitted into the air during manufacture. It has low vapour pressure, and I was assured that there is no danger to those who work in the plant or to the local community from the manufacturing process. It is not listed as a human carcinogen. Extensive tests are required around the world, including in the US and Europe, and the tests for carcinoginicity, mutagenicity and teratogenic activities were all negative. Therefore, I have no concerns about my constituents who live or work near or at the plant. However, like all hon. Members, I am anxious that we should heed good science and protect consumers.

The announcement was made in the United States on 6 or 7 June. On 9 June, a press release was issued by a pressure group in the United Kingdom,

demanding that Britain follow the American lead and bans the dangerous pesticide chlorpyrifos, which has been associated with brain damage...UK consumers are regularly exposed to this chemical in their diets.

The press release quotes documents from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food as saying that the chemical has been found in apples, grapes, strawberries, oranges and celery. It goes on to say,

New research by the US Environmental Protection Agency has shown that it can cause brain damage in rats.

The pressure group comments:

This filthy pesticide should be taken off the shelves at once. If it's too toxic for the US, it's too toxic for us. Next week is Food Safety Week—the Government will be telling people how to prepare their food safely. But the Government has to set an example—and make sure that food is grown safely in the first place.

That sort of press release is not untypical of pretty junky science. I took the trouble to look up some of the original documents to see what was said in the press reports and by scientists about the decisions taken in the United States. I also looked at the summaries of the pesticides monitoring data published by MAFF to see what was actually said. The fear expressed in the press release is that people are regularly exposed to the chemical, are finding it in their fruit and that it must be taken away.

The independent chairman of a working group on the subject said that it was not possible to detect the pesticides in almost 99 per cent. of the samples examined. The legal limits are set so as to include large safety factors. The chairman said that none of the residues that exceeded those limits were high enough to cause concern. He said:

The extremely small proportion of samples which exceeded the legal limits would not cause harm to consumers.

Similarly, it has been said that the results show that consumers would be at negligible risk from the small proportion of samples where maximum residue limits were exceeded. Of course, samples that show that the legal limits have been exceeded are cause for concern, but they are not necessarily cause for panic if we have gained efficacy in the product. The reason that such products have been used for 30-odd years is that they are known to be efficient.

In looking at the US decision, I was particularly interested in an article in *The Seattle Times* by William O. Robertson, who was head of the Washington poison control centre for 30 years. He explained that he did not recall a single incident of dursban-caused illness. He went on to explain that that chemical was withdrawn because safety factor was piled upon safety factor. The US Environmental Protection Agency decided that it would not use human test data; it was thought to be ethically unacceptable. It decided instead to base the safety factor on animal doses. It worked out the dose that seemed to cause an effect on the animal, multiplied it by 10 for safety and then by a further factor of 10; it also took account of the size of the animal compared to humans to allow for the possibility that we might be more sensitive than the animal, and then added another factor of 10 because children might be involved. That is a safety factor of 1,000.

I know that time is pressing, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I want to balance the argument. I accept the precautionary principle, but I want to add a little common sense. A safety factor of 1,000 is leading to the removal of goods from the shelves. That may be correct, and I am happy for our regulators to consider it, but we should not automatically assume that we need a safety factor of 1,000 between what the tests show to be harmful and what we allow. There is room for debate.

For instance, I shall consider the precautionary principle in relation to the poison that I know best—alcohol. If we tested how much alcohol could be given to a dog before it became affected and then applied a safety factor of 1,000, I would not be allowed even a teaspoon of beer. That is not reasonable, because we have thousands of years of experience of alcohol. The precautionary principle depends on a degree of ignorance. It might be argued that, because children are damaged in motor vehicle accidents and exposed to risks on the roads, we should introduce a further factor of 10 as a precautionary principle and reduce the speed limit on motorways to 7 mph.

A balancing act is needed. I hope that the Government will take it seriously. Of course we must listen to what science has to say, but we must use a modicum of common sense in balancing efficacy against knowledge. We have 30 years' experience. I hope that the Government will distinguish between chemicals, consider the evidence and not be bulldozed into making decisions across broad spectrums because of the trash science that we too often read in our media.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. I appeal to the remaining speakers to take account of the reduced time left for Front-Bench spokesmen.

10.34 am

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): Successive Governments have shown a remarkable unwillingness to act on any sort of precautionary principle in the

[Mr. Colin Breed]

handling of OPs. Indeed, as early as 1951, it was recommended that dye be added to organophosphate sheep dips to enable farmers to identify splashes, and that labels reading "Deadly poison" be used. What we are talking about has been known for a long time.

I believe that OP sufferers have gone for years without being properly diagnosed. General practitioners and hospitals have received little guidance in diagnosing the symptoms, and many victims have been diagnosed with different problems, such as myalgic encephalomyelitis or Parkinson's disease. It is only recently that, following the report of the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment and the recommendation of the Veterinary Products Committee, it has been decided to ban OPs pending the improvement of their containers, to prevent exposure to concentrate.

At present, no one is really winning. Farmers are suffering because of sheep scab in their flocks while OP dips are banned. More importantly, they suffer ill health after years of inadequate precautions. There seems to be no doubt that OP sheep dips are dangerous and toxic. Surely, all the evidence that has been available for some time is sufficient to conclude that the precautionary principle in some form—and I accept that there are various forms—demands protection for all those who work with OPs as well as substantial Government support for the development of alternative, and less risky, methods of preventing sheep scab in particular. Like many of my colleagues, I was a little disappointed by the failure of the Agriculture Committee's report to expose the area of need that I have outlined. By focusing chiefly on the containers issue, the Committee has deflected attention from the crucial need to investigate alternatives.

The Government have sought to deny any risk, claiming that most of the people in contact with concentrates such as OPs would have been environmental health officers, technicians or individual regimental hygiene duties personnel, who are appropriately trained in procedures and the use of equipment. However, it is clear that many people use OPs without that training and without an understanding of the precautions that are needed. Indeed, an answer to a recent parliamentary question stated:

> there is currently no reason to believe that Gulf veterans who might have been in casual contact with dilute pesticide...or with the malathion dust used to de-louse Iraqi prisoners of war, are at increased risk of long-term ill health.—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 20 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 536W.]

Surely, however, the crucial word in that passage is "currently". Constant use of such language leaves the door open. The scientific jury is clearly out, and there is a need at least for further investigation of such poisoning.

What all kinds of sufferers want is real action by the Government. I have three quick suggestions. First, we should clearly and immediately adopt the precautionary principle, and Government policy should in every way possible take account of the lessons of the past when insufficient precautions have been taken. Secondly, we should undertake a scheme properly to assess the risks associated with OPs. Those are jumping up in all sorts of areas, such as aircraft lubricants, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler). There are all kinds of ways in which OPs can become a part of people's lives without their knowing about it. Thirdly, I am concerned about funding for research and development. We heard earlier about the genome project. The money available to investigate that was enormous. That is because of the enormous commercial benefits. Research and development today seem to be driven more by the commercial benefit imperative than by some other considerations such as the health of people who come into contact with chemicals.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Breed: I am afraid that I do not have time.

10.39 am

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): I shall be brief, to allow the Minister time to respond. I add my congratulations to those already given to the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson). This is an important debate and he has given a comprehensive presentation on this problem.

It is no surprise to me that the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is responding to the debate. However, the issue straddles more than one Department, and the need for co-ordination between Government Departments is one message that has come out of the debate. The matter should be addressed from several different angles, not only from the MAFF perspective.

I shall restrict my comments to the MAFF decision taken in December 1999 and announced through a written answer in the Lords to withdraw all organophosphate sheep dips in response to fears that the chemicals posed a danger to human health. We should be clear that the ban is not a blanket ban on OP dip chemicals, but a withdrawal of the OP dip containers. The Government appear to be saying that OPs will be reintroduced when the containers have been redesigned to minimise operator exposure to OPs. Many anti-OP campaigners, including the Pesticides Trust, welcomed their move, as have most of this morning's speakers, but the general reaction from the agricultural community has been more hostile.

Many livestock producers believe that OP dips are the most effective means of controlling common ectoparasites on sheep, such as scab and blowfly. The alternatives are all problematic owing to lack of effectiveness, expense and time restrictions on releasing treated animals into the food chain. The main alternatives are synthetic pyrethroids, greater use of which is likely to increase resistance to parasites.

Farmers are concerned about their animals' welfare and fear the effect of worsening animal welfare on their livelihoods. Although parasitic infection may not cause premature death, there is a direct read-across from it to rate of maturation, the value of by-products such as sheepskin and increased veterinary expenses. The greatest fear is of an outbreak of scab. The hon. Member for Norwich, North said that there was little sign of that at the moment, but the use of illegally held stockpiles of OP dips may be keeping such an outbreak in check.

Although farmers are primarily concerned with the animal welfare consequences of withdrawal of OPs, concerns have also been expressed about environmental consequences. The problem lies in the lack of suitable alternatives to OPs. The Environment Agency, which monitors pollution levels in watercourses, warns of a much greater risk of groundwater pollution from the use of synthetic pyrethroids, which are the main alternative to OPs for sheep farmers. Those chemicals are 100 times more toxic to aquatic life than OPs, and pose a particular threat to invertebrate creatures that sustain larger aquatic animals such as salmon.

The Agriculture Committee report was critical of the Government and took MAFF to task over its handling of the decision. The Committee said that

> much of the confusion surrounding the announcement of 20 December could have been prevented if more effective procedures had been in place for consulting manufacturers, farmers' representatives and statutory agencies and for disseminating advice and information after the decision had been made public.

The Committee was also clear about the consequences of the Government's actions, stating:

> We remain concerned that users of sheep dips are without their preferred means of combating sheep disease for the foreseeable future and there are likely to be severe economic, environmental and animal welfare implications as a result.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that the horns of the dilemma are that either the chemicals used seriously damage human health or they devastate the environment? Should not objective, non-commercial research be carried out to produce new products as soon as possible to overcome both those problems?

Mr. Moss: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, but the Government are not saying that at the moment. They have acted merely because doing nothing would not have been acceptable. There are no real alternatives to OPs apart from pyrethroids. Research, not least into the effects on human health, is important in regard to every aspect of OPs.

I wish to ask the Minister several questions, some of which she might not be able to answer today; if not, I would welcome answers in writing. First, why did not MAFF Ministers consult more widely before announcing the ban on OP dips? Which organisations did the Government consult in the months between receiving the report from the Institute of Occupational Medicine and making their decision to withdraw OPs? Does MAFF have any contingency plan in the event of a major outbreak of scab occur? If MAFF intends to reintroduce OPs, will it publish a timetable for that? What advice will MAFF give farmers on alternatives to OP dips? Why did not the Government consider the environmental impact of OP withdrawal before making their announcement? Finally, will the Government accept and implement the recommendations of the Agriculture Committee?

10.46 am

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): I am pleased to respond to the debate, which is on a subject of interest and concern to many people. I begin by emphasising that the Government take those concerns seriously. Two years ago, we initiated the most rigorous and transparent scrutiny of OPs ever undertaken.

I appreciate the way in which the debate has been conducted, beginning with the balanced introduction of my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson). He pointed to the wide-ranging nature of the debate and said that the concerns that have been expressed relate to a number of different Departments. I do not accept the criticism of the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss), who speaks for the Opposition on such issues, that we do not have a co-ordinated approach to the matter. The Government set up an official group on OPs, which is co-ordinated by my department and which reported in June 1998. Since then, all Departments with an interest have been involved—the Ministry of Defence, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Health and Safety Executive, the Cabinet Office, the territorial departments and so on. We are anxious to ensure co-ordination on the issue, different aspects of which come under the responsibility of different Departments, and to ensure that the matters are properly considered. The existence of the all-party group helps in that respect because it offers a way of bringing together interested members from all parties who may be interested in different aspects of the issue—that has certainly been reflected in the varied contributions that have been made this morning.

We all know that OPs are toxic chemicals, acute exposure to which has ill-health effects. The question that needs to be answered is whether long-term exposure to low levels of OPs has similarly detrimental effects—a point that was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North in his introduction. It is the question that we put to the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment—COT—in 1998. It set up a working group of the best specialists in the field, which took evidence from those with an interest in the problem, including representatives of sufferers' groups. Its report was published last November. It concluded that ill-health effects from prolonged low-level exposure to OPs remained unproven, although there is still a question about whether a small group of individuals may be especially susceptible to OPs.

The three regulatory committees that advise the Government on the subject are the Veterinary Products Committee, the Advisory Committee on Pesticides and the Committee on Safety of Medicines. We asked them to consider the implications of the report. They all advised that, on the basis of current scientific knowledge, there should be no general withdrawal of OPs from the market. However, they endorsed the need for further research to tackle the identified points of uncertainty.

Simultaneously, the Veterinary Products Committee advised us on the results of a three-year study by the Institute of Occupational Medicine in Edinburgh into sheep dippers' exposure to OPs. It suggested that the greatest hazard arose when handling the concentrated dip.

We took immediate action to implement the committees' advice through a four-point plan. First, marketing authorisation holders were required to withdraw all OP sheep dips from the market pending the

[Ms Joyce Quin]

introduction of modified concentrate containers designed to minimise the risk of operator exposure. Secondly, we revoked the approval for three OP pesticide compounds for which data packages had not been submitted as part of the review on OPs by the Advisory Committee on Pesticides. Thirdly, we implemented measures to promote best practice and, fourthly, we are developing a targeted research programme to implement the research recommendations of the committees. The importance of research was rightly emphasised by several hon. Members in the debate.

Many views have been expressed. The hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire mentioned the report of the Select Committee on Agriculture. The hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) referred to concerns in his constituency and to his contact with the farming community, especially sheep farmers. He signalled the fact that there has been a mixed reaction to the Government's decision. Some people have supported it, but we know that the National Farmers Union did not welcome the procedure or the substance of the decision. Nor did other organisations such as the National Sheep Association.

Hon. Members will be aware of the views that were expressed to the Select Committee on Agriculture. It concluded that, although it did not want to dismiss the sufferings of those whose ill health had been linked to OP sheep dips, it would be of general benefit if OP sheep dip concentrates were restored to the market in suitably designed containers as soon as possible. It is fair to say, therefore, that many different views have been expressed on the subject. It is the Government's responsibility to listen to representations and to act on the basis of our scientific advice, which we have done. However, I would not underestimate the complexity of some of the issues involved, and my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North did not do so either.

Mr. Öpik: As a member of the Select Committee, I want to remind the Minister that the view expressed in the report was mainly based on the fact that at present no alternative product balances the interests of preventing sheep scab and not wrecking the environment.

Ms Quin: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point. Some products are used as alternatives; the hon. Member for Ludlow spoke about their cost and efficacy and the question of long-lasting effects in controlling the parasites and the relevant diseases. That explains many of the representations that the Government have received.

I understand that hon. Members are concerned to know whether OP sheep dips might return to the market and, if so, when. All that I can say is that we expect to receive further advice from the Veterinary Products Committee shortly, and, in common with previous practice, we shall make an announcement to Parliament before informing the marketing authorisation holders of the Government's decision.

The hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire asked several questions that were also raised in the Select Committee's report. Obviously, the Government have a responsibility to respond to that report and shall do so shortly. If that response does not answer the questions that the hon. Gentleman asked, I shall write to him and, given the interest that has been shown this morning, ensure that my letter is available in the House of Commons Library.

The precautionary principle was mentioned, and I accept that there is no universally accepted definition of the principle, either domestically or across Europe, where many such regulations are negotiated and agreed. None the less, the authorisation procedures for veterinary medicinal products and pesticides take a generally precautionary approach to risk assessment. The thrust of our precautionary approach is that exposure should be reduced well below the level that might cause problems.

The Health and Safety Executive evaluates the practicality of recommended proportions. Surveys of dipping practice and inspections have taken place, so we believe that there is evidence of improved practice. That is borne out by the fact that the number of incidents investigated has now fallen from its peak in the early 1990s. We must pay tribute to those who expressed concern about the products. Their action brought about some extra controls and extra precautions. As a result, an approach that is generally more responsible has emerged. I would not like to under-emphasise that.

The risk from pesticides was mentioned, and, in that regard, the Government's primary aim is to protect people, animals and the environment. Like veterinary medicines, all pesticides are assessed for safety in use, and no pesticide may be sold or used unless approved by Ministers. All pesticides are subject to routine review if evidence emerges about their safety. In response to public concern, our current domestic review programme has focused on the use of OP compounds.

I shall briefly refer to the research programme that we are undertaking. Hon. Members present, particularly those in the all-party group, are familiar with the research programme, but the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) asked about research into alternatives to dips, and I feel that neither he nor the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire recognised the work that we are doing.

We are funding a major programme of research into alternative strategies for controlling sheep scab, costing £1.6 million. The projects include basic studies on the biology of the scab mite, aimed at identifying aspects of the mite's physiology that could be targets for alternative control methods. They could include vaccines, fungi pathogenic to the mites, means of altering the allergic response of the sheep or means of interfering with the mite's feeding process. It is important that hon. Members recognise that the Government are focusing on that and are keen to deal with the issue seriously

I welcome the fact that this debate has taken place. Ministers in other Departments who are interested in the subjects raised will be aware of it, but I shall draw their attention to the comments made by hon. Members about the responsibility of other Departments. I hope that, in attempting to answer at least some of the questions that have been asked, I have persuaded hon. Members that the Government are dealing with the issue with the utmost seriousness.

Fraud (European Community)

11 am

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): We come now to the next issue for our consideration. I call David Michael Davis.

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving my full title.

The fact that the European Commission suffers from fraud, corruption, incompetence and nepotism is a matter of public knowledge and public record a little more than a year after the pseudo-resignation of the Commission. I say "pseudo-resignation", because it was designed to protect rather than punish the guilty. The pay, perks, pensions and powers of all the Commissioners were maintained until their eventual replacement by the current Commission.

I raise the issue of fraud because of an event that took place before those resignations that makes me worry about the extent to which the European Union takes the issue seriously. A year before those dramatic events at the Commission, the Public Accounts Committee had for the second time raised the problem of fraud in the European Union. The European Court of Auditors had raised the matter more than once. I took part in a debate with Jacques Santer, the President of the Commission at that time, on the "Today" programme. His first response—admittedly, a year before the crisis, but after he had received at least two ECA reports on the matter—was to deny that there was any significant fraud, despite our criticisms and the fact that it had been raised at the Council of Ministers.

Secondly, when that argument failed, Mr. Santer said that fraud was the fault of the member states—that more than 80 per cent. of the fraud related to members states, not the Commission, so the member states should solve the problem. Thirdly, he said that the mechanisms available to deal with fraud were perfectly okay and that OCLAF—the office of the Commission that was supposed to co-ordinate anti-fraud efforts— was doing its job and there was no need to make it more independent. All that was contrary to the eventual findings of the committee of wise men appointed by the European Parliament.

I mention that individual event, because historically the tendency of the Commission and all the institutions of the Union has been to sweep uncomfortable issues under the carpet. I am one of those—perhaps we are in the minority in this Room—who do not believe that we should leave the European Union. We must build a Union that can hold the faith of the public whom it serves. The current Union does not do anything like that. I do not want the Union to be allowed to forget about the problem, so that it returns in five or 10 years' time in an even more unpleasant and virulent form.

I have seen no reference—this may be my fault—in the intergovernmental conference preparations or in the agendas of Feira or for Nice in December to deal with the problems of fraud, incompetence and corruption in the European Union. What are the Government's plans? I, and many others, have no intention of letting the issue be forgotten.

I have several questions for the Minister: first, what immediate action has been taken on the frauds that we know about? Such action is a test of the resolve of this Government and of those throughout the European Union to deal with the issue, rather than being a conclusive answer to the problem. Secondly, what reforms will Vice-President Kinnock introduce to resolve the issue, and how speedily will they be made? Thirdly, what further actions will be taken to deal with the issue? Will they be on the IGC agenda in December?

I have my tongue in my cheek when I say "immediate action" because I am basing my comments on data from the 1998 European Court of Auditors report, the most recent one available. It is two years since the matters that we are discussing were aired and three years since the actions were committed. That is an aside, but it has implications for the European Union.

The ECA raised the matter of frauds and irregularities in individual countries; this country was not perfect as there was fraud totalling some £12 million. However, far and away the biggest irregularity was in Italy, where the total reached £106 million, mostly in four major olive oil scandals. As the United Kingdom is one of the few net contributors in the European Union, those scandals cost British taxpayers tens of millions of pounds. The Treasury should therefore take an interest on behalf of the British taxpayer. Was a penalty levied on Italy for the £106-million irregularity? If so, has it been paid?

The second issue raised in the ECA report was a substantial fraud relating to the export of meat to Jordan. A subsidy of £46 million was involved, but it was not really for export to Jordan—it was an embargo-busting operation for Iraq. European Union taxpayers' money was used in defiance of a United Nations resolution and western nations' actions to control the evil dictatorship in Iraq. I want to know whether a prosecution has been brought against those who defied almost every national policy in the European Union and used significant sums of British taxpayers' money to do so.

A third issue in the ECA report was the contract awarded for guarding the European Commission buildings. That is poignant because it was awarded by the security department, which is responsible for protecting the integrity—in every sense—of the European Commission. The contract was found to be fraudulent; it involved ghost workers and criminal false accounting. The ECA report stated that four members of the department would be disciplined and the case was handed to the Belgian police for prosecution. Has that prosecution been completed, and if so has anyone has been punished as a result? As I said, we should bear in mind the fact that the issues I have raised are three years old.

I raised those cases as symbols of how seriously we take the matter. The Chamber will note that one of them relates to a national failure, one to an individual contract, and one to something done by the Commission. I picked them because the way in which they will be dealt with is interesting.

I am also concerned about the strategic reforms that the European Union is undertaking. I should say up front that I approve of the fact that Vice-President Kinnock has been put in charge of the reforms. I might upset my Conservative colleagues by saying that, but he is a tough and honest politician; nobody would deny him that. He knows the European system. Some would

[Mr. David Davis]

consider that a vice rather than a virtue, but in this context it is a virtue. More importantly, he knows our system, which is one of the best for maintaining propriety in public life. We are not necessarily alone in that: one or two other systems in Europe are comparable. Vice-President Kinnock does not have to reinvent the wheel in what he is doing in the European Union. He has lived in a system that puts propriety at the top of the priority tree.

However, no matter how good, determined or tough he is, he cannot do the job alone. The Comptroller and Auditor General and the Public Accounts Committee have sought to help him. He will need UK Government support. Sometimes, support takes the form of pushing as well as helping. I will return to that point.

I will focus on the nature and speed of what Vice-President Kinnock intends to do. I disagree with him about the new anti-fraud office. The National Audit Office's staff are not civil servants. They are independently recruited; there might be secondment arrangements, but there is not an integrated career path by which a member of the NAO's staff could look forward to working in, for instance, the Department of Social Security or the Ministry of Defence. That is so for a good reason—it means that there is no social or career pressure on an individual to pull punches in criticising the body that he is investigating. That is not true of the new European Anti-Fraud Office—OLAF. I am not criticising any individual. I do not know the new head of OLAF, Franz-Hermann Bruener, but, as far as I can tell from studying his curriculum vitae, he is well qualified and independently minded, although he has previously been employed by the European Commission in other respects.

Simply being a part of an organisation can make it difficult for an audit body or an anti-fraud body to be as impartial as it ought to be. That situation can render it open to corruption or to pressure. After all, one of the issues that I raised earlier concerned the security arm of the Commission. OLAF should properly have been a completely separate body, accountable either to the European Court of Auditors or to the European Court of Justice. I am concerned about the situation, especially because the pressure to prevent that from happening came from two sources. Surprisingly, it came not from the Commission in the first instance. Instead, it came from the European Parliament—I am afraid that there is no surprise in that, to put it bluntly—and from the Council of Ministers. What stance did the British Government take on the matter? If we did not support the British parliamentary model and the other best models, most of which come from northern Europe, why not, and what was the logic behind the position? That situation is a flaw in the system. There is supposed to be a superstructure to protect the system, but it will not prevent the pressures about which I am concerned.

Some of what I am about to say with regard to the European Parliament's role might be an important component of possible proposals for the next IGC. A Parliament—certainly our Parliament—is a fierce and largely independent scrutineer of Government, although there are obviously party pressures within it, which I shall discuss in a moment. The European Parliament has a peculiar problem, which is not entirely its fault. As a result of the relative power in Brussels, a dependency relationship has developed between the European Parliament and the Commission. The Commission has always been the source of most power. Therefore, if a European parliamentarian wanted to get something done, it was useful to have a contact at the Commission. In a sense, that is sensible politics, but it means that there is not the same separation between the Executive and Parliament as exists in our system—even though we have the Executive within the Parliament—when challenges are made over spending, corruption or whatever.

Moreover, no single party is in power, which is a natural outcome of the arrangements in Europe. What tends to happen is that natural alliances are formed between parts of the European Parliament and individual Commissioners, either on the basis of national origin or, more often these days—perhaps this is a fitting European ideal—on the basis of party. I am afraid that the Minister might find this uncomfortable, but we saw something of that in the affair of Madame Cresson, which led up to the great crisis that produced the change in the Commission. Madame Cresson is a socialist French Commissioner, and there is no doubt that socialist Members of the European Parliament attempted to protect her. I do not hold that against any one party. It is a structural element of the Parliament that right-wing or Christian Democrat parliamentarians will tend to form alliances with Christian Democrat Commissioners, and that socialist parliamentarians will tend to form alliances with socialist Commissioners. That means that the whole concept of having a separate, impartial Parliament is flawed.

Gladstone dealt with that issue by setting up the PAC. To my great benefit today, he ensured that the Chairman of the PAC—the principal scrutineer in Parliament—is a member of the Opposition, who is clearly not a member of the Executive. We might suggest to the European Parliament or to the IGC a series of reinforcements of the budgetary committee of the European Parliament, one of which would be a rotating chairmanship, so that whenever a Commissioner from any party was in front of the Commission, the chairmanship for that session or report would be held by a member of an opposing party; a Christian Democrat in the case of a socialist Commissioner or a socialist in the case of a Christian Democrat Commissioner.

Mr. Mark Oaten (Winchester): The right hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point, but would he extend that idea to require opposites in terms of the countries from which individuals come?

Mr. Davis: That is a fair point. I have considered that, but have to say that I ducked it because I was not at all sure how it would work with the oath sworn by Commissioners on taking office, in which they undertake to give up all their national affiliations. All of us who have worked in Europe know that the oath is a complete nonsense because Commissioners look to their national origins, but I was unsure whether such a proposal would be at odds with some fundamental part of the treaty. I have not had a chance to re-read the treaty to check that, having read it too many times. However, the hon. Gentleman makes a fair point and I would be inclined to agree that his suggestion would

reinforce the independence of the budgetary committee. In addition, I strongly believe that we should give the budgetary committee of the European Parliament the right to summon persons and papers—the same right as we have in the House. Over the years, the Government have stressed that the first duty of the European Parliament should be financial scrutiny. We cannot ask it to perform that role unless we give it that power.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): My right hon. Friend's analysis fascinates me. I am sure that he would agree that the role of independent employees of the Commission should be taken into account, one of whom blew the whistle on the latest fraud. Will my right hon. Friend acknowledge the role of Brian Connolly, who worked in the European Commission treasury department and who wrote a marvellous book entitled "The Rotten Heart of Europe" in which he described those practices? Those who work inside the system should have the opportunity to declare their concerns.

Mr. Davis: I entirely take my hon. Friend's point. Like the hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten), she has caught me on something that I had decided not to mention, but I shall deal with the issue now. If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I shall focus more on Mr. van Buitenen, because although Mr. Connolly made some interesting points, he would have been in breach of British civil service rules as he was writing about policy matters outside his remit.

Mr. van Buitenen, the Dutchman who blew the whistle, was badly treated. Indeed, his treatment still seems shocking. It does not reflect well on the Commission, the EU or its member states. I believe that whistle blowers should be protected. Vice-President Kinnock's proposals include such a provision, but I would have made it retrospective. I believe that we should compensate Mr. van Buitenen for the way in which he was treated. I would even consider compensating Mr. Connolly, because, even though he was in breach of British civil service rules, the treatment that was accorded him was inappropriate.

The answer to my hon. Friend is yes—I would write that into the IGC. It is an area where the EU has, in my judgment, been in breach of its much-vaunted commitment to human rights. One of the fundamental human rights is not being asked to do something that is immoral or improper; that right was not provided.

My next proposal might shock some of my hon. Friends. I have tussled with the problem at length because I do not believe in giving more power to the EU. It has enough power for the moment, but, in this context, I would give it one more power relating to the budgetary committee. In cases of malpractice, such as those of the past year or two, I would allow it to dismiss a Commissioner. I would not allow dismissal for policy issues or other matters; but for malpractice it is implausible to ask a Parliament to oversee financial expenditure and not to allow it to penalise those who engage in malpractice. I agonised over the issue, but I concluded that if an action was justiciable as malpractice, removal should be available.

The third item of Mr. Kinnock's proposals is not greatly known; indeed, even as a Minister for Europe, I barely heard reference to it. I speak of European staff regulations. Hon. Members may not be aware of them, but they virtually have the force of law within EU institutions. They would make our labour laws of the 1970s look progressive. [*Interruption.*] I have struck a chord with the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field). They limit what can be done when a malpractice is found. The best example is one of the earlier frauds discovered in 1990 by Edward McMillan-Scott MEP, in the tourism directorate, which has yet to be brought to court. If my memory is correct, the sum of £5 million was involved and the people concerned—I cannot call them the guilty people, because we do not know about that, the case not having come to court—are still in receipt of pensions and full benefits from the Commission.

The staff regulations have been an impediment to resolving fraud and malpractice problems all along. The Kinnock reforms, the timetable for which I have before me, and which, incidentally, incorporate the whistle blower protection that we discussed earlier, do not even involve consultation on the question of proposed changes to staff regulations until the first quarter of next year. It is not proposed to bring those reforms of staff regulations before the Council until the end of next year. The earliest point at which we could conceivably obtain a change to one of the most fundamental impediments to proper management of the Commission would be four years after the crisis that led to debates such as today's. That is altogether too slow. Why is there such a delay? If the Government do not agree with it, will they do something to speed matters up? Given that there has not even been any consultation for a year, the problem is clearly not one of negotiation or proper practice. It is more a problem of failing to make the issue enough of a priority.

The European Court of Auditors pointed out that many of the problems that we are discussing arise because the European Union tries to do too much. The worst example of that—the Cresson failure—demonstrates that the lesson has been completely ignored by the current Commission. The European Commission Humanitarian Office—ECHO—was the site of the worst of the problems exposed a couple of years ago. Hundreds of millions of ecus or pounds were improperly accounted for. We do not know that they were fraudulently disposed of, but we do not know where they went, either. However, we know that at least one contract, for £2.4 million, was completely fictitious; there was no other contracting party. The money was being leached out of the system to be used at the discretion of various members of the Commission. That arose directly from the fact that the European Union was trying to do too much and had created a culture of going around the rules. Perhaps that might be done in the first instance to achieve worthwhile aims, but from then on the rules become irrelevant. The barrier against malpractice, fraud and criminal activity then vanishes.

What I have described happened a few years ago. What is happening now? Only six weeks ago, Chris Patten made some cogent comments about his directorate of the Commission. He showed that staff are trying to spend two, three or four times as much money as would be normal in an international development department. That led our Secretary of State for International Development to describe the European Union as the worst aid agency in the world. I do not

[Mr. Davis]

often agree with her, but she has a point. As Mr. Patten said, it can take as long as nine years for it to fulfil a promise. To a Nicaraguan whose home has been swept away by a flood or an African peasant whose family is dying in a famine, nine years is eternity.

The issue is not simply one of fraud, but one of people dying because of our incompetent system. What Mr. Patten has talked about shows that we still have the same problems as we had two or three years ago. He has come up with 23-point plan to try to spend the money that he has. Having looked at that plan, I have no confidence that it will stop any fraud whatever. Mr. Patten talks about relocating decisions to EU posts around the world—which, invariably, will mean less control—and a series of things of that nature, none of which will resolve the problem of fraud. That is a serious weakness in the system.

I have no confidence that we have made any progress. The lesson of the Cresson behaviour was learned, namely that the European Union should do less and do it better. As long as the EU focuses more on politics and promises than on good management and delivery, two things will happen: on the one hand, British and other taxpayers' money will be wasted and, on the other, the reputation of the European union will go down. That cannot be a good thing, whatever one's view of the EU.

11.31 am

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): It is a great honour to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) both as a friend and as a member of the Public Accounts Committee, which he chairs and on which I am honoured to serve with him. As always, my right hon. Friend has done a great service to Parliament in the way in which he presented his speech.

I am happy to speak on the issue because agricultural fraud has had a major impact on my constituency. I shall return to that in a moment. Of course, no one really knows how much fraud there is in the EU as, by its very nature, it is impossible to quantify. Klaus Tiedmann of Freiburg university in Germany thought that it might be anything between 7 and 10 per cent. of the total EU budget. If it is, we are talking about very large figures indeed. Needless to say, the European Commission has a far lower figure and says that fraud could be as low as 2 per cent. However, even the Commission acknowledges that the cash figure is much higher than the EU's reported figure, which is based on auditing agricultural spending exclusively. By any measure, the problem is enormous and costs all of us who live in Europe a very large sum indeed, which is why our debate is important and timely.

My right hon. Friend dealt with some of the major scandals that have afflicted the EU over the past 10 years. He mentioned that our colleague, the Conservative MEP Edward McMillan-Scott, detected the tourism fraud which amounted to some £3 million. As my right hon. Friend said, we are still waiting for that to come to court. In November 1995, the Court of Auditors refused to certify the EU's annual accounts on discovering that nearly £3 billion was not properly accounted for. My right hon. Friend mentioned that, in early 1998, the Commission's anti-fraud unit revealed that some £600 million of its humanitarian aid budget between 1993 and 1995 could not be accounted for, of which £1.5 million had been intended for refugees from the genocide in Rwanda and Burundi. That £1.5 million had simply vanished into the ether. To make the episode worse, the incident only came to light years after the fact, allegedly because the Commission did not inform the Court of Auditors when irregularities in the aid programme were first noted in 1994.

Some explanations of why that money went astray are sublimely pathetic. Some reports, such as one in *The Sunday Times* in October 1998, maintained that money intended for field workers in areas of conflict was spent on hiring more bureaucrats in Brussels. Another reason, according to a report in *The Daily Telegraph* in October 1998, was that the money was not necessarily misspent or wasted, but that no one either knew or could trace where it went. Clearly, fraud can take place in many areas under many guises and we must find a system that will ensure that we try to reduce it.

In my few short remarks, I want to deal with agricultural fraud and the major problem of fraud in the common agricultural policy. *Agra Europe*, the European independent weekly, summed up that problem rather well. It said:

> The essence of the major—and minor—frauds . . . is either claims for subsidy payment on products which do not exist or the misrepresentation of a less valuable form of a commodity as a more valuable one. Almost all CAP frauds are variations on these essentially simple stratagems. The more it becomes necessary for the EU to support and protect every part and sector of the agricultural market, so these measures become more comprehensive and more complex.

Commenting on why fraud is so closely associated with the CAP, *Agra Europe* said:

> The reasons are obvious: the CAP still accounts for almost half of the EU's expenditure and spending within the . . . budget essentially involves payments to individuals and companies involved in trade in agricultural commodities. Expenditure in other sectors of the budget tends to involve payments to government and other official bodies and fraud is therefore much more difficult to perpetrate on these types of payments.

That article sums up why fraud in the CAP—accounting, as the policy does, for half the EU's budget—is such a great problem. It also explains why so much of the EU's expenditure is diverted directly to individuals, small companies, farms and so on.

How can we deal with that? Last Friday, I got some insights when I visited Mr. James Walgate, who farms in Swallow in Lincolnshire. Turning from the rather esoteric arguments in which we talk about millions and billions of pounds, I shall take matters right down to the farm gate and give an example of how fraud affects farmers in our constituencies. I sat in Mr. Walgate's farmhouse and talked through some of the issues with him and his colleagues who, as a group of English farmers, are tearing their hair out at the amount of regulation and red tape with which they have to deal. They told me that they feel that they are not farming barley, wheat, cows or sheep, but brown envelopes, filled, not with cash—sadly for them—but with forms. Indeed, they showed me form after form after form.

No doubt, all those forms are considered necessary to combat fraud, the very issue discussed by my right hon. Friend. The farmers showed me page after page of the

set-aside form, much of the information in it duplicated. They showed me a folder full of all the enforcement notices on health and safety at work with which they must deal. My right hon. Friend may tell me that all those issues show that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is doing its best to ensure that the subsidies that are available to our farmers are not misspent fraudulently. However, one must ask oneself whether those farmers' competitors in other EU countries, especially Mediterranean countries, face the same degree of regulation and oversight. Our own farmers are convinced that they do not.

I do not want to get into that debate too much as that ground has been well ploughed in the past. Essentially, the argument is negative, as it is difficult to quantify exactly how much fraud is going on in Spain, Portugal, Italy or wherever. We have heard about olive oil scams and so on, and the Government argue that, in any event, such matters are not their responsibility. However, they are responsible for ensuring that the money is spent correctly with minimum regulation and bureaucracy being imposed on our farmers.

I shall offer a practical solution to finding a way out of the appalling level of fraud in the common agricultural policy. As the article in *Agra Europe* sets out, that fraud is the result of the very nature of the subsidy system in Europe which, essentially, is based on a long series of production costs and units, such as the suckler premium scheme, the beef special premium scheme, the veal calf premium scheme, and so on. Such a large number of complex support schemes, which are distributed to many individuals, small companies and farmers, means that fraud is inevitable.

The only suggestion that I can make is that we should change the whole subsidy mechanism so that we subsidise incomes rather than production. The Government have introduced the working families tax credit in this country, so why can we not have a working farms tax credit in Europe? That would shift subsidies from the series of complex support mechanisms into simple support for farmers' incomes, especially those that are relatively low.

I know that our Government have argued against such a scheme in the past because our farms tend to be larger than those on the continent, where there are many more part-time farmers. However, I should have thought that one could create a mechanism based on the farm's working population so that the subsidy would depend on whether the farm employed an individual, a family or farm labourers. It would then be far easier to track where the money was going and to deal with fraud. I can see no other way to solve the problem.

I am impressed by what my right hon. Friend has said, and I warmly support all his points about trying to support Vice-President Kinnock. I share his view that Mr. Kinnock is probably the right man for the job—anybody who could sort out the Labour party in the early 1990s is surely capable of having a good go at fraud in the EU. I am sure that my right hon. Friend is right to say that we can try to develop mechanisms within the European Parliament which mirror this country's effective mechanisms such as the National Audit Office.

We must ask, "Who guards the guards?" How can we have a genuinely independent office in the EU, with independent staff and oversight by independent politicians, which can delve into the inner recesses of the EU? These matters are detailed and complex, and we need a body as independent and professional as the National Audit Office to cope with them.

I have no argument with anything that my right hon. Friend said, but I would just point out that, in dealing with the CAP and an area as wide as the EU, in which farming stretches from Sicily up to the north of Scotland, simply tweaking the mechanisms in the European Parliament or the Commission will never enable us to get to the root of evil in the system. It is difficult to root out fraud when such complex, wide-ranging and different subsidies apply to the whole range of production. I end with a plea: will the Government argue for a complete change of the support mechanism which gets to the heart of fraud and moves the basis of subsidy from production to people?

11.43 am

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for being late to the debate; it is a discourtesy to the Chamber, but I did tell the Speaker that I would be delayed. It was a double blow because I missed half of the speech by the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee.

I want, first, to centre on why this is such an important issue, whether one is for or against Europe or the euro, and, secondly, to make some suggestions to my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary, who is to reply to the debate. There is no reason why she should respond immediately, but I would be grateful if she corresponded with me and put her replies in the Library.

This issue is so important because there are large sums of British taxpayers' money at stake. Taxpayers are forming a view of Europe as a result of our ability or inability to satisfy them that we are safeguarding their hard-earned cash. In Birkenhead some time ago, we had a debate, not about Europe but about the euro, and very strong views were expressed. It is to the credit of those who were pro-euro that when they went out to try to get the Labour vote out in the European elections, they came back and reported honestly Labour voters' response to the idea of Europe and to voting in a European election: the voters summed up what they saw in Europe as a thieves' kitchen.

That is worrying for those who are serious about the long-term prosperity of Europe. It is more worrying for those who are madly in favour of all that Europe does than it is for those of us who may have some questions, particularly about the euro. It is therefore crucial that the Government respond properly and effectively to the issues that we are raising today.

I would like the Government to take certain steps. We should learn from our efforts in this country to counter fraud, which are admirable compared with those in Europe. It would be sensible for us to give up thinking that we can devise a grand strategy which will deal with fraud with a big bang. We need to learn from one another about the steps that we can see working in member countries and implement those measures across Europe to protect the taxpayers' money that feeds the European machine.

I shall make five brief suggestions. First, given that we do not know whose hand is in whose pocket over there, let alone whose hand is in our pocket over here, it is

[Mr. Frank Field]

crucial that we have an independent system of auditing, separate from the main Departments because, clearly, some of the problems are in the Departments themselves. The one organisation that shines out among all others is the Court of Auditors, which is beginning to show the independence that one would expect from a body within the British political tradition. I suggest that the independent audit office that is to operate in Europe should not report to any of the Departments or even to Commissioner Kinnock, although I totally agree with the comments that have been made about him. The office needs to report to the body that has begun to show its independence, as it did in supporting Paul van Buitenen, who has already been mentioned.

Mr. Oaten: I agree in principle with what the right hon. Gentleman is saying, but will he expand on his remarks? If the body is not reporting to the Commission, but only to the Court of Auditors, where is the democratic accountability? How do we get the report and recommendations before elected politicians?

Mr. Field: I have problems about whether the institution is democratic anyway, but I shall deal in a moment with how we can make the EU more accountable to all of us, in Europe and here at home.

My second suggestion is that we should draw attention to the Government's success on whistleblowing. The measures that this country has to protect whistleblowers should operate in Europe as well, where there is an appalling state of affairs. The guy who bravely and effectively drew our attention to what was going on in the thieves' kitchen was set upon by people, many of whom were the thieves themselves, who were trying to make sure that he did not continue to speak. Moreover, he is already back in the dock as a major suspect for leaking papers in another area of fraud. How much pain can one individual take if he is not protected properly by the safeguards for whistleblowers that we in this country think are important? *[Interruption.]* There is clearly a European fly trying to dive-bomb me. I hope that he does not have one of those sharp umbrellas with which to attack me, or I may keel over.

My third point is that we know that the Commission returns some of our money to us to spend in this country. There is now concern about whether the employment programme funds have all been spent as they should in this country. I ask my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to look into that matter and report on whether we have followed up the complaints that the relevant Departments in Europe have made about the spending of money that went from this country to Europe and has been recycled back again.

Fourthly, may I suggest, as a method of increasing confidence in what goes on in Europe, that the Government regularly publish the names of those who are charged with fraud offences in Europe; when they were charged; what action is being taken and the final outcome, both internally and then, I hope, in the courts. That would boost morale in this country and show that we are attempting to get to grips with the problem of fraud, the size of which is unclear.

Fifthly—this touches on the point made by the hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten)—never mind what the European Commission comes up with, could the Government present an annual report to Parliament on what new moves are being undertaken to protect our funds and then find time for us to debate it?

I am pleased to have the privilege of speaking in the debate. I do not think that there is a grand strategy or that we can sit around for decades trying to work out how to deal with fraud, in Europe or elsewhere. The method must be to find out what works and then to build on that. I have made five suggestions, but I have not had a chance to warn my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary about them. I shall understand if she cannot respond to them at the moment. However, I should be grateful to her if any correspondence could be placed in the Library so that we could all draw on it.

11.51 am

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): I shall make but a brief contribution to the debate. I congratulate my right hon. Friend on obtaining this important debate. In previous years, I have been a regular contributor to the debate on the Court of Auditors report. I have concluded over the years that fraud is endemic in the European Union, and I do not have much hope that it can be eradicated. I shall ask a question that goes to the root of the matter: what is the EU doing with the funds that are available to it that could not be done by nation states?

My right hon. Friend has said that the EU does not have the means or the mechanisms with which to control its funds adequately to ensure that fraud is reduced to an acceptable level. I do not say that fraud can be non-existent, because we shall never live in that perfect world. He was right to say that there is a great difference between what goes on in the European Parliament and the Commission and what happens in the United Kingdom, where our system ensures that there is little dishonesty or fraud in the body politic.

The explanation for that is that we are all directly answerable to our electorates in a way that continental politicians simply are not. If we were caught up to mischief, the electorate would wreak their vengeance on us and we would no longer be Members of Parliament; indeed, the whole Government could suffer a similar fate. In contrast, from time to time on the continent, those whom the electorate have rejected reappear not only as members of their parliaments, but as members of their administrations. Of course that removes one of the important checks and balances of our system, which I believe to be absolutely invaluable.

Rather than Europe trying to drag us into its system of doing things, there would be great virtue in our persuading Europe not only that our system works and ensures that there is little fraud, dishonesty or corruption in our body politic, but that we have the blueprint that the rest of Europe would be well advised to follow.

What does the EU need the money for? I contend that the functions that it discharges that involve or require large sums can and should be carried out by individual nation states. The answer to that question is that the EU needs the money because it needs largesse, without which it could not persuade individuals and individual countries to do things the way it wants.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) has mentioned fraud in farming. In my experience, when we crack down on such fraud, the poor

take the blame. I have a letter with me this morning about one of my constituents who has 42 cows. She is in desperate trouble because of a crackdown. She has made an error in her paperwork and will forfeit what to her is an important part of her income. That is not the source of the fraud; the source is in the big time. The Mr. Bigs of farming—more particularly, the Mr. Bigs of farming on the continent—get away with massive fraud, and that is the system there. It is probably more than an inspector's life is worth to take issue with the big-time fraudsters who prosper under the system.

My solution to the problem would be to repatriate the spending to the nation states. This country certainly has much tighter controls. If we did not, we as politicians would pay the price by losing our seats, or the whole Government would collapse. My contention is that such money is necessary not for the good that it does, but simply to ensure that the EU has a hold over those on whom it wishes to force its views. That is shown very much in this country's farming industry, where those who might otherwise comment on those matters in the context of agriculture in Britain are in receipt of large sums—some of the cheques are for more than £1 million. Clearly, they will not bite the hand that feeds them. They will not lead the industry in opposition to what I believe is a corrupt regime. That explains, in a roundabout way, why the EU needs that largesse; it buys off its opposition, so it can continue with the systems that many of us think are totally unsatisfactory.

11.58 am

Mr. Mark Oaten (Winchester): I begin by congratulating the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) on initiating the debate. I note that other hon. Members have avoided mentioning his constituency. I shall refer to him as the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, because that is easier. I agree entirely with the remarks that he made in his speech, which were powerful coming from the Chairman of that Committee. I hope that the Economic Secretary will deal with some of the points that have been made.

I agree with all the speeches that have been made, except the previous one. We have heard some thoughtful ideas, certainly from the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), and the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) made some good points about the common agricultural policy, to which I shall refer later.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss fraud. The EU could deal with fraud in one of two ways: it could adapt and ensure that its public administration goes through the motions of reform, or it could tackle the problem and put in place genuine reforms so that it begins to revitalise the rather tarnished reputation that it has not only in this country but among the citizens of Europe.

As we have heard, it is now 15 months since the European Commission resigned en masse, so it is critical to find out what has happened in that period. We have heard this morning that the Neil Kinnock reforms are in place and bedding down. Whatever our views on Europe, we all hope that Kinnock can draw a permanent line in the sand by creating a much more transparent and accountable Commission.

Before I deal with the reforms and where they are going, it is worth reflecting on the scale of the problem. I speak as someone who is pro-European. I am passionate about our country's role in Europe, but, while researching my speech, I began to feel slightly Euro-sceptic, because the scale of fraud that is taking place brings out the worst in anyone.

This morning, we have heard that there are different debates about how much fraud there has been. The Court of Auditors, which I think is respected on the issue, has estimated that 5.5 per cent. of the EU budget is lost every year through what it describes as mismanagement, wastage or outright fraud. The amount is nearly the same as the UK's contribution to the EU in the first place. There are some who believe that that figure is somewhat conservative and that the real figure is nearer 10 per cent.

Frankly, whether it is 5 or 10 per cent., the figures are outrageous and totally unacceptable. How can any European citizen have faith in a system in which the budget is approved by a democratically elected Parliament, only to be squandered by bureaucratic, centralistic and unaccountable institutions, which is, sadly, what we have in the EU at the moment?

The Court of Auditors has had to deal with large amounts of EU money. I am concerned that there have been delays in the way in which it has been able to sign off accounts. We have heard that it does good work, but it cannot be right that it cannot sign off accounts even, sometimes, many years in arrears. It is not a good process and system to have in place. The Court of Auditors itself cannot work with the type of systems that we have in this country.

In March, I met Paul Van Buitenen, whom we have discussed and who is widely known as the whistleblower. He and I had an hour-long meeting. I was appalled at some of the stories that he told me about the intimidation and difficulties that he had had to face. I was shocked to learn that the Commission had in place what were effectively gagging order regulations against individuals such as him to prevent them from talking about the irregularities that he had discovered. It epitomised the culture of the Commission that an official was forced to put his position and career on the line and to breach confidentiality to expose the substantial mismanagement and fraud.

Although I admired Paul Van Buitenen's courage, I was astounded by the absence of checks and balances that should have been there in the first place. That raises the question: if he had not had the courage to intervene as he did, would the Commission not have resigned? Would it be shielding some of the things that had taken place? I suspect that that would still be the position.

We have had evidence not only from whistleblowers, but, in April, from Sir John Bourn, head of our National Audit Office, who reported to this Parliament, identifying "significant weaknesses" in the management of the Commission's budget. The NAO found that there may have been errors totalling £3 billion in European payouts in 1998 alone. Together with new clear accounting policies to improve the reliability of the Community's accounts, he called for a simplification of the CAP.

I was interested that the hon. Member for Gainsborough said that the system was complex, and then suggested that we consider a farm tax credit. I am all in favour of simplifying the system, but that sounded

[Mr. Mark Oaten]

like a more complex system. I am not entirely convinced that it would crack down on fraud, but we know that the CAP is badly in need of reform.

What are the solutions? Last November, for example, Neil Kinnock launched the whistleblowers charter for the European Commission, which aims to put in place procedures to protect whistleblowers. I hope that that to some extent deals with the concerns that the right hon. Member for Birkenhead raised about putting the processes in place.

The charter mentions the European anti-fraud office, also known as OLAF, as an external channel through which officials can safely report their suspicions to a body that is independent of the Commission. The new OLAF office organises and conducts administrative investigations to detect fraud and irregularities connected with the financial interests of the Community.

Between 1 June 1999 and 31 May 2000, 68 administrative investigations were opened, 30 others were closed and 67 reports were filed. The Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee said that he wanted more of those issues to be aired and some of the details to be available to the public. I welcome the fact that much of OLAF's work is now available on the internet. That is an important step towards much greater transparency and accountability, but, picking up on the points that were made by the right hon. Gentleman, it is important that OLAF's work is monitored independently, so that we have proper accountability.

The Kinnock White Paper detailed a promising reform programme, which was started in March and is expected to continue until the second half of 2002. It focuses on three key areas: comprehensive reform of personnel policy; modernisation of financial management; and control of new systems. I support that programme and agree with the concerns that have been raised about the time scales, which need to be put in place—but progress is being made.

This morning, I had an opportunity to meet Mrs. Fontaine, the President of the European Parliament, and to discuss the Kinnock proposals with her. People sense an atmosphere of change, and that the proposals are beginning to bed down, but, when I discussed the reforms with Paul Van Buitenen, he expressed a concern that, although they may deal with the internal processes, there is a fundamental problem in terms of the culture in the EU, which is much harder to tackle.

The issue that Paul Van Buitenen put to me in cultural terms was that the EU lacks genuine transnational political parties. His argument was that everyone feels a stronger sense of affinity to his own nation, rather than to a pan-European group, and that that can make the imposition of standards difficult and disjointed. I hope that the EU tackles the cultural issue much more.

Of course, the debate about delivery and accountability in Europe is not about just what goes on in the EU. Eighty per cent. of EU spending is disbursed by member states. That is where most of the fraud takes place. An anti-fraud strategy must go beyond Brussels. It must be Europe-wide. That will be a major challenge for some of the EU member states that do not, if I can put it politely, have the same standard of probity in public affairs as we do.

This touches slightly on the concern of the hon. Member for Gainsborough about the level playing field. If the EU is to embrace enlargement—I hope that it does so—to expand and include countries such as Albania, Poland and Hungary, we must be absolutely sure that the conditions of entry require those individual countries to raise their standards, too.

I am pro-European. I am pro-currency, pro-engagement and pro-Britain playing a full part in Europe, but I am disheartened by the fraud that is taking place. For those of us who believe that Europe is the way forward and is in our best interests, it is damaging our cause and our case. Bluntly, it is wrong that public money is mis-spent in that way. The Kinnock proposals represent a way forward, but, beyond that, there needs to be a cultural change in the EU. I hope that the British Government will take a lead on those issues when they argue for better probity at the conferences in the year ahead.

12.7 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) on securing the debate. There is obviously a model of proper conduct and of ways of dealing with such problems in the UK. It is a pity that it does not and cannot operate more widely in the EU.

I remind hon. Members that as late as the mid-18th century, the Paymaster General's role was to milk public funds. Indeed, Fox's father made himself rich by so doing. We have not always had the standards that Gladstone established, and they do not seem to establish themselves satisfactorily across the channel.

I echo the support for Commissioner Kinnock. I am sure that he has not been infected by the environment that he is operating in. As has been pointed out, the report seeks to address the processes at least—but I, too, doubt whether it will be effective, because of the cultural problems.

On specifics, I agree that the Court of Auditors must have a rotating chairmanship drawn from the opposition. It must have independent auditors; it is complete nonsense for it to be staffed with insiders, as it were. It must report to the European Parliament, and, potentially, to European Governments individually, on its findings about what has gone on in member states.

I cannot help feeling that it would be useful for the European anti-fraud office to visit Hong Kong, which has the most effective anti-corruption fraud office in the world, although admittedly it is a small country. Again, if the European anti-fraud office is not independently staffed, I cannot see that it can do a proper job. Clearly, it must be accountable to the Court of Auditors.

As others have said, it is clearly essential to have adequate protection for whistleblowers—and, I would argue, rather better protection in this country, given the background—and proper exposure and punishment of offenders. It is unacceptable that individuals can return to power when they have a track record of corruption. I suggest that the European Parliament could do with a Nolan, as it were. Its standards are certainly not the standards of this Parliament, but such a committee is probably the only body that has the power to dismiss a corrupt Commission. Having that ability would give it a powerful raison d'être.

The central problem of the common agricultural policy is that 80 per cent. of the money is dispensed by member states. The question is how they should be policed, because, to some extent, member states have a self-interest in obtaining as much as they can from the centre. It is a culture of "them", not "us". It will always be difficult for member states to police themselves, but it would be expensive to police them centrally. The common agricultural policy now costs £29 billion and the system clearly invites corruption. Ultimate reform can come only from the abolition of that system.

I wish to touch on a point that has not been raised. The CAP operates the exchange rate compensation scheme, which is drafted in a completely incomprehensible way. While sterling has strengthened by 50 per cent. against other currencies, and what is effectively one European currency, £1 billion or £2 billion a year in compensation has been paid out to Italy, Sweden, Germany and other member states. What is the logic of paying them compensation, because their currencies have weakened en bloc and they have enjoyed the advantages of that? On undertakings for collective investment in transferable securities, the German banks have blocked the development of money funds in Europe, and that is a different form of corruption.

The public in the United Kingdom have rumbled the situation. In a wonderful phrase, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) pointed out that they perceive the set-up as a thieves' kitchen. As people on both sides of the argument have said, until there is an improvement and proper standards of conduct, the credibility and standing of European Union organisations will decline further in the eyes of the British public.

When I was a meritocratic student at one of England's leading meritocratic universities, I studied mediaeval history. The wonderful Professor Walter Ullmann put his finger on the problem. Whereas the UK and other Anglo-Saxon nations have the deeply rooted concept of power ascending from the people and the tribe, and leaders being accountable to the people, the problem with continental Europe is that it still has the Roman empire and mediaeval tradition of power descending from God, or what have you. That creates a powerful obstacle in the way of properly exposing corruption, because the citizenry does not expect that to be done. They expect lower standards of conduct than we are used to in this country.

Commissioner Patten has been mentioned. I specifically recollect that £500 million of development support was allocated to South Africa, of which only £20 million of actual expenditure was ever discovered, and most of that was wasted. Some £480 million was completely unknown and unaccounted for. That is unbelievable.

I am nervous that, despite the good intentions of Commissioner Kinnock, there is still not the will to tackle the problem effectively. As was said, we do not know whether fraud is 7 per cent., 10 per cent., or the Court of Auditors' estimate of 5.5 per cent. The issue is not on the Nice agenda, and the view is that it has been buried for the time being.

The Treasury will no doubt refer to its report and to the five proposals of the European Court of Auditors concerning the elements of the structure that are missing. However, the problem goes a great deal deeper. Perhaps, only when member states look to devising methods of imposing their own sanctions against corruption will there be any real and dramatic change. In the meantime, I wish Commissioner Kinnock every success, and I commend him on his proper standards and his attempts to address a major problem.

12.15 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): In the 15 minutes allotted to me, I will struggle to respond to all the points that have been raised. However, I shall do my best. I apologise if my reply is a little bitty, but it is either that or answering fewer questions.

Like everyone else, I congratulate the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) on securing this debate. I know that the subject is dear to his heart and that he refers to it on many parliamentary occasions. I welcome the fact that he has raised the subject and I welcome the contributions that have been made. The Public Accounts Committee was so concerned about the issue that when its members visited Brussels last year, they interviewed key players and produced the important report on "Financial Management and Control in the European Union". It raised many pertinent questions about the state of European institutions and the Commission itself.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the independence of OLAF and its relationship with the Commission. The arrangements that have been put in place are entirely right, because the Commission has the responsibility, under the treaty, for budget execution. That responsibility must include instituting effective fraud prevention procedures. The anti-fraud office needs to understand the organisation that it is investigating so, in that sense, it needs to be an insider with access to information about what is happening within the organisation. Past experience bears that out. The Commission's previous anti-fraud unit, UCLAF, investigated all the fraud allegations that featured in the wise men's report, but, under the previous arrangements, it had no responsibility for follow-up and there was no mechanism to ensure that the right course of action was taken.

The new arrangements under OLAF will make recommendations on follow-up, and the institutions will have to report on whether that has been carried out. In addition, the unit's director will report to the European Council and to the European Parliament. I take the point made by the hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten) that the important element of accountability in the reporting arrangements must be considered. It is important that we do not lose sight of that.

The question of whether we should replicate the arrangements used by the Public Accounts Committee was raised. The PAC works because officials have clear roles and responsibilities. The accounting officer in the National Audit Office knows that he is responsible for ensuring that Departments apply the rules and will have to answer if they do not. That is why we pressed the Commission, as a priority, to set out clear roles and responsibilities for all staff. Indeed, the White Paper on reform, which I shall refer to in more detail shortly,

[Miss Melanie Johnson]

includes important measures in that regard. We know that the Commission intends all staff to have clear job descriptions and objectives by the autumn. We will keep up the pressure to ensure that there is real and meaningful reform. I agree with all the contributors to the debate who stressed the need continually to press for progress on that front.

Questions were raised by the right hon. Gentleman about Italy. Fraud cases tend to be enormously complex and can take an extremely long time—often years—to investigate. That is not unusual, if we compare it with fraud investigations in the UK on matters unrelated to the subject of the debate. That is frustrating for all of us, but it is not outside the bounds of our usual experience of the difficulties of detecting and investigating fraud. For that reason, it is difficult to comment on individual cases.

On the security contract fraud, the security firm was replaced and investigations by the Belgian police are still going on into the allegedly fraudulent contract arrangements mentioned by the right hon. Gentleman.

It may be helpful if I deal next with whistleblowing. It would have been wrong to intervene without knowing the full details of the case, as ill-considered intervention might have endangered ongoing investigations. However, I accept that there must be rules governing whistleblowing. Since the Government came to power, we have taken significant steps in the UK to establish such rules.

Van Buitenen was the subject of a disciplinary hearing, which reprimanded him for actions that were considered to compromise certain criminal investigations that were in progress; but the judgment was mitigated by the circumstances of his case, particularly the lack of proper procedures for reporting concerns about improper practice.

Mr. David Davis: I thank the Minister for giving way. I do not wish to delay her progress, but is it plausible for a whistleblower who has brought a matter to public attention for the first time to be reprimanded on the grounds that he is jeopardising a criminal prosecution, when no criminal prosecution has ever been brought to fruition in the European Commission?

Miss Johnson: The right hon. Gentleman makes a useful point, but it is fair to say that with regard to the way that van Buitenen behaved, there were issues on both sides. It was not an open and shut case. We accept that whistleblowing by employees is extremely important. If they suspect fraud, they should be encouraged to report it, and whistleblowers should be protected. That is an important principle. I agree with both the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), who made those points particularly strongly.

The Commission's decision in June 1999 on whistleblowers sets out clear procedures for reporting suspected fraud, corruption and other illegal activities. Those procedures will be formalised in the revision of the staff regulations which is in progress, as part of the Commission's reform programme. The aim is to ensure protection for a whistleblower acting in good faith and in the public interest. We respect and value that in this country, and have taken steps to put it in place in full-blown form in the UK. Until just a few years ago, we could not claim that everything in our country was right, and indeed, we still cannot be confident that it is all right.

On the subject of structural flaws in the Parliament which lead to protection for individuals by political parties, it is essentially up to the European Parliament to decide how it organises its sessions. The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden proposed an interesting idea in that respect which is worth exploring further.

The right hon. Gentleman also referred to tourism fraud. I agree that the Commission's handling of the matter was not competent. That is why it was so necessary to implement the reforms. There must be greater co-operation between member states. There is scope for taking forward and implementing effectively the Eurojust proposal for an agency to assist co-operation and to allow the exchange of information—for example, about the evidence that needs to be gathered in one member state to be used in legal proceedings in another member state with a different judicial system.

I am sure that Commissioner Kinnock will be somewhat embarrassed by the support that he has received from all right hon. and hon. Members present, but no doubt he will also be delighted. Of course, the Government support reform and the work that he is heading in the Commission.

I agree that staff regulations are too inflexible. Lengthy consultations with staff are required. The last reform took place 10 years ago, so the situation has been left untouched for too long. There is a need to get it right this time. That will take time and negotiation, but we are not complacent. We are keen to make progress, as is Neil Kinnock, I am sure.

There is already a code of conduct for Commissioners, and there are proposals to protect whistleblowers. The White Paper on Commission reform incorporates proposals to modernise staff management, including an overhaul of recruitment procedures, improved training and career management, a proper system of staff appraisal based on job objectives that are directly linked to Commission objectives—a highly desirable feature—a merit-based system of promotion, which is important, and a more effective disciplinary system, which is also important. All the right sort of measures are being progressed.

The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) spoke about the way in which EU funds are being wasted. The level of error is clearly unacceptable, and we have been pressing the Commission and other member states to take action. However, we must not lose sight of the fact, pointed out by several speakers in the debate, that 80 per cent. of the expenditure goes through individual member states, and is therefore up to them. We need to address the matter through the EU and by putting pressure on member states through member-state to member-state channels.

Contrary to what the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) said, it is not simply a matter of tackling the Commission. Member states must be tackled. We are

working with them to improve financial control, which includes work to simplify regulations and provide clarification of eligible expenditure. I agree wholeheartedly with my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead that the mismanagement of public funds undermines the confidence of European taxpayers in the EU. We must work together to remedy an unacceptable situation.

With regard to humanitarian aid, one of the problems is a lack of resources to manage the aid programme. Most of the resources did not go astray, but were used to administer the aid programme. That relates to the point about how much is fraud and how much is money mismanaged in various ways, which is also a big issue. Much of what is described as fraud is not technically fraud, but mismanaged funds.

Mr. David Davis: One example is the 2.4 million ecu contract, which was fictitious. Some of the money, as the hon. Lady says, was used for other employees, but two thirds of a million ecu are still missing. The money cannot all have been used properly.

Miss Johnson: At no time did I suggest that all the money was used properly. I believe that the sum of £400,000 is unaccounted for, but I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that money unaccounted for is unacceptable. We must do more to tackle the problem. Activity-based budgeting will help us to identify the administrative resources needed for efficient management. That is an important part of ensuring that resources reach their destination and that no fraud takes place. The distribution of aid has been the subject not only of proposals by Commissioner Patten, as the right hon. Gentleman said, but of considerable ongoing discussions in various EU forums, including the Budget Council, with which I am involved.

The hon. Member for Gainsborough spoke about the CAP. It is worth while pointing out in relation to his East Anglian example—I know the hon. Gentleman's constituency a little, and I am not sure whether Gainsborough considers itself part of East Anglia, but it is not far short—the claimant literature is constantly being reviewed. We are trying to simplify the pilot scheme for arable area payments in East Anglia. Those may not apply to his area, but efforts are being made to lessen the bureaucratic burden on farmers. We all—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Police Services (Sutton)

12.30 pm

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I am delighted to have been given the opportunity to raise a number of issues about policing in Sutton. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) would like to speak too, so I shall try to limit my contribution.

It may be unusual, as an Opposition Member, to say that, generally speaking, things in Sutton are working well. The overall policing picture is a good one by comparison with other parts of London and the country. Sutton has the second lowest crime rate in London, and I pay tribute to the local force and the local council for achieving that. I am happy to back the bid by Sutton police to make Sutton the safest borough in London.

Not everything is perfect, of course. The Sutton racial equality council is concerned about the under-representation of ethnic minority officers, the turnover of staff in the community safety unit and the degree of consultation with ethnic minority communities. Perhaps the Minister could comment on the progress that is being made in meeting the target of 5 per cent. ethnic minority officers by the end of the year. There are also concerns in the constituency about 999 calls that are unanswered. I know that that issue was touched on in the debate last Friday.

Sutton police force is having to adjust its numbers following the boundary change with Surrey police on 1 April. That change means that the police boundaries are, for the first time, exactly coterminous with those of the London borough of Sutton. That change has resulted in the creation of the smallest police division in London, but one which I believe is perfectly formed.

Inevitably, reorganising the force and deciding which officers go to Sutton and which to Epsom has not been the easiest of tasks. Furthermore, the boundary change has left Sutton over strength by a net number of 21 officers. The serious shortfall in police numbers across London—hon. Members should be aware that those numbers have fallen by about 1,700 since the Government came to office—has meant that the 21 officers have had to be redeployed elsewhere.

Not surprisingly, many of those officers who were forced to move wanted to stay in Sutton and have been upset by their enforced relocation. Does the Minister agree that enforced relocation, whether caused by a change in police boundaries or by the tenure policy that requires officers to be moved perhaps two or three times within their careers, is unpopular within the Metropolitan police and ensures that valuable local experience and specialised expertise are lost?

Will the Government provide input to the consultation with the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis on this important issue and support changes that make these moves voluntary rather than mandatory? When do the Government expect the Commissioner to report back on his consultation?

Enforced relocation is not the only local issue; pay is another. I recently secured an Adjournment debate in Westminster Hall on public sector workers' recruitment and retention in London. During that debate, I raised

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the issue of the cost of living for those workers. The Home Secretary clearly read his *Hansard* and listened, at least in part, to some of the points that I and other hon. Members raised during the debate. Last week, he announced that effectively he was restoring to London police officers recruited after 1994 the housing allowance that the Conservatives abolished in 1994. That is a Liberal Democrat campaign success which, the Minister will be pleased to hear, we shall widely advertise in *Focus*. [*Laughter.*]

The Home Secretary made the correct decision, though it will not solve current problems. What assessment have the Government made of the extra number of police officers who will be recruited and retained as a result of the change? I know that the Home Secretary was not able to answer that question last Friday, but perhaps the Minister will have had time over the weekend to analyse its impact. It remains the view of senior officers in my patch that retention will still be a problem even after the Home Secretary's welcome announcement.

Even in London's second safest borough, we cannot afford to lose officers. Last year's crime figures in Sutton were a disappointment, and ultimately that is the test of a policing and crime strategy. There was an increase in crime overall and in each of the major categories. Although burglary and vehicle crime rose relatively little, violent crime increased by 22 per cent. and street crime by 36 per cent. Those are the most worrying features.

I am happy to praise my local police force, but those figures are depressing and we cannot afford to be complacent. I know that Sutton police are not complacent and that they are redoubling their efforts to get Sutton back on track. However, unless they are given the resources that are needed, they will be facing an uphill struggle because of the increasing demands on police resources.

Is the Minister, for example, able to confirm the cost of policing the £1.5 million party that Sir Bob Geldof will be organising for London's mayor, the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone)? Who will be paying for the policing of that event? What mechanisms exist to stop resources being siphoned away from a relatively safe borough such as Sutton to inner-city boroughs by a Metropolitan police authority, which perhaps inevitably will have an inner-city focus? Will the Minister say how much of the budget of Sutton police will have to be paid out for the welcome increase in post-Sheehy officers' salaries, which will be effective from next week? I shall be happy for the Minister to respond later in writing because I have not notified him of all these questions.

There are ways of maximising the best use of police resources. I recommend the positive partnership approach that Sutton police have with the London borough of Sutton in tackling issues such as graffiti. Sutton council has also been working locally with the probation service on its anti-graffiti strategy. Following successful graffiti projects at Wallington station in my constituency and Stonecot hill, the council's community safety unit is co-ordinating a new project, again in my constituency, at Wrythe lane, Rosehill, which started on Monday.

Following consultation with shop owners, local residents, the police and the probation service as well as the Sutton youth awareness programme, murals are being created on 19 shutters at a row of shops in a busy shopping location. Not all the shop owners wanted a mural, and that is fine. None will be forced to take one. Offenders on community service orders will paint the shutters, ready for the murals to be painted on by local young people, supervised by Darren Cullen, who is a former graffiti artist.

I am sure that hon. Members will agree that that sort of partnership approach should be commended. However, I am concerned that the good work of all the organisations could be undermined in Sutton by the circulation of a magazine called *Graphotism*. I do not have a copy of the magazine to show hon. Members, but I have seen photocopies of some of the pages. The magazine is clearly dedicated to the promotion of graffiti. It features photographs of graffiti on commuter trains and it markets products for use by graffiti artists. Many people, including me, take the view that it encourages people to break the law. There is a very small disclaimer that can hardly be read on the pages of the magazine, and apparently that may be enough to let the producer off the hook.

What action can be taken against the publishers of such a magazine? I understand that the police solicitors and the Crown Prosecution Service believe that it would not be possible to prove mens rea, or intention. What further steps are the Government considering to deal with such a blatant incitement to commit a criminal offence?

One way of dealing with the problem of graffiti, if not *Graphotism*, might be through the creation of community constables, an idea that Susan Kramer promoted tirelessly in her excellent mayoral campaign. The idea is a simple one, and I am sure that the Minister will be familiar with it. I can point to a good example in my constituency. The Sutton parks constabulary is now in its second year and is proving very effective. Council officers are used to doing some of the work that would otherwise be done by the police and they are doing an excellent job. In the past year, for instance, the parks constabulary received 587 calls and dealt with a wide range of issues, mainly relating to youth disturbance, burglar alarms, unauthorised vehicles in parks, joyriding and abandoned vehicles. What plans do the Government have to extend the range of responsibilities that parks constabularies and others could take on?

Sutton is a relatively crime-free area. Local residents, the council, the police, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam and I all want to keep it that way. In fact, we want to make Sutton the safest borough in London, but we cannot do that without addressing the issue of officer retention and without a guarantee that Sutton will not be penalised for its success in keeping crime down. I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure Sutton residents on those points.

12.40 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I want to underline one or two of the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) has made.

Some years ago, my parliamentary predecessor, Lady Olga Maitland, secured a debate in the House on law and order in Sutton. In that debate, she branded Sutton

as crime-ridden and a dangerous place to live. She was wrong, but she secured banner headlines in the tabloid press—popular papers that many people read—portraying Sutton as a dangerous place. That did great harm to the borough and to the livelihoods of many of the traders in Sutton town centre. Those who think that Sutton is a dangerous place today are as wrong as she was then.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the fact that Sutton is the second safest borough in London. That is something to be pleased but not complacent about. Sutton is also the smallest borough in London and, with the advent of the borough-based policing system from 1 April, which I certainly welcome, we now have the opportunity to have a much clearer focus of police activity on the problems of the local communities.

We can now have one set of partners. My hon. Friend has already said something about partnership working, which has been established in Sutton for 10 years, with the council, the police and many other community interests working together to develop and invest in crime reduction and prevention, tackling both crime and the fear of crime with initiatives such as closed circuit television, home security, gating projects and youth diversion initiatives.

My hon. Friend referred to the incitement, through a magazine that is circulating in the area, to damage property with graffiti. I hope that the Minister will say something about that and about what the Government intend to do about those who supply the paint products that are used for graffiti. Back in March, there was an initiative in Sutton that tackled the perpetrators. There were 30 arrests and a substantial reduction in graffiti following the concerted effort by the police, the council and others.

That exercise showed clearly that some of the people who supply and sell the paints do it in a way that is totally irresponsible, displaying them in such a way as to entice and paying no regard to the use to which they can be put. I hope that something can be done to control more effectively the way in which the products are sold.

Having the smallest division in the Met has many advantages, some of which I have outlined, but it also has some potential downsides. As my hon. Friend said, the Sutton division is having to slim down to get down to the 254 officers that it will have as a borough division, losing 21 officers from the bigger division that it once was.

There is also undoubtedly concern arising from the current tenure policy, and it is hitting morale. I have had letters expressing concern from local officers. A review of the policy is under way, and it certainly needs to be changed. We must ensure that we make best use of the experience that officers gain through their careers, and of the investment that the police service puts into the development of specialist skills. That can be lost through an ill-thought-out transfer to an area of activity that does not exploit those skills.

Last week, Sir John Stevens told the Commons Press Gallery:

> I need to maintain at least 25,600 officers if I am to police London with confidence. The people of London deserve nothing less than the best we can offer and if numbers continue to dwindle we are in trouble—make no mistake.

He went on to say:

> We do not have enough officers to police London with confidence. We have 25,480 officers—five years ago we had 28,000.

If the most senior police officer in London says that he does not have confidence that he can police London adequately, there must be cause for concern in my and my hon. Friend's constituencies about the fact that having only 254 officers does not give sufficient leeway to cover vacancies. We have already discussed the problems of recruitment and retention. With such a small number of officers, losing even one or two to vacancies has a disproportionate impact on the operational effectiveness of the division. That is why I hope that the Minister will say something about the tenure policy and the need to ensure that success in reducing crime is not rewarded by a further reduction in police numbers.

My hon. Friend rightly said that it is important, with a successful community safety strategy, never to be complacent. The crime figures in Sutton in the past year—for violent crime and street crime in particular—have been a cause for some disappointment and concern for my constituents, and for the council and the police, who need to redouble their efforts. They are doing that, but they also need to know that both the Greater London Authority, which is now the responsible body, and the Minister, who provides much of the funds, are mindful of the fact that a small police division needs to have a guarantee that its numbers will not be reduced any further.

12.46 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on securing this debate. We have debated policing in London a great deal recently, both in Adjournment debates and in the annual debate last Friday, so if he will forgive me, I will focus on the issues that he has raised relating specifically to Sutton rather than on some of the more general issues.

Both the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) began by talking about current policing working well and rebutting the approach that was only too characteristic of Lady Olga Maitland when she represented Sutton and Cheam. It is worth placing on the record the comparative crime position in Sutton because, as has been said, it is very good.

Incidents of violence against the person in Sutton were 6.5 per 1,000 of the population in the 12 months to September 1999, compared with the Metropolitan police average of 11.2; sexual offences were 0.4 per 1,000, compared with 0.7; robberies were 0.5, compared with 2.3; burglaries from a dwelling were 2.1, compared with 5.1; thefts of a vehicle were 2.9, compared with 4.2; and thefts from a vehicle were 5.2, compared with 7.8.

None of that is reason to be complacent in any way, but both hon. Gentlemen are absolutely right to highlight the fact that Sutton is the second safest borough in London and to join the police in the borough in campaigning to make it the safest.

Greater London has witnessed significant change this year in its government, with the creation of the GLA and of the independent Metropolitan Police Authority and, most importantly in my opinion, with the

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consequential boundary changes that have affected Sutton and other London boroughs significantly. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington put the case well when he referred to the encouragement that the coterminosity of boundaries affords to a whole range of partnership working.

Many police officers have described our Crime and Disorder Act 1998 as one of the most significant pieces of legislation ever to affect policing. That is predicated on good partnerships, which are massively assisted by being able to have common boundaries and therefore common professional, political and strategic links. That is extremely important.

Obviously, there may be teething difficulties, as there have been big changes in the policing of the Sutton area, with the transfer of the officers who police the Epsom area to the Surrey police. No doubt there may be some confusion in the immediate period, but I know that the hon. Gentlemen and all the authorities concerned will do their best to ensure that the transition is as smooth as possible. The ultimate result of the transition will, I believe, be positive for the residents of Sutton, as it will be more generally across the Metropolitan police force. The change is important and significant.

The issues raised by the hon. Members for Carshalton and Wallington and for Sutton and Cheam are important. Boundary changes under the leadership of the borough's police commander, John Bainbridge, to whom I also pay tribute, have become a conduit for the review of policing styles in Sutton. He has decided to adopt a combination of intelligence-led and problem-orientated policing that is locally delivered in partnership with the borough council. That is an important development. The Metropolitan police have invested more resources and effort into problem-orientated partnership activity, as in their view it will achieve lasting reductions in crime and disorder. Such improvements would have been more difficult to deliver before the boundary changes.

I understand the concerns expressed on the reduction in police numbers. I understand from the commissioner that the boundary changes left Sutton relatively over-staffed, when other London boroughs were short of staff. The result was the transfer of about 20 officers in June and July to other London boroughs, as the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington said. The process has been handled by the force as sensitively as possible, and I hope that it will take place smoothly.

I understand that the boundary changes have resulted in a target in the Sutton borough area of 254 police officers by 31 March 2001. They will be supported by 75 civilian staff. We do not believe that that change will compromise the Met's policing style. Nor will it affect their operational activities. The policing of Epsom and the other areas that have been transferred to Surrey police is a matter for the chief constable of Surrey, who I am sure will ensure that Epsom is as well policed as previously. Indeed, Surrey's budget has been increased as a result of the boundary changes to ensure that the resources are available.

Both the hon. Members for Carshalton and Wallington and for Sutton and Cheam referred reasonably to the issues of tenure, which are important to consider. The facts on tenure are straightforward. For reasons of not only specialism, to which the hon. Gentlemen referred, but community continuity, which is essential to partnership work, we have considered that it is important to address again the question of tenure. The commissioner is indeed doing so. The Metropolitan police service career management policy is about to be launched, which will replace the tenure arrangements—officer postings—with a much more effective means of capitalising on the needs of the organisation and officers' particular professional skills.

I believe that the change on tenure will be widely welcomed—I certainly welcome it—and that it will address much more effectively the need for stability and the removal of uncertainty to which both hon. Gentleman referred. I hope that the change will be welcomed by all people throughout Sutton and by the hon. Gentlemen. I certainly commend it to them. It is part of a significant and substantial programme on which I am happy to give further details to them in writing if it would be helpful. It is an important part of the remotivation and rededication of the police service in London generally, and Sutton particularly, to the issues that have to be addressed.

Mr. Brake: I would be grateful if, as far as possible, the Minister confirmed in his letter the timetable—when consultation will finish and when any recommendations will be implemented.

Mr. Clarke: I am of course perfectly happy to do that.

I apologise to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for my unparliamentary behaviour in laughing out loud when the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington claimed the increase in Metropolitan police pay as a Liberal Democrat campaign success. I have heard many things so claimed in my time, both in my constituency in Norwich and nationally, but without taking away any credit for the vigorous way in which the hon. Gentleman puts the case, I assure him that the announcement by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on Friday was due to scientific assessment of a range of facts and the result of wide representation. I believe that it is out of order to laugh during a parliamentary debate, but I could not control myself. I try to be an extremely controlled individual, but I could not manage to be so on that occasion.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington referred to the Sutton parks constabulary, which is an important point. The constabulary is an important complement to the work of the Metropolitan police service in Sutton. The London borough of Sutton parks police work closely with Metropolitan police staff under a joint protocol for responses to incidents and the flow of intelligence. The parks police have been directly involved in the graffiti and under-age drinking initiatives. The constabulary has eight constables, and its work complements our continuing drive to develop partnership between police and local authorities.

In my city of Norwich, a similar parks police initiative under the neighbourhood warden and community constable scheme has had a major impact on improving

the amenity of parks and on eliminating not only petty but sometimes more serious crime. I am therefore happy to commend the police, the council and Sutton parks constabulary for their work and look forward with interest to evidence of continued work in that area.

The graffiti campaign is important. I refer to the Adjournment debate on the matter on 27 March secured by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable). Indeed, in the policing debate on Friday, the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) raised such points. I take the points seriously; they are important and we are seeking to address them.

Sutton's multi-agency approach between the police, local businesses and communities, schools and the Crown Prosecution Service seems to be effective. I understand that a database of tags has been developed and important links between graffiti artists and priority crimes have been established. A total of 50 reported allegations have been dealt with by various means.

I commend to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington the development of new guidelines on closed circuit television in the context of his remarks on transport. I published them in February, and we gave particular priority to CCTV in areas where there is concern about transport. That will help our integrated transport policy and with the issues that he raised. I cannot tell him anything on the question of the publishers of the magazine, although I will look into that. We have looked carefully into the serious issues concerning paints and the way in which we can deal with them.

Mr. Brake: The Minister has not responded to the issue about magazines and it was certainly not addressed in Friday's debate. I would be grateful, therefore, if he responded in writing.

Mr. Clarke: I will respond; I was not aware of the problem more generally.

The hon. Gentleman raised the question of the 999 service, which is a serious concern. I dealt with that in my response to Friday's debate, so I will not go through the matter in detail except to say that many more staff have been recruited to address the issue. The issue of a major £1 billion investment in a completely new command and control system will be one of the earliest and toughest decisions for the new Metropolitan police authority. We in government have encouraged that. The Metropolitan police are working very hard on it and we acknowledge that serious issues need to be addressed.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, the target—I emphasise that such targets are not quotas—for ethnic minority recruitment is 25 per cent. by 2009, which is challenging. The majority of forces should meet their target in 10 years, but we have accepted that some may take longer. I have no other information to give him on that subject. We give great priority to it for the simple reason that, in cities across the United States of America, for example, when a community identifies with the police force that serves it, policing is strengthened in a variety of important and different ways.

On Bob Geldof and the mayor of London's campaign party, I must confess that I do not study the affairs, particularly the social life and plans, of my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) as closely as I perhaps should. However, I assure the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington that, under section 25 of the Police Act 1996, the commissioner has the power to charge for policing special events such as pop concerts. The matter is one for the commissioner, although any event that my hon. Friend might organise for his own pleasure and interest should not affect normal policing. Off-duty officers would often be used.

I have attempted to address the issues and conclude by commending Sutton for its extremely effective and strong safety record.

Paper Industry

1 pm

Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): I am grateful for the opportunity to debate one of the United Kingdom's great manufacturing industries. As chairman of the all-party group on the paper industry, I can tell the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce that those hon. Members with paper interests in their constituencies are concerned about the pressures that the industry faces and believe that the Government should be seen to take those concerns seriously. Therefore, my purpose today is to highlight the industry's valuable contribution to UK manufacturing and present its concerns to the House.

The UK has 98 pulp, paper and board mills, employing about 21,000 people. Those mills produce hundreds of grades of paper and board, which convert into a wide range of products for industry, commerce, education, communications, distribution and personal use in the home, together with a host of other specialty papers for industry. It is estimated that 12.7 million tonnes of paper were used in the UK last year. Sadly, more than half of that paper came from imports.

Mills in the UK are concentrated in Lancashire, the west country, central Scotland and my own county of Kent. In the Chatham and Aylesford constituency, the industry has an annual production of approximately 1.4 million tonnes of paper and board, making it the largest single concentration of production anywhere in the UK, employing more than 1,000 workers.

The industry is highly capital intensive. A new paper or board mill can cost well over £200 million and may take up to three years from the design stage to commission. To obtain an adequate return on such an investment, a mill needs to operate 24 hours a day. Such huge investments make the industry volatile to fluctuations in demand. If the economy slows down, so does the demand for paper.

The measures taken by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor have created the type of stability that the paper industry needs. Yet, as I said, the market is a European one, with 80 per cent. of imported paper coming from Europe. During the past three years, the value of the pound has led to job losses, mill closures and lost markets. Within such a competitive market, it can be difficult to claw back those markets.

The paper industry takes seriously its responsibility to the environment. During the past 20 years, the industry has reduced its water consumption by 70 per cent., its energy consumption per tonne of paper is falling year on year, and many of the UK operations have transferred their energy needs to combined heat and power plants. Earlier this year, following negotiations with the Government on the climate change levy, the industry agreed tough targets. Before her transfer to the Department for Trade and Industry, my hon. Friend the Minister was very much involved in those negotiations, particularly at the preliminary stage.

I welcome the outcome of the negotiations. The industry felt that the Government had a genuine desire to listen and it responded. But there remains some anxiety in the industry, in particular about what is good quality combined heat and power, because it is that which will be exempt. It would be of great help if my hon. Friend were able to say when that matter will be clarified.

The industry knows that, if it is to compete, it must invest. Last year saw £300 million of capital expenditure, and, coupled with that investment, the industry has increased efficiency. Since 1989, output has improved by 43 per cent., and productivity per operative has increased by 140 per cent.

The paper industry is different from other traditional manufacturing industries in that capacity is increasing, not contracting. It is important to recognise that the industry has massive potential, and, with the right economic conditions, most of which are in place, it has the ability to beat all comers. As I say, despite technological advances, paper consumption has not declined but increased. The Government make their own contribution to that with their endless White Papers, Green Papers and consultation documents, all of which, I am sure that my hon. Friend will agree, make excellent and stimulating reading. Some may be better than others, but I shall leave it to my hon. Friend to say which. That also creates jobs.

In 1990, the UK consumed 1.8 million tonnes of newsprint, and in 1999, that had increased to 2.5 million tonnes. In the UK, we buy more papers and magazines than any other country in Europe, having recently overtaken Germany. I am bound to say that, indisputably, the best newsprint comes from Aylesford.

Given that the market is growing, with a forecast growth of 2 per cent. in the UK and between 1 and 3 per cent. throughout the rest of Europe, the question for us in the UK is whether our paper industry will be able to capture those markets and take advantage of the extra business and prosperity that that will bring. At present, we are at a distinct disadvantage.

Last year was a record year for production, with a turnover of £3.5 billion, yet the industry realised a pre-tax profit of just £150 million. The main problem facing the industry is the strength of the pound and the weakness of the euro.

The Graphical, Paper and Media Union, the main union representing workers in the industry, advises me that mills throughout Britain have closed, principally due to the strength of the pound. We have seen examples in Kent where profitable mills, such as Kimberley Clark Ltd. in Larkfield in my constituency and the Buckland mill, which produces the world famous Conqueror paper, owned by Argo Wiggins are in the process of closing operations, with about 400 job losses in Kent.

The industry knows that, to a certain extent, it must live with a strong pound. But to be told that it must be more efficient does not inspire confidence, particularly given the background of the figures to which I have referred. Cost-cutting and efficiency improvements have been made at the cost of many jobs—2,500 in the past two years, representing 10 per cent. of the work force. Importantly, they are well-paid jobs.

The Paper Federation of Great Britain recently held a referendum among its members regarding entry into the euro, and 60 per cent. favoured entry, believing that it was the right move for the industry, although obviously at the right rate. That view is shared by the GPMU.

It is vital that industry takes part in the debate. When we have a referendum, industrial leaders will have more influence on what is a major democratic decision than ever before. People who work in mills, textiles, and in the car and steel industries will ask their employers and union leaders what it will mean for their industry, job security, ability to pay the mortgage and have a holiday. Those are the issues that matter and those are the arguments on which we should concentrate. I should like the Government to take a more robust line as the matter is taken forward.

I have spoken about the great efforts that the industry is making in investment, productivity, the environment, and about the pressures that it faces. However, it is also important to highlight some of its shortcomings. The industry has an appalling health and safety record, which puts mill owners in the United Kingdom to shame. Twelve deaths have occurred in the past six years and scores of serious accidents.

Two years ago, the industry set itself a target of reducing serious accidents by 50 per cent. It is widely acknowledged that progress has not been satisfactory. Earlier this year, George Beattie, the GPMU national officer, told a meeting of the chief executive officers of the paper industry that they were not improving enough or even at all. That is a damning indictment.

The industry kills. There are examples of people being allowed to work 34 12-hour shifts without a break. The industry asks people to work for 40 days without a day off. Paper mills are dangerous places, and the industry has not taken health and safety seriously enough. The culture is far too macho, and there is a lack of interest in health and safety. The consequences are fatalities. People are dying in the industry.

There must be change, and I hope that the industry will take its commitments to targets seriously. There must be a wake-up call, and a sea change in the industry's attitude. The targets that the industry has set are not unrealistic because there are examples of good practice throughout the country in various mills, which have reduced their accident rates by 50 per cent. If some can do it, others can learn and follow their example.

Against the background of appalling safety, the GPMU will not sit back. I endorse its campaign themes. Its message is:

> We are here to work, not to die. Say no to unsafe jobs.

That is a powerful message, and I hope that mill operators will take it seriously. There is a firm basis on which employers and unions can improve their health and safety record: a positive and productive relationship between the two sides. The relationship between the unions and management could be held up as a model of excellent industrial relations. It is therefore possible to use that relationship to ensure that the health and safety record matches the technological, productivity and environmental advances.

The industry is good for Britain. With the right economic conditions, it can be a world beater because it has a skilled and dedicated work force. The Government need to listen and understand the anxieties and do everything in their power to create the right economic conditions for it to thrive. If we do that, it will thrive.

1.13 pm

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) on securing the debate and on his election as the new chairman of the all-party group on the paper industry. I also congratulate him on his excellent speech, which was made not only on behalf of his constituents who work in the industry, but on behalf of the whole industry.

I checked the parliamentary online information system—POLIS—and found that the paper industry was last debated in the House 14 years ago. I appreciate that my hon. Friend spoke on the importance of recycling in the industry in the Budget debate earlier this year. However, it is extraordinary that such an important industry has not been the subject of a debate before today. I therefore especially congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate.

I strongly agree with my hon. Friend's remarks on the industry's importance. This country has an extraordinary tradition of excellence and self-sufficiency in paper and board making. Fifty years ago, we were not only wholly self-sufficient in producing paper and board, but a major exporter. For a variety of reasons, that position has been steadily eroded until a nadir was reached in the mid-1980s. Employment in the industry has fallen from 52,000 in 1980 to less than half that number today.

The shrinking in employment does not provide an accurate view of what has happened in the industry. I am glad that my hon. Friend emphasised its productivity improvements and output growth. Both have been striking. In the past two decades, total annual production has nearly doubled from 3.8 million tonnes to 6.6 million tonnes.

There is still significant employment in the industry. As my hon. Friend said, some 21,000 employees work in fewer than 100 mills in several different parts of the United Kingdom, including, of course, my hon. Friend's constituency. If one takes the wider definition of the industry by the Office for National Statistics—it includes pulp, paper and paper products—the sector contributes more than £4 billion of value added to our gross domestic product. That is comparable to the manufacture of textiles and aircraft, and greater than the manufacture of steel and computer hardware. We are therefore considering a sizeable, high-productivity, high-technology manufacturing sector.

The industry's other distinctive feature, to which my hon. Friend referred, is its position not only in a European but a global marketplace. That is clearly reflected by the industry's ownership structure, with some 60 per cent. of capacity owned by overseas interests, including Nordic and North American interests. My hon. Friend rightly mentioned that we import more than half our total paper requirements. We are in a major market; our consumption is the fifth largest in the world and, as my hon. Friend said, it is growing. Imports are also growing fast. Exports have remained steady, but imports are growing rapidly. Our ability to recover paper from the urban forest—the newsprint and other forms of paper that have already been used—is crucial to our future competitiveness.

[Ms Patricia Hewitt]

The strong level of investment that continues in the industry is welcome. It has often been encouraged by Government grants. In the last three financial years, 93 offers of regional selective assistance grant have been made and accepted. They total some £19 million of Government support for investment in paper, paper products and packaging. Of course, the total value of the investments is far greater. That is encouraging for future productivity and the management's confidence in the capacity of the UK industry. The large amount of inward investment in the tissue products sector is especially welcome, as is investment in environmental improvements.

Although the industry faces competitive challenges in a global marketplace, and employment in the sector is contracting, it is fundamentally in good shape. Output has continued to increase, and productivity has been increasing substantially.

I should like to say more about the growing importance of recycling in the paper industry. As my hon. Friend knows, the so-called waste paper utilisation rate—the proportion of our paper production that is derived from waste paper and board—is among the highest in the world, at around 65 per cent. Aylesford uses only recycled stock for its newsprint production.

The other side of the coin, the recycling rate—the proportion of our total waste paper that is collected and recycled—is disappointing. It is less than half the utilisation rate. One of the reasons is that we consume far more paper and board than we manufacture. Consequently, several million tonnes of paper are landfilled each year. That is clearly a wasted opportunity for environmental sustainability and industrial competitiveness.

Waste Strategy 2000, the waste strategy for England and Wales, which we published in May, sets out the various steps that we are taking to increase the recycling rate. It has been good to see the response from the paper sector to the White Paper and the recent call for proposals under the recycling programme of the Department of Trade and Industry to support research and development, and to underpin projects that are designed to increase demand for recycled materials. We are now in the final stages of assessing those projects.

Mr. Shaw: This subject is close to my heart, and I spend much time lobbying every Minister about the need to provide more facilities so that local authorities can collect their waste in a way that means that it can be recycled. Does my hon. Friend agree that the three mills that can take newsprint and magazines are full to capacity and that no new mill has been built for nearly five years? The mills that have come on stream have been in Europe. It is a European market, so there is only so much capacity. We need to increase capacity and it is essential that the Government provide assistance for that. Without that, the strategy will not work.

Ms Hewitt: My hon. Friend makes an important point and I am well aware of his long-standing interest in the issue and the proposals that he has made to colleagues and myself. In the Waste Strategy 2000, we announced that we would set up the waste and resources action programme—WRAP—to overcome some of the barriers to reuse and recycling. The objective of that new body, which will be established later this year, will be to promote more sustainable waste management generally, but, in the first instance, to focus on developing markets and end uses for secondary materials. I hope that it will be able to tackle some of the market failures that exist in recycled materials, especially newsprint. Both the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions have committed resources to that new organisation to give some muscle to the strategy.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment recently reached an agreement with the newspaper publishing industry on increasing its recycled content targets. I am sure that my hon. Friend agrees that that was an important development.

My hon. Friend referred to the climate change levy that will be introduced next April. That levy is a key element in our strategy to tackle the issue of global climate change and to deliver on our international and domestic targets to cut emissions of greenhouse gases. We have worked hard with industry—the paper industry and more broadly across manufacturing—to ensure that we get the design of the CCL right to achieve our environmental objectives in ways that do not damage, and indeed could enhance, the competitiveness of British industry.

As my hon. Friend will be aware, the Chancellor announced important revisions to our original proposals in both his pre-Budget report last November and in his Budget statement in March. When we announced the levy—I was involved as Economic Secretary to the Treasury—we made it clear that we would take especial notice of the position of the energy-intensive sectors that are subject to intense international competition, including, of course, the UK paper industry. I am therefore pleased that the Paper Federation of Great Britain, on behalf of its members, has negotiated with the Government an energy efficiency agreement which will qualify the industry for an 80 per cent. discount on the levy. That is an important step forward for the industry's competitiveness and the wider objective of improving environmental sustainability.

My hon. Friend rightly referred to the exemption from the levy for good quality combined heat and power. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment announced on 17 May how good quality would be assessed, using a simple and definitive methodology called CHP quality assurance. That followed valuable consultations with the paper industry and other CHP users. My right hon. Friend will issue the full details in the next few days, and they will be circulated to all companies using CHP.

It is worth stressing that the CHP plants that have been approved during and since the review of energy sources for power generation include four paper mill developments, totalling nearly 350 MW. I warmly congratulate the industry on those multi-million pound investments in new paper production technology.

My hon. Friend mentioned the issue of the exchange rate and the weakness of the euro. We know that that is causing difficulties for British industry, particularly paper and board manufacturing, 75 per cent. of whose exports go to the European Union. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has said on many occasions, the problem is the weakness of the euro, rather than the overall strength of sterling. Indeed, sterling had been stable for four years against the dollar, although more recently it has fallen to a six-year low against the dollar. The Government must take a long-term view of how to achieve the economic stability that, as my hon. Friend began by saying, is crucial to investment and confidence in the paper and other industries. We will not allow short-term pressures to risk returning us to the days of boom and bust and a constant change in policy that made investment in the UK's productive capacity so inadequate.

It is worth remembering that in the paper industry, and more broadly across manufacturing, we are seeing improvements in output, productivity and exports. Although manufacturing employment has fallen by some 160,000 jobs in the past three years, we should remember the period between 1979 and 1997, when manufacturing employment fell, on average, by 140,000 every year. The scale is very different today.

As my hon. Friend will be aware, the Government's policy on the single currency remains as it was when my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer set it out in October 1997. The determining factor that must guide any Government decision is whether the economic case for the UK joining is clear and unambiguous. We have set out five economic tests that have to be met before any decision to join can be taken, and we have made it clear that once the Government have made a decision, it will be put before Parliament, but that the final decision must be made by the people in a referendum.

I shall end, as did my hon. Friend, on the issue of the health and safety performance of the industry. I am glad that he tackled so trenchantly the appalling health and safety record that mars the otherwise highly impressive record of productivity and investment. I know from discussions with the Graphical, Paper and Media Union how hard it has worked with management, in a model of partnership with industry, to tackle that problem. The accident rate in the paper industry has persistently remained some 50 per cent. higher than the average achieved by all manufacturing industry. That record is simply not good enough.

For the past two years, the industry, the unions and the Health and Safety Executive have co-operated in a major initiative, strongly backed by Ministers in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. The initiative was designed to reduce accidents by 50 per cent. over three years, but the accident figures remain stubbornly high. That is unacceptable. We expect from the owners and management of the mills a commitment to safe working practices, and a culture of safety and continuous improvement in which people's health and lives are not regarded as expendable commodities in the quest for higher output. That safety record is the one blot on the record of an industry that is enormously important to this country, which has made real improvements in investment and productivity and which certainly has the backing and the practical support of the Government.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past One o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 29 June 2000

[MR MICHAEL J. MARTIN *in the Chair*]

Sanctions

[*Relevant documents: Second Report from the International Development Committee, Session 1999-2000 HC67, and Government response HC473*]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Pope.*]

2.30 pm

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): I am delighted to be able to open this debate on sanctions. The Select Committee on International Development decided to investigate sanctions because of the humanitarian effect on the people of the countries affected. The compelling evidence that was given to us by many international organisations concerned with children and women, and with the humanitarian affairs of the targeted countries, showed that the policy was having a severe effect on the poorest people in the countries concerned, and very little effect in terms of achieving the aims of the Foreign Office and the international community. The major example is the compulsory economic sanctions that were imposed on Iraq, which have now been in place for 10 years. Inevitably, therefore, our report concentrates on Iraq.

The International Development Committee is particularly concerned by the statements made to us by organisations such as UNICEF and the Save the Children Fund. In 1999, UNICEF published the extraordinary estimate that an additional 500,000 Iraqi children under the age of five died between 1991 and 1998. During those eight years, in an average three-hour period—the length of today's debate—there would be 21 additional deaths of under-fives in a country whose population is one third of the size of the United Kingdom's. UNICEF's most recent child malnutrition survey, in south and central Iraq, found little, if any, change since 1997.

That is the result of the imposition by the international community of sanctions on Iraq. When they were imposed, the sanctions were designed to change the behaviour—or, indeed, the leadership—of the Government of Iraq. They were supposed to ensure that Saddam Hussein, the president of Iraq, was denied the means by which he could continue to manufacture, and threaten his immediate vicinity with, weapons of mass destruction, and to prevent him from carrying out aggressive wars and incursions into neighbouring countries such as Kuwait.

What have been the effects of those sanctions on Saddam Hussein's behaviour 10 years later? He is still in power, more certainly than he was when the sanctions were imposed. He and his family are considerably richer than they were 10 years ago. The imposition of sanctions has enabled him to impose a rationing system for food, medical supplies, health and education on all the people of Iraq, who have thus become totally dependent on him.

That shows the ineffectiveness of sanctions on Iraq. The Foreign Office's reply to the Committee's report is complacent and, in many ways, flabby. Before there are cries of pain from the Foreign Office, I point out that one would have thought that, in making a reply to a Select Committee, it would have made every effort to ensure that its facts were correct. It states that the United Kingdom has imposed universal sanctions only once since the second world war, but that is not the case. It has applied them three times, in Argentina and elsewhere. That illustrates a disregard for accuracy and a determination not to listen to the Select Committee's arguments for trying to do something more effective, and with fewer bad humanitarian effects for the countries being targeted.

Sanctions have never been effective anywhere. They are a diplomatic tool used to reply to a population's cry for the Foreign Office to do something. Doing something, for the Foreign Office, involves taking the easy option of saying that it will apply sanctions. The Foreign Office's—and the international community's—readiness to impose sanctions in answer to the demand to do something has increased since the end of the cold war. It is now involved in more than 25 sanctions regimes, most of which have been applied since then, and I fear that the number is growing.

Other regional examples of sanctions exist, in which we find severe humanitarian suffering—for example, in Burundi.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): I am sorry to have to disagree with the Chairman of our Committee, but paragraph 39 of the Committee's conclusions clearly states:

> Not all this humanitarian distress is the direct result of the sanctions regime. There is a tendency to blame all such distress on sanctions in the absence of clear evidence...The responsibility for the plight of the Iraqi people must ultimately lie with the Iraqi leadership.

It is only fair to point out that that formed part of our report's conclusions.

Mr. Wells: I entirely accept that. I was coming to that point later in my speech. Of course Saddam Hussein is responsible for all the distress in his country. His people are suffering as a result of serious maladministration, fraud, and the corrupt nature of his regime. However, without the sanctions, he would not have been helped to stay in power and to apply the rationing system to which I have referred. We cannot deny that, in Iraq and elsewhere, the perpetrators of serious international crimes are responsible for the humanitarian effects of those crimes on their countries, but we do not have to help them.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): There is a great deal of common ground between my hon. Friend and myself. We all went through the lengthy business of compiling the report. However, I am not entirely sure that we have been helping Saddam Hussein as he appears to suggest. I do not disagree with him fundamentally, but I do not believe that the people of Iraq would have been in a much better position without sanctions.

Mr. Wells: I have to disagree with my hon. Friend. I do not think that Saddam Hussein would have

[Mr. Wells]

remained quite so securely in power if he had not been assisted in doing so by international sanctions. Those sanctions legitimise his domestic position as far as the Iraqi people are concerned, because they are seen as an external threat not only to his regime but to the whole population. That gives him greater authority. The countries imposing the sanctions are not responsible for causing the suffering of the people of Iraq, however. Saddam Hussein is.

The sanctions against Burundi are among the examples of regional sanctions that have not worked and have produced severe humanitarian disasters. The sanctions imposed by three African countries on Burundi prevented the provision of medical assistance for well over a year. The result was severe outbreaks of disease for which no medical help was available. The civilian population also faced serious shortages of food and other vital supplies.

The other obvious failure was in Angola, where sanctions still apply. The evidence given to the Committee suggested that Dr. Savimbi is receiving the contents of at least seven flights a day, despite the international community's sanctions. Some of the aircraft are, in fact, so large that he is taking delivery of tanks. Such is the ineffectiveness of the sanctions against Angola that Savimbi is able to carry on a civil war. Angola provides some of the worst examples of human deprivation and, although it is potentially a rich country, it has become one of the poorest in the world. The effectiveness of the sanctions must be questioned, but the impact on innocent civilians and their children is substantial.

My next example relates to a real farce. I refer to the political ineptitude shown by the European Union—acting with the support of the United Kingdom—in the fuel for democracy regime that was imposed on Serbia at the end of last year. In that case, although the European Union had imposed sanctions on fuel supplies to Serbia, we chose to break our own sanctions. The world was conscious that, during the severe winter in Serbia and Kosovo, there could be a serious number of deaths from hypothermia among the weaker members of the population—especially young children and elderly people—as a result of the bombing of the region and the elimination of the power supply, so the European Union, supported by the United Kingdom, decided to supply fuel to those mayors of Serbian towns close to the border with Kosovo who would declare themselves for democracy and against Milosevic. That was done in the name of humanitarian assistance.

The bandying around of the term "humanitarian" in that context was deplorable. Since the Geneva convention, the understanding has been that any assistance provided under the humanitarian banner should be universal—it should go to all sides in a war. Those delivering such aid must be seen to be neutral, so that they will not come under attack from any side. Fuel for democracy violated all humanitarian considerations. It was supplied only to those mayors who were opposed to Milosevic. That is a serious undermining of the whole credibility of sanctions and humanitarian assistance and it should cease forthwith. In any case, that programme did not result in the overthrow of Milosevic, as had been hoped. The people of Serbia were saved from death in the cold by the Chinese, who supplied fuel, and the Swiss Government, who repaired many of their power stations. In terms of humanitarian efforts and focus, the Foreign Office and the European Union are unlikely to be effective in that example.

The question arises whether we should be using sanctions at all—whether we should give them up as a means of trying to exert pressure on countries that offend against international law. The Committee concluded that that would not be sensible. The evidence suggested that we should make sanctions sharper and more focused, and perhaps concentrate them on financial assets.

In recent years there has been a flurry of activity to examine how financial sanctions might be implemented. A major initiative has been the Swiss-sponsored Interlaken process, which has been examining proposals to improve the effectiveness of financial sanctions. The United Kingdom has been supportive of the Interlaken process, but the Committee thought that there was a gap between rhetoric and practice. For example, at the time of its inquiry, the Treasury informed the Committee that in the case of Angola only two accounts had been frozen and that the amounts frozen were not significant. Similarly, while the Government in their response stated that they take financial sanctions seriously, they also stated that

> it is the responsibility of financial institutions to ensure that targeted accounts are frozen, and up to them to decide which systems they wish to use to achieve this end.

The Government's rejection of interdiction software, which is widely used in the United States and elsewhere, contrasts with the speech of the United Kingdom ambassador to the United Nations Security Council during a debate on sanctions on 17 April when he stated:

> I hope that modern technology will be able to help us in the financial area.

The Government also rejected the Committee's recommendation that an office for foreign assets control be established.

How many accounts have been frozen under the financial sanctions regimes against Iraq, UNITA in Angola, the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia? Is the situation satisfactory, or should the Government and the Bank of England be examining further options for freezing the funds of targeted individuals? Are the Government satisfied that the recommendations of the Interlaken process were taken into account when the most recent financial sanctions regime was implemented, against the Taliban in Afghanistan? The Foreign Office rejected the Committee's approach and I believe that it was seriously mistaken to do so. If we are to apply financial sanctions, the co-operation of not only the Foreign Office, but the Treasury, the Department of Trade and Industry, the Bank of England, Customs and Excise, the UK mission in New York and so on will be needed.

It is incorrect to say that the United Kingdom has never imposed unilateral financial sanctions. We did so on 2 April 1982 against Argentina and on 2 August 1990 against Kuwait, which was then part of Iraq. On both occasions, the Emergency Powers Act 1920 was used and the fact that the Kuwait measures were protective is irrelevant. The Committee's basic point is unassailable.

There will be coherent administration of sanctions only if responsibility rests with a single body that is responsive to the financial centre being policed.

The Bank of England used to do the job very well, but since the internationalisation of the banking system and the proposed transfer to Brussels of the Bank of England's powers to discipline the banking sector, its powers and capacity have been seriously undermined. Therefore, we need to replace those powers with a co-operative effort on an international and European Union basis which includes the United States and Japan at least. The Foreign Office should reconsider its rejection of that demand. I ask it to do so urgently. The whole Government must reconsider their position if they are serious about finding a means of targeting sanctions on the leaders of countries without creating unnecessary suffering for their unempowered people. It is illogical to apply sanctions that impact on people who have no power, in particular, no power to change the regime. They have no power because they have no money, because the very leaders whom we are trying to influence have taken it away. Sanctions should instead be targeted on the people whom we need to get at.

The Committee examined the present system of humanitarian exemptions and concluded that they should be based on a thorough assessment of the likely impact of the sanctions on the targeted population, and of other issues

such as the level of economic development in the country targeted and groups that are likely to be disproportionately affected by the imposition of sanctions.

The Committee further recommended that

sanctions regimes should be sufficiently flexible so as to allow for fine-tuning in response to any...adverse humanitarian consequences.

For example, in northern Iraq the universal food ration, which was introduced as part of the oil for food programme, resulted in the dramatic collapse of markets in key agricultural products such as wheat, flour, rice, oil, chick peas and lentils, impoverishing the farmers in that region. That mistake has been made time and again in international efforts to help people, particularly by the World Food Programme. We should have learnt from such mistakes by now, but in this case we apparently have not. It is vital that the humanitarian response to sanctions takes account of local procurement and the local economy.

Finally, the Committee looked at the capacity of the United Nations. The Government agreed with the Committee that there is a need for a dedicated and properly resourced capacity—not only in Britain but in the United Nations secretariat—to provide advice and support to the Security Council, sanctions committees, member states and regional organisations on all aspects of sanctions, including the targeting, implementation and enforcement of financial sanctions. The Government's response makes frequent reference to a Canadian proposal to establish a working group on sanctions in the United Nations Security Council. Has that group been established? Who will be involved and what will be its remit? How will it be funded and supported, both financially and logistically?

This is a very serious issue, and the Committee has made a major contribution to persuading the international community and the Foreign Office to do a lot better than they are doing at the moment. Among those who gave important evidence to the Committee was Mr. Jeremy Carver, who is a representative of one of the most important and best informed legal practices in this country. He believes that the Committee is right to press the Foreign Office to be more constructive and recognise the needs of those in the targeted nations who, because they are unable to respond to sanctions, are suffering seriously.

This debate is long overdue, and I hope that it will help to ensure a more sustainable, rigorous and disciplined policy that we can applaud and support in future.

2.53 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): I also want to quote from Mr. Jeremy Carver, who, as the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) suggested, is a partner and head of international law at Clifford Chance. Mr. Carver took part in the Interlaken process, so he is well versed in these arguments. He told the Committee:

It is not the imposition or maintenance of international sanctions, but the policies of the Iraqi government which are the primary cause of this suffering. The Iraqi regime has cynically exploited sanctions: both to justify its neglect of its own population and as a tool to solicit external support for its reconstructed ambitions. A government which delights in showing foreign parliamentarians suffering infants, when its warehouses are overflowing with food and medicine undistributed for years, surely reveals itself, save to the gullible.

Representatives of the Iraqi opposition groups who gave evidence to us agreed. They questioned the extent to which the humanitarian impact of sanctions was the responsibility of the countries imposing the sanctions or of the Iraqi Government. They said that the sanctions had had an effect. None of us would argue that they had not—of course they have. The British Government have agreed that the humanitarian situation in Iraq has deteriorated since sanctions were imposed in 1990, but obviously there are differing opinions about the causes.

The opposition groups said:

After 60 or 90 days at the most the regime had the opportunity to remove sanctions if the international community's will had been accepted by Iraq—

and if it had been implemented. However, they said:

Iraq has dragged its feet by denying the Iraqi population a better life in economic, political and even social terms...it has challenged the international community and the UN resolutions.

I could give hon. Members a list longer than both arms that would show the ways in which the Iraqi Government have refused to honour those resolutions and continued to go their own way.

The Iraqi opposition groups of course acknowledge that the sanctions are hurting the people, but they say:

they are absolutely necessary to keep pressure on the regime.

The solution, it is argued, lies in maintaining sanctions, albeit with improved exemption mechanisms. We should bring education, transport and the environment into the equation. That is the solution, not the total removal of sanctions.

[Ann Clwyd]

That was the opposition groups' argument, and it must be said that those people have family in Iraq, both north and south, and they know what they are talking about. The trouble is that it is difficult for us to establish for ourselves where the truth lies, apart from by listening to reports from other people.

Mr. Robathan: The hon. Lady and I share much common ground on the matter. I would like to raise one issue before she moves on from considering the Iraqi opposition. They made a point that is worth repeating. They were asked by the hon. Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett) whether the people of Iraq wanted sanctions to be lifted. In response, Dr. Latif Rashid from the Iraqi National Congress said:

> I think that it would be a nightmare for the Iraqi people if the pressure on the regime was reduced.

That speaks volumes, does it not?

Ann Clwyd: That is an important point. The report is bulky and we took a long time to prepare it. The evidence in it is an accumulation of opinions, which is worth reading, if I may plug it. The then head of the middle east department at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Edward Chaplin, said:

> there are other, rather startling anomalies in the way that, for example, Iraq exports food to Syria in significant quantities, while claiming that its people do not have enough to eat.

Further, Mr. Chaplin said that the regime had

> reduced the amount of the calorific value of the food basket but put in large sums of money for the import of bank-note counting machines and telecommunications equipment, tens of millions of dollars for those items, but less than before going on the food basket. And then there is the problem of distribution, even the stuff that does get into the country.

Iraqi Kurdistan and northern Iraq are the subject of both UN sanctions and Saddam Hussein's sanctions. The UN and other humanitarian agencies have assumed responsibility for the provision of food and medicine there. Other witnesses noted the stark contrast between those areas and central and southern Iraq, where Saddam Hussein remains in control. The people in northern Iraq will certainly substantiate that.

I want to concentrate today on the human rights abuses of the Iraqi regime, because they are a factor that it is important to consider within the subject of sanctions. Like many of my hon. Friends, I went round the holocaust exhibition in the Imperial War museum. I spent two hours there the other week looking at the evidence of the terrible effects of the holocaust on peoples of various countries and the debris that was left of people's personal effects: the buttons off their coats, scraps of material, tin mugs, half combs, and many things that were dug out of mass graves. When one looks at the film of events that took place at the time, one sees the sheer terror on people's faces—on the faces of small children and old men and women.

As I walked around, I thought that in a few years' time we would see the same thing in Iraq, because of the extent of the persecution by that regime of the Kurds in the north, the Shi'ites in the south and the Iranians, with the use of chemical weapons on the people of Halabja and the written instructions given by many leading members of the regime.

The Iraqi regime is very like the Nazis and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, who kept explicit instructions about what should be done with people. For example, in the case of a group of Kurdish shepherds who were rounded up, a telegram was sent back to Baghdad to ask what should be done with them. The command was, "Dispose of them." They were shot. Afterwards, letters were sent out to their relatives asking them to come and collect the bodies. When they collected the bodies, they had to sign for them and pay for the bullets that had been used to kill their relatives. That is documented in meticulous detail by the regime, and that will be very useful in the future when the perpetrators appear before a war crimes tribunal.

I want to highlight the Government's response to part of the Committee's report. The report said:

> Any move away from comprehensive sanctions should go hand in hand with measures designed to target the real culprits, not the poor of Iraq but their leadership. Possibilities include a concerted attempt to target and either freeze or sequester the assets of Saddam Hussein and those connected to him, and the indictment of Saddam Hussein and his close associated as war criminals. To bring to justice Saddam Hussein is also a humanitarian imperative and this should be done without delay.

The Government agreed with that view. They referred to the fact that the UN special rapporteur for Iraq concluded in his most recent report that he had observed no improvement in the human rights situation there since his appointment as human rights rapporteur in 1992. In fact, he said that the situation was getting worse. The prevailing regime of systematic human rights violations is contrary to Iraq's many international obligations and remains a threat to peace and security in the region.

The Government share the view that Saddam Hussein and other members of his regime should be brought to account for the atrocities that they have committed over the years. The Government support Indict and other organisations that seek to bring them to justice. I should explain my own interest as chair of Indict, from which I receive no personal finances. That organisation is committed to bringing some of the main perpetrators of continuing human rights abuses before an international criminal tribunal.

One of the problems with the proposed International Criminal Court is that it will not be able to act retrospectively and, given the slow pace at which countries are ratifying it, it will be many years before it is set up. That is why I suggest that the action of organisations such as Indict to bring Saddam Hussein before an international war crimes tribunal could be an alternative to the easing of sanctions—that is, if the regime agrees to resolution 1284, which the United Kingdom spent so much time pushing through the UN, only to be told by Tariq Aziz that Iraq had no intention of agreeing to it. The resolution is all about the easing of sanctions. If the regime or its supporters favour the easing of sanctions, they should back it. They should also back the creation of an ad hoc tribunal at the UN to indict Saddam Hussein and some of his closest cronies.

It seems extremely ironic to me that those abuses are so well documented—better documented than many war crimes perpetrated in the century that has just passed—yet no international tribunal has been set up at the UN. I know that the Government have been busy in relation to resolution 1284 and will continue to press for

it to be accepted, but they should concentrate at the same time on trying to secure the establishment of an ad hoc tribunal. In a recent letter to Ambassador Holbrooke at the UN, Human Rights Watch pressed the Security Council to establish an international criminal tribunal like those that have already been set up for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia.

Human Rights Watch noted that such a step was entirely warranted on the basis of the evidence that it had uncovered and would help to dispel any suggestion that addressing Iraq's humanitarian crisis implies leniency towards the Iraqi regime. An article in *The Economist* on 8 April said:

> Sanctions remain the world's only leverage over a ruthless and bellicose tyrant. Yet almost ten years into the embargo they have not budged him.

That point was also made by the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford.

Perhaps America and Britain need to rethink a policy that has so embittered and impoverished the people of Iraq. I can never understand why the UN annual report on human rights in Iraq does not receive more publicity when it documents some of the most awful human rights abuses ever. In his latest report to the UN, Max van der Stoel, human rights rapporteur on Iraq since 1992, said:

> the gravity of human rights abuses in Iraq has few comparisons in the world since the end of the second world war.

He regrets that since saying that in 1992 he has had no cause to change his view, and concludes that the regime has effectively eliminated the civil rights to life, liberty and physical integrity; eliminated freedoms of thought, expression, association and assembly; flouted rights to political participation; banned all political parties except the Ba'ath party; and failed to use all available resources to ensure the enjoyment of their economic, social and cultural rights by the Iraqi people. He says that the political and legal order in Iraq is not compatible with respect for human rights and entails systematic violations throughout the country, affecting almost the entire population.

I shall list some of the abuses that have taken place in the past year. The special rapporteur has a list of 21 people from Basra who in late March 1999 were arrested, executed by firing squad and buried in a mass grave near the town of Zubair. Their so-called crime was demonstrating. In addition, the houses of their families were demolished and their relatives detained. That was under the direct supervision of Ali Hassan Al-Majid, commonly known outside Iraq as "Chemical Ali", the man who ordered the destruction of Halabja by chemical and biological weapons.

Other lists contained the names of 56 prisoners who were executed en masse in the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad in April 1999 and of 26 prisoners executed en masse on 10 August 1999. Their so-called crime was inflicting damage on the state. Since 1997 2,500 prisoners have been executed without trial as part of Iraq's prison cleansing campaign.

The special rapporteur has lists of hundreds arrested and detained without trial. For example, 70 people in Kerbal were arrested and taken to detention centres in Baghdad and prisons in Al-Amara. Those arrests were ordered by Saddam's son Qusay to intimidate the population of the southern marshes by taking hostages. Eight Shi'ite clerics have been sentenced to death. Two Shi'ite religious scholars have been murdered in what the special rapporteur feels may have been an organised attack by the Iraqi Government.

The Iraqis in exile do not make enough of these facts. When I went to northern Iraq I met thousands of people camping out in what had been the headquarters of the Iraqi secret police. They had been deported. They were given 24 hours to get out of their homes and clear off to northern Iraq. That internal deportation, to relocate and Arabise the Kurds, continues. Kurdish property and land have been seized and Arab settlements have been built in Kurdish areas.

Iraq has the highest number of disappearances in the world. The human rights working group has stated that there are more than 16,000 outstanding cases of disappearances, including those of more than 600 Kuwaitis. The special rapporteur has reports of the Iraqi army destroying houses and villages. In late March 1999, armoured division 6 destroyed the residential areas of some of the tribes and bulldozed 56 homes of political opponents in Basra.

Since the beginning of last year, the special rapporteur has received regular reports that the Government of Iraq has been destroying the houses of opponents with bulldozers in broad daylight. Recently, 52 houses were demolished in Basra. There is a list of names of hundreds of people treated in that way. We know their addresses and the action that was taken against their families. We know of arrests, executions and expulsions.

I am reminded of a visit to the then Iraqi ambassador in London in about 1977 or 1978, when I was not a politician but part of a group from Wales. There were many Iraqi and Kurdish students in Wales then. We came with a list of missing women and children. I did not understand then why all the Iraqis decided to stay at the top of the road. After all, they had made the journey from Wales with us. However, they said, "No, no, we are not coming anywhere near there." At the Iraqi embassy we were given tea, smiles and greetings. Then I passed to the ambassador a list of the missing women and children. He did not even look at it. He just pushed it aside, got up and shouted "Out! Out!" Then I understood why the Iraqis and Kurds had stayed at the top of the street. That was the first of many visits to the Iraqi embassy. I cannot say that my treatment was any better on subsequent occasions. In fact, I think it got progressively worse.

Over the years, among the organisations that have given evidence—I have chaired an Iraqi opposition group, too, since 1984—has been the Iraqi Communist party, which was badly treated by the regime. Its members went to see the UN special rapporteur in Geneva with more lists—the lists are always reliable—showing what has happened this year. A group of 58 prisoners who had been held in solitary confinement at the Abu Ghraib prison were executed on 9 March. Among those victims, 14 had been sentenced to death for political offences ranging from being affiliated to opposition parties to participating in opposition activities. The rest were sentenced for criminal offences. The bodies of the latter were handed to the families; the bodies of the political prisoners were removed using vehicles that belonged to special security, which is headed by Saddam's son Qusay. They were buried at night and the relatives do not know where.

[Ann Clwyd]

I could go on: 21 political prisoners were executed on 3 February; 43 were executed on 12 February; and 101 were executed later in the year. I understand that 73 citizens are now being held in solitary confinement at the Abu Ghraib prison in cells that are usually used for people who are sentenced to death. They have been there since 1991. Those who went to see the UN special rapporteur proposed activating UN resolution 688, which deals with human rights in Iraq. Like so many other UN resolutions, however, it has not been honoured by the regime. The regime's officials, headed by Saddam Hussein, should face trial before an international tribunal.

One sanction that would make it impossible for Saddam Hussein or other members of the regime to travel is indictment. Other war criminals who have been chased around the globe have eventually been caught. If the members of the regime are indicted, they are less likely to move outside the country. I have had many dealings with Ambassador David Scheffer, whose remit includes war crimes committed throughout the world. He believes that Saddam Hussein and his henchmen are still viewed by some Governments as the legitimate leaders of a country that is under siege by the international community. In reality, they are thugs who are terrorising what was once, and could be again, a great nation.

We, the United States and many other countries have said that that group of Iraqi criminals should be stripped of their power and, if possible, brought to justice. They should not benefit from contracts, trade or initiatives that would bestow any legitimacy on their regime in Baghdad. They should be isolated, cut off and brought before the gates of justice.

The organisation that I chair has named 12 members of the regime, including Saddam Hussein, his two sons Qusay and Uday, his cousin Hassan Al-Majid—the infamous "Chemical Ali"—and a small number of associates who share responsibility for the crimes. From time to time, we hear that a member of the regime may be travelling in Europe. Last year, Ezzat Ibrahim Al-Douri, vice-chairman of the revolutionary command council, visited Vienna last summer for medical attention. The United States, other nations and the organisation that I chair approached the Austrian authorities to try to have him detained there. Unfortunately, the Austrian official who tried to get him arrested did not have sufficient material. It is necessary to get witness statements, videos if possible, signed orders and a variety of admissible evidence for an indictment.

In our organisation, we have had to build up such information from scratch. We began with empty box files. Despite all the evidence that is held in the United States and the United Kingdom, we have had to piece it together ourselves. If the rest of the world, and the Government, are serious about indictment, they should give more assistance to those who are trying to bring it about.

I want to mention nine major criminal episodes under Saddam Hussein's rule in Iraq. In the 1980s, crimes against humanity and possible genocide occurred in the Anfal campaign against the Kurds, including the use of poison gas in Halabja in 1988, which killed an estimated 5,000 people in a single attack. Also in the 1980s, crimes against humanity and war crimes were committed involving the use of poison gas against Iran. There were other war crimes against Iran and the Iranian people. In 1990 and 1991, there were crimes against humanity and war crimes against Kuwait, its people and its environment, during the illegal invasion and occupation, and in the same year there were war crimes against coalition forces during the Gulf war. During the 1990s there were possible crimes against humanity and war crimes with respect to illegal human experimentation. Since the 1980s, possible crimes against humanity have related to killings in Iraq, mainly of political opponents. Since 1991, crimes against humanity and possibly genocide have been committed against the Iraqi Kurds in the north and against the people of the southern Iraqi marshes. Possible crimes against humanity and war crimes have been committed in killing Iranian prisoners of war.

Among the documents held by the Americans are 5.5 million pages of captured Iraqi documents taken out of northern Iraq by Human Rights Watch and the United States Government. An archive of more than 4 million pages of Iraqi documents was captured, and videos were shot by US cameramen during the Gulf war. Classified Iraqi archives are held. No one can doubt the Iraqi regime's continuing assaults on its own civilians. Anyone who calls for the unilateral lifting of sanctions without underlying agreements is being irresponsible.

I hear that some countries now talk about trade with Iraq and sending trade delegations. I hear of a recent agreement with Turkey. There must not be a memory lapse about the war crimes of Saddam Hussein and his inner circle. That man and his regime have for years brutally and systematically committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. They are committing them now and will continue to do so until the international community finally says no.

The Security Council could, I believe, set up an ad hoc tribunal. I have heard Ambassador Scheffer mention the use of an interim arrangement in the setting up of war crimes tribunals in the past. That was done in the cases of former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, when a commission of experts was set up to investigate the facts. However, he believes that that is unnecessary in this case. The facts are well known, and an ad-hoc tribunal could be set up now.

Last year, when the Select Committee went to the United Nations and we spoke to the Secretary-General, I asked him specifically what the UN would do if some of those war criminals were indicted. He said, "I suppose we would set up an ad hoc tribunal." Indict hopes soon to put that to the test. We have copies of 176 CD-ROMs, which the US has made available to us. Our researchers have been going through that information and collecting the kind of evidence that is needed to bring about an indictment. There is no shortage of information.

It is important to place on the record one of the most brutal crimes of Saddam Hussein's regime—the Anfal campaign against the Kurds. I have been to that part of the world several times, and that campaign never came home to me in all its brutality until I crossed the border from Iran into Iraq at night during Saddam Hussein's attack on the Kurds. They were fleeing across the

mountains to Iran and elsewhere, wherever they could cross a border, in the most pitiful state. We could hear the bombardment going on. As we drove into northern Iraq, we saw that every few miles there were masses of rubble. I realised that those were some of the 3,000 villages that had just been bulldozed by Saddam Hussein, and had once been people's homes. Those people had been transported to the desert area of Iraq. That was when I recognised the sheer awfulness of the Anfal campaign.

"Chemical Ali", who was in the late 1980s the man responsible for implementing the policy against the Kurds, said in a speech to security commanders in January 1989:

> I'll certainly look after the Kurds. I'll do it by burying them with bulldozers. That's how I'll do it.

He was true to his word. The policy was simple and direct.

Orders for the treatment of people who were rounded up were explicit, as in the case of the shepherds whom I mentioned earlier. An order of June 1987, again from Ali Hassan Al-Majid, stated:

> The armed forces must kill any human being or animal present within these areas. They are totally prohibited.

That order was repeated often, because apparently some units in the field were not as active in implementing the policy as the high command wished. Another command stated:

> The core command shall carry out random bombardments using artillery, helicopters and aircraft at all times in order to kill the largest number of persons present in those prohibited areas. All persons captured in those villages shall be detained, and those between the ages of 15 and 70 must be executed after any useful information has been obtained from them.

Another cold-blooded edict stated:

> The 1st Army Corps issued an order as requested by comrade Ali Hassan Al-Majid to execute the wounded civilians after the party organisation confirmed their hostility towards the authorities.

The best known incident was the attack on Halabja, where 5,000 civilians died from the effects of mustard and nerve gases. I went to see some of them in hospital in London about a month later. They had the most horrifying burns, and some could not speak. The devastating effects of Halabja are felt to this day, including abnormal rates of birth defects, cancers and infertility.

The Foreign Secretary and the Minister have spelt out their intentions many times, and I agree with them. I have always supported the view that they have taken. After all, what alternative do we have when there is no agreement that weapons production—which I am certain is still going on in that country—can be inspected? Do we just cross our fingers as Saddam Hussein smuggles in a new stock of weapons, and wish the Kurds, the Shias and the Iranians—and anyone else whom he plans to attack—the best of luck? The answer to that must be no.

If we are responsible human beings, as I hope, we must realise that Saddam Hussein's is an awful regime. Unless it is brought to book—for example, through resolution 1284 or through the indictment of Iraqi war criminals—it will continue to persecute its own people and make their lives a misery, and continue to be a threat to neighbouring countries and, perhaps, countries further afield. We must say to him that there is no hiding place in the world for war criminals any more, as the spokesperson for the Attorney General said at Question Time this afternoon. We must say that it is the responsibility of every country, under international law, to prosecute Iraqi war criminals wherever they might be. That must be the message to any future dictators and perpetrators of atrocities such as the holocaust and the many other terrible things that have happened to us over the past century.

3.32 pm

Mr. Tony Worthington (Clydebank and Milngavie): I want to take the emphasis away from Iraq and to look at sanctions more generally. I shall look particularly at the question of what are called smart sanctions, or financial sanctions.

There are many imperfections in the kind of sanctions that have generally been imposed, and the advantages of smart sanctions are listed in paragraph 65 of our report. It points out that smarter sanctions ought, among other things, to hurt the regime more than the general population; that they avoid the humanitarian costs of comprehensive trade embargoes; and that they make it more difficult for the target regime to rally domestic and foreign support against the sanctions. There is an attractiveness about smart sanctions. I went into this investigation thinking that it would be interesting to hear about them. I wondered what they were and how they operated.

I must say that I emerged from working on the report deeply disillusioned about smart sanctions, because I did not find much smartness going on. The report refers to that in strong terms in paragraph 78, which says:

> We consider it totally unacceptable that there is no individual or organisation within the United Nations with overall responsibility for targeting financial sanctions, for example against those who continue to enrich themselves while their people suffer.

It is impossible to have smart sanctions when the United Nations does not have a brain. It does not have a brain because no one there is responsible for gathering information. No person or organisation within the United Nations is responsible for the imposition of smart sanctions. We must address that. The Foreign Office's response to the report does not deal adequately with that point.

If hon. Members want to know how dumb the United Nations is in this respect, they should read the evidence of Ambassador Fowler on the resources that he has and the information that he receives as chair of the Angola sanctions committee. He said that he received whatever information any nation deigned to give him, which was not much.

I can illustrate the point about smart sanctions by referring to the issue of diamonds. It is fair to say that, if we were serious about preventing conflict in Africa, we would have done something about diamond mining and smuggling a long time ago. The Angola crisis has been going on for 25 years, and it is calculated that, in the 1990s, Savimbi gathered in $3.7 billion from the diamond trade. The Congo and, for the past 10 years, Sierra Leone have also been affected.

I received some information from De Beers, which controls about 65 per cent. of the world's diamonds. The figure has gone down in recent years because of the

[Mr. Tony Worthington]

collapse of the Soviet Union, but we are still talking about a big player. Everyone who considers the situations in Angola, Sierra Leone and the Congo comes to the conclusion that diamonds are fuelling the wars. In a press release, De Beers Canada said that it had long ago

ceased buying diamonds in Angola from the informal sector of the economy.

The document also says:

The intake of diamonds being purchased by De Beers and its associated companies and being sold into the market through the Sight system does not include any diamonds which come from any area in Africa controlled by forces rebelling against the legitimate and internationally recognised government of the relevant country.

De Beers is saying that its hands are clean.

De Beers also wrote to me about something that I said in a previous debate. In evidence to Congress, the corporation said that, for a variety of reasons, it had been

appalled by the link that has been made between diamonds and the funding of weapons purchases by rebel armies in Africa.

In the letter that I received, it said:

Moreover, as part of its (well publicised) programme to deny rebel movements in Africa access to the world's diamond markets, De Beers has closed down all its outside buying operations in Africa and instructed its offices in Antwerp and Tel Aviv not to buy any African-sourced diamonds. That is why it is able to ensure that all the diamonds it sells onto the market are conflict-free.

That is an enormous statement, and it conflicts with what has been said by others who have carried out research into the matter.

Ms Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): Does the hon. Gentleman not find it surprising that world diamond prices have remained fairly stable? If there were a quantity of diamonds available outside the official channels, the price of diamonds would have plummeted.

Mr. Worthington: One of the major reasons for the existence of De Beers is to protect world diamond prices. We ought to be able to use it to help to clear up diamond smuggling, as it is easier to control operations with such a huge organisation.

A report by an organisation called Partnership Africa-Canada, entitled "The Heart of the Matter: Sierra Leone, Diamonds and Human Security", says:

De Beers says that it does not purchase Sierra Leonean diamonds. Through its companies and buying offices in West Africa, however, and in its attempts to mop up supplies everywhere in the world, it is virtually inconceivable that the company is not—in one way or another—purchasing diamonds that have been smuggled out of Sierra Leone.

There are important questions to be asked. Although the Government of Sierra Leone recorded exports of only 8,500 carats in 1998, the Diamond High Council in Belgium recorded imports from Sierra Leone of 770,000 carats. In Liberia, where little diamond mining takes place, the annual diamond mining capacity is between 100,000 and 150,000 carats, but Liberian imports to Belgium of more than 31 million carats have been recorded between 1994 and 1998. In other words, although the capacity of the Liberian diamond industry was said to be about 100,000 carats, Belgium was allegedly importing 6 million carats a year during that period. That is a highly significant accusation.

The Canadian report states:

De Beers is part of the problem. In its efforts to control as much of the international diamond market as possible, it is no doubt purchasing diamonds from a wide variety of dubious sources, either wittingly or unwittingly.

That is also a considerable accusation. Global Witness, a London-based organisation with which the Foreign Office occasionally deals, has stated:

Governments and the trade must finally accept it is their responsibility to ensure that diamonds are not involved in the funding of conflict, and take action accordingly.

Global Witness is a well-accredited organisation, and I see the Minister nodding in agreement. It continues:

If any of these diamond funded conflicts in Africa are to have a chance of peaceful conclusion and if the threat to the international market is to be negated, then the international community, through the G8, G77, UN, SADC and EU must act swiftly and decisively to prohibit the sale and marketing of these "blood diamonds".

Conflicts have continued in Angola for 25 years, and in Sierra Leone for 10 years. Diamonds are relatively simple to control compared with offshore financial trading activities. They pose problems, in the sense that they are small and very valuable, but they are subject to powerful controls. The diamond market in Belgium, which controls 75 per cent. of the world's diamonds, is secretive, and it is because it has been designed to be so that hon. Members probably know little about it.

The world community cannot cope with this problem. Like everyone else, Ambassador Fowler accepts that diamonds are at the root of it, but as far as I can tell, his team consists of not much more than one other person and a dog—and I am not even sure about the dog. He has no information-gathering mechanisms, no power, and is unable to understand the situation in Angola, whether in respect of diamonds or of anything else. We asked him about the problem of small arms in Angola, and he replied, "Small arms? Huge, 50-tonne tanks are being smuggled in and I can't stop them."

We must get serious about this problem. If sanctions are to be imposed, it is no use giving in to the "something must be done" syndrome. Where sanctions have been imposed, there have been terrible consequences for innocent people in almost every case. We have allowed black markets to be set up, and often strengthened the villains whom we are trying to bring down. The Minister and the Foreign Office know that I am right. The United Nations is not equipped, in terms of information gathering or singleness of purpose, to impose smart or other sanctions. That matter must be addressed soon.

I am not criticising the Minister. I recently received a parliamentary answer saying that representatives from the Foreign Office have met the diamond people in Belgium. That is a welcome step forward. However, we must go much further. We have the most active Africa Minister that I can remember, but he and the Government must get to grips with smart sanctions, especially in relation to diamonds.

3.45 pm

Ms Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): I congratulate the International Development Committee on an immensely detailed and thought-

provoking report on sanctions. I must admit that, on first reading it, I was somewhat startled, because my perception was that the Committee was arguing forcefully—because of the evidence that had been so tellingly presented to it—that sanctions can create even more humanitarian havoc for the people of the countries on which they are imposed.

I clearly remember, after the apartheid regime in South Africa had finally been dispatched, buying my first bottle of South African wine, and shaking all the way from the shelf, through the checkout, to the exit. For my entire life, it had seemed that anything that had anything to do with South Africa was not to be touched—and was certainly not touched by me. I have always believed in the power of sanctions and have participated in them in so far as it is possible for an individual consumer so to do. I was therefore relieved that paragraph 3 of the Government response to the Committee's report stated:

> The Government believes that the case for sanctions remains compelling.

The paragraph concludes:

> Our sanctions policy will remain under constant review in the light of these and other international consultations and of feedback received from UK civil society.

Having said that, I strongly agree with many aspects of the Committee's report. I could not agree more with the argument in favour of infinitely smarter sanctions that was so forcefully presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington)—in terms not only of their implementation, but of those on whom they are imposed and of the information that is provided to us, as consumers, about regimes that warrant their imposition.

The Committee concentrated mainly on the sanctions imposed on Iraq, but it also took evidence on Burma, and I should like to raise the strong case for the introduction of investment and financial sanctions against that country. I shall not take up hon. Members' time by detailing the evidence that is already in the Committee's report, as I am sure that everyone in the Chamber is aware of the appalling nature of the illegal and brutal regime that claims to govern the people of Burma. My argument is supported by those who are working for the introduction of sanctions against Burma and by Aung San Suu Kyi, the only democratic leader of Burma and the only person, in my view, who has any right to speak for that country and its people. She argues forcefully for the introduction of such sanctions against her country.

The situation for the people of Burma is appalling, and it is getting worse every year. The comparative tables for countries around Burma reveal that, in terms of infant mortality, mortality of children under the age of five and maternal mortality, Burma is by the far the worst country in that part of the world. As we know, millions of men, women and children are in forced labour there. Indeed, on 17 June 1999 the International Labour Organisation—an agency of the United Nations, as I am sure all hon. Members are aware—passed an unprecedented resolution that virtually expelled Burma from its ranks. The resolution was overwhelmingly adopted at the ILO annual assembly in Geneva. That came as the result of an inquiry by the ILO's commission, which accused Burma's ruling military of the widespread and systematic use of forced labour. The commission charges that

> any person who violates the prohibition of recourse to forced labour under the (ILO) Convention is guilty of an international crime that is also, if committed in a widespread or systematic manner, a crime against humanity.

I do not believe that anyone in the Chamber would argue with that assessment.

The commission has gathered evidence of threats to the life and security and the extrajudicial punishment of those who are unwilling, slow or unable to comply with the demand for forced labour. Such punishments or reprisals range from money demands to physical abuse, beatings, torture, rape and murder. The commission also has evidence that forced labour in Burma is widely performed by women, children and elderly persons, as well as persons unfit to work.

More than 1.5 million people have been internally displaced in Burma. There are more than 1,500 political prisoners. Thousands upon thousands of refugees have had to flee their country. The standard of living for people in Burma, which is naturally rich, is falling year on year as the economy deteriorates. In the main, that is because its so-called Government are interested only in increasing the size of the army, continually expanding their military and buying more weapons. The country has no enemies outside its borders. It is under no threat from anyone. The only threat that the illegal regime can discern is from the people of Burma itself.

The hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) argued, with regard to Saddam Hussein, that, far from removing the illegal regime, sanctions have assisted in the maintenance of his criminal activities. If one turned that argument on its head, one could say that the non-introduction of sanctions would remove such regimes. That is certainly not the case as far as Burma is concerned. The situation for the people of Burma could not be worse. The majority of the economy is based on rice and the majority of rice farmers must sell their rice to the army and to the Government for far less than it would raise on the open market. Such minimal sums as are spent on what we in this country would regard as a caring social infrastructure must be spent on lauding the regime.

I would argue for the introduction of some form of economic sanctions and for active, energetic proselytising among our indigenous companies and those of our European partners that would regard investment in Burma as profitable. We should argue that any company in the European Union already in Burma should disinvest and not consider future investment there. The United States has already introduced such a system.

To go back to a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie made, there are difficulties in achieving agreement, not only on obtaining information, but on unity of action in the international community. I congratulate the Government on the work that they have already undertaken in the UK and the EU on attempting to freeze Burmese assets.

I agree with the Chairman of the Committee about the difficulties of introducing a cohesive programme of economic sanctions. They should not only work, but

[Ms Glenda Jackson]

target the leaders of regimes. He said that it would require close co-ordination between every arm of Government, but our Government pride themselves on being joined up, so that should not present a problem. I would argue that the present Government in Burma are criminals; if they were called a mafia, no one would hesitate to consider introducing an international regime to freeze or take away the criminal assets of the perpetrators.

It would not be impossible to introduce such sanctions. They would have a beneficial effect on the people of Burma by shortening the life of that illegal regime. History shows that all such repressive regimes are eventually overturned. We pray that it will happen peacefully, but time is a factor. We, as consumers, are quite prepared not to buy products from companies that we believe are investing in illegal regimes whose practices are regarded as unethical and which we believe will damage not only human beings, but the environment. We have reached a point in the world's history when Governments should be able to harness the energy and commitment of people around the world to play their part as consumers to help to reduce the power of regimes such as that in Burma.

I congratulate the Government on what they and our European partners have done. I urge them to continue to work strongly together. They should tell the UK's financial and business community what they regard as the wrong kind of investment. They should proselytise in the international community, saying that the regime has placed the most appalling burdens on a people who are innately gentle and peace-loving. The regime has destroyed the economy of one of the richest countries in that part of the world, and it continues to stop, harass and imprison its people. It will not allow the only truly democratically elected leader of that country, Aung San Suu Kyi, to play her proper part in taking her people out of the darkness in which they are now enveloped and into the light.

We are talking about a regime that sends small children along jungle paths to ensure that, if land mines have been laid, only the children die and not the soldiers. That is one example of its brutality and its total lack of appreciation of what is essential to achieve civilised relations in the international community.

I thank the Select Committee for its hard work; its report is immensely detailed. I acknowledge that sanctions must be infinitely smarter, but I still hold to the belief that they have a major role to play in ensuring a peaceful change, so that those regimes that are unacceptable to those who believe in democracy, human rights and justice can be removed and overturned.

3.59 pm

Barbara Follett (Stevenage): I welcome the debate. The subject is long overdue for an airing. As other hon. Members and my Select Committee colleagues have covered so much ground so eloquently, I shall confine my remarks to something of which I have personal experience.

Between the early 1960s and the late 1970s I lived under a sanctions regime in South Africa. The Select Committee set itself the task of assessing the impact of sanctions on target regimes and examining proposals to reduce their unintended harm. I should like to consider those two aims in the light of my experience in South Africa. Sanctions are as old as democracy itself. The first recorded incident of sanctions led to the Peloponnesian war in 432 BC, when I believe that Athens imposed sanctions on a neighbouring state, which then called in Sparta. The imposition of sanctions often ends in war. We saw that in the case of sanctions by the United States against Japan in 1938, which some people say led to Pearl harbour. Sanctions have also been imposed against Britain. In 1807, President Jefferson imposed an embargo on trade with European countries because of our actions against United States merchant ships.

Sanctions have been applied to many countries, with some success or no success, but on the whole with qualified success. Most people would say that, even if sanctions are not successful in bringing down a regime, they may change some conditions and make things better for some people. The only case of sanctions that people such as economic historians and economists agree was a success was in relation to South Africa. The sanctions introduced there eventually produced the fall of apartheid, but I should like to talk about the effect of those sanctions.

There is no doubt that, as in the case of Iraq, and as the Select Committee report stresses, the sanctions imposed on South Africa, especially initially, had a disproportionate effect on the poor, just as they are having in Iraq. Sanctions on Iraq have been in place for nine years. They were in place in South Africa for many more years than that, and the apartheid regime was in place for 44 years in total. To be effective, sanctions must be multilateral, and nothing illustrates that better than the case of South Africa. In the early '60s, I was a student at university in South Africa. The apartheid regime had been in place since 1948 and was really beginning to bite. We were forbidden to go to university with members of other races, except under special qualifying conditions. The Group Areas Act was in place. Infant mortality among the black races was 50 per cent. Half of African children born in South Africa in the 1960s died before they reached their first birthday. The infant mortality rate among the whites, who then comprised 4 million of the population compared with 26 million blacks, was lower than the World Health Organisation's best—a statistic of about 19 in 1,000.

In the 1960s, South Africa was suffering under the apartheid regime. The Organisation of African Unity imposed the first trade embargo on South Africa. It was not effective because South Africa's economy was not especially involved with other African economies, and the few border states with which it was involved, such as Zambia, Botswana and Swaziland, were too enmeshed in the South African economy to withdraw effectively.

Sanctions continued until about 1977. In 1961, South Africa withdrew from the Commonwealth because it faced United Nations Security Council resolutions and embargoes by other Commonwealth countries. In the early 1960s, South Africa either withdrew or was expelled from a variety of regional and international organisations such as the Food and Agriculture Organisation, UNESCO and various others. In 1963, the Security Council introduced limited military sanctions and the situation in South Africa grew worse. By 1976, the first strike by school children took place.

Black children were told that, instead of being taught in English—still not their mother tongue—they would be taught in Afrikaans, so they revolted.

That situation created a great deal of publicity about apartheid South Africa. There had already been a substantial amount of publicity, in which my hon. Friend the Minister of State had played his part. However, the real change came in the late 1970s. Until then, I saw almost no difference in South Africa as a result of sanctions, other than that the South African economy became more self-sufficient. There were petrol restrictions, which meant that the number of deaths on South African roads—astronomically high to this day—was reduced.

Overall, the difference for the whites was not great, but the sanctions had an effect on the blacks, who were the oppressed. That is because sanctions were not targeted. However, from the early 1970s, people in South Africa, including me, were calling for targeted sanctions on South Africa's financial institutions—on gold. Nobody heard and nobody did anything, because people did not have the psychological will to impose targeted sanctions. That is a second strong prerequisite. One can have the physical ability to impose sanctions, but one must also have the psychological will.

People in Britain debated sanctions, and I saw and heard those debates. I remember listening to a debate just after I had visited a township where the homes of about 100 people had been flattened by bulldozers. At the time, I wondered how anyone could say that sanctions were wrong. Sanctions were vital, but they needed to be better sanctions. That is what the report should be about.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) said, currently sanctions are not smart. I doubt that they ever will be smart, but they are definitely better than entering into armed conflict. We must ensure that they are imposed effectively and to a time scale. Had sanctions been imposed on South Africa's financial institutions by the United States earlier than 1985, we might have seen some change sooner. That was when the US imposed selective sanctions on computers and computer software used in security operations, on nuclear technology and on financial assistance to United States firms that hoped to invest in South Africa. Those sanctions began to hit the oppressor rather than the oppressed because the Pretoria regime was tied in to western credit facilities and western banking.

When the European Union imposed similar sanctions, the measures really began to bite. Actions by my hon. Friend the Minister of State on the sporting and cultural front had an effect on the psychological ability of people to impose sanctions, which is why my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson) found it so difficult to buy South African wine and why so many people boycotted a certain brand of chocolate and milk for many years. To this day, I sometimes feel guilty about eating that particular brand of chocolate, but I remember the difference that those sanctions made. That is why I appeal to my hon. Friend the Minister of State to do everything that he can to ensure that the UN's imposition of sanctions on Iraq is strengthened.

As I have already said, sanctions must be multilateral to be effective, and they must be targeted, as they were in South Africa. We began to target effectively in 1985, but it took until 1992 for the South African economy to reach such a parlous state that apartheid started to be dismantled. How many lives could we have saved, how much suffering could we have stopped, how many generations of people could we have prevented from being tainted in the way that people will be tainted in South Africa by the effects of those 44 years of apartheid, had we had the ability and the psychological will to impose those sanctions, and, most importantly, had we targeted the oppressor and not the oppressed? For far too many people, sanctions are window dressing. People ask politicians, "What are you doing about it?" Politicians hate being asked that question, although they are asked it all the time. The need to do something about a situation is fuelled by the CNN effect—being able to see what is happening in a country. We can say that we are imposing sanctions, but we are not imposing the right sanctions. I hope that the debate will lead to the pursuit of the right sanctions at the right time by the right people, aimed at the oppressor, not the oppressed.

4.10 pm

Ms Tess Kingham (Gloucester): As we have heard from several hon. Members, Angola features prominently in the Select Committee's report on sanctions. It became clear to us during the course of the inquiry that the international sanctions imposed on UNITA in Angola, in an attempt to pressure it into adhering to agreed peace accords, have unconditionally failed the people and the Government of that country, despite the fact that the Angolan Government have done all that the international community has required it to do during its long battle with UNITA.

The background to the situation in Angola makes clear both the need for sanctions and the way in which the sanctions have not been effective. Following Angola's independence in 1975, UNITA unleashed a campaign of terrorism against the Angolan people. Backed by apartheid South Africa and the United States, the campaign's hallmarks were brutal massacres, hostage taking and bomb planting—in short, the whole terrorist repertoire—along with the illegal sale of ivory, which resulted in the slaughter of more than 100,000 elephants.

The countryside was terrorised by many massacres. They included a massacre on 8 February 1986 in Camabatela, Kwanza Norte, in which 107 people were hacked to death with machetes, including the Methodist pastor and four of his children. In 1994, during the occupation of Huambo, UNITA murdered 2,500 people. Many bodies were found down wells. In September 1995, there was a massacre of displaced persons in Celepi centre, where 105 people were slaughtered. The dead included women and children.

There is no doubt that UNITA has devastated Angola. The Minister of State who is here today spoke at the Action for Southern Africa conference last November. I hope that it is in order for me to quote him. He said of Angola:

> I am haunted by my visit there in September 1995. Limbless starving people begging everywhere. Gaunt ghost cities like Huambo, its streets lined with stark concrete edifices, every house

[Ms Tess Kingham]

office or shop gutted. Thirty-five years of endless war fuelled by arms and ammunition from Europe. Hopelessness and despair etched on the faces of the people, nearly two million of them displaced.

That was the handiwork of Jonas Savimbi, a creation of the west and the leader of UNITA. Despite their military advances against UNITA, the Angolan Government were committed to co-operating with the international community and initiated a lengthy diplomatic process. On the demand of the international community, the Angolan Government held multi-party elections in 1992 with United Nations monitoring. UNITA fared badly. Savimbi rejected the election results and returned to war. He took 75 per cent. of the country; the UN called it the worst war in the world. In 1994, the Lusaka protocol failed and UNITA did not disarm. Under considerable pressure from the west, the Angolan Government made more major concessions, with UNITA representatives being offered high office. Sadly, that was not to be the stepping stone to peace and reconciliation for which everybody had hoped. Rather, Savimbi and UNITA used the breathing space to rebuild militarily and to re-arm. Re-arming took place under the noses of MONUA, the UN observer mission in Angola. Since 1992, the death toll and destruction inflicted by UNITA has hit record heights.

The international community via the UN targeted UNITA with sanctions. The financial sanctions in place since 1998 and the arms embargo sound good in theory. The intent is sound—to strangle UNITA's supply lines and to deprive Savimbi of resources to continue the war. However, the Select Committee discovered that, in reality, the sanctions have been totally ineffective, as the UN has had pathetically few resources to monitor them and no teeth with which to enforce them. The Committee concluded that

The failure to enforce effectively the sanctions regime against UNITA is a scandal that must be urgently addressed by the international community.

Despite the international ban on diamond sales from UNITA areas, UNITA diamonds regularly find their way on to European diamond markets, as my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) noted, and, despite the arms embargo, UNITA has found access to large-scale military equipment, as the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) pointed out.

In his evidence to the Select Committee, Ambassador Fowler, the chairman of the UN sanctions committee on Angola, said:

Savimbi has earned between US$3 and US$4 billion from diamond marketing over the past eight years. That buys an awful lot of military equipment.

Savimbi is reported to be receiving between five and seven flights an evening, carrying vehicles, guns and even tanks. Ambassador Fowler said:

His part of Angola is landlocked. It's not easy to get 50 tonne tanks into that part of Angola—yet he does that. We might usefully concentrate on how he does that.

No sanctions regime could realistically be expected to stop the sale of UNITA diamonds or to stop arms getting into UNITA's hands, particularly with the amount of small arms floating around Africa as a result of past conflicts. However, one would expect that, once the international community had committed itself to sanctions, it would do all in its power to ensure the resources and political will to enforce them. The blatant and gargantuan flouting of sanctions against UNITA makes a mockery of the process.

The Select Committee discovered during its inquiry how little is dedicated to monitoring sanctions within the UN. The UN has no information-gathering capacity of its own. We were told that the Angolan sanctions committee relied on information passed on to it by member states, non-governmental organisations and journalists. Even when information is received, it is unlikely to be followed up, given the derisory resourcing of the sanctions committee. The summary of the meeting of the chairmen of the Security Council sanctions committees in April 1999 noted that some committees were practically non-operational.

Administrative capacity is so low that it would be laughable if the consequences were not so serious. In evidence to the Committee, Ambassador Fowler said:

I have about one third of a person in a UN Secretariat who helps me arrange meetings. My own expenses are paid by the Canadian Government.

That was a shock to the Committee. Once the big, dramatic gesture is made by the international community, we assume that sanctions will be set up, that the UN wheels will go into motion, that resources will be provided, including offices and staff, and that the intelligence gathering networks will swing into action. However, as was said earlier, it is rather like one man and his dog—or perhaps one woman and a dog.

That member states should take the funding of sanctions so lightly is an insult to the millions who have perished directly or indirectly as a result of the Angolan war. It is also an insult to the Angolan Government, who have followed UN advice at each stage in the hope for peace. Until peace comes to Angola, its people will never benefit from development. The infrastructure is shot to pieces, the health and education systems are decimated and extreme poverty is the norm. Angola must sit alongside Rwanda as a country that has been totally let down by the United Nations and its member states.

Despite the odds stacked against him, Ambassador Fowler has done a remarkable job. Many were impressed when he gave evidence to the Committee. He has established two expert panels to investigate the flow of diamond money and weapons to Savimbi. I am pleased to say that the UK Government have taken a leading role in the funding of that operation. I was also delighted yesterday to hear the Foreign Office announce a new initiative on the global certification of diamonds. I hope that the Government will support the campaign to indict Jonas Savimbi as a war criminal. The Select Committee heard that it may spur UN member states to enforce sanctions against UNITA more vigorously if Savimbi is known to be a wanted war criminal.

Due to the work of Ambassador Fowler, there is hope that sanctions against UNITA may be made more effective and may contribute towards the end of the war and the future development of Angola. It is imperative that the overall resourcing, status and effectiveness of the UN sanctions committee is reviewed. The Select Committee recommends establishing a properly staffed and financed UN sanctions unit to receive and co-

ordinate information on financial sanctions and to press Governments to implement them. That is the least that many of those countries should demand from the international community. I hope that the Government will press for that urgently. Smart UN sanctions, properly applied and enforced, could be a useful tool in resolving conflicts. At present, however, member states seem content with making diplomatic gestures—what my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett) called window dressing—rather than making sanctions work. The casualties of that apathy are the people of countries such as Angola.

In the autumn, world leaders will gather for the UN millennium General Assembly. I hope that they will use that opportunity to reaffirm their commitment to meeting the development assistance committee's targets to halve world poverty by 2015. I hope, too, that the opportunity will be grasped to consider some of the more fundamental structural and resourcing changes that are needed to make the UN an effective body in the new millennium. The role of sanctions committees could be raised at that summit, and I hope that the Government will use every opportunity to do so.

Angola celebrates its 25th anniversary of independence later this year. It can never truly reap the benefits of independence while its people suffer poverty and under-development. If sanctions against UNITA work, and Savimbi is destroyed, the people of Angola would have a silver jubilee to celebrate. I hope that the Government, with their renewed commitment to Angola will contribute to making that happen.

4.20 pm

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): The debate has seen an inherent tension, almost a contradiction, between two inescapable facts—first, that Saddam Hussein is ultimately responsible for the suffering of the Iraqi people, and, secondly, that the comprehensive economic sanctions imposed by the international community have caused the serious deterioration of the humanitarian and developmental situation in Iraq.

My thoughts at the beginning of the inquiry were informed largely by the former view. After all, we must remember that Saddam Hussein is willing to commit genocide at the drop of a hat. When the Iraqi football team lost a match, he had the footballers taken off the plane and tortured—the English football team might be relieved that we do not employ the same tactics. Saddam Hussein is also intent on manufacturing weapons of mass destruction. There is incontrovertible evidence that that is the case, and the international community and the Government have a responsibility to take action.

As the Select Committee found, however, although sanctions are a low-cost alternative to war, they are all too often as damaging in humanitarian and developmental terms as armed conflict. My hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) gave a devastating critique of Saddam's regime. She listed in detail the grotesque human rights abuses committed by Hussein. He, his army and his death squads have been responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent people—20,000, 30,000, 50,000, even 100,000, who knows?

However, as the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) pointed out, UNICEF estimates that sanctions have caused the death of 500,000 children. That is another contradiction. As it might be controversial, I shall quote the report. It states:

> UNICEF estimated that, if the substantial reductions in child mortality achieved throughout Iraq in the 1980s had continued into the 1990s, there would have been half a million fewer deaths under five in the country as a whole in the eight year period from 1991 to 1998.

Whether or not those figures are exact, two facts remain—first, that sanctions have failed to dislodge Saddam Hussein, and, secondly, that sanctions have hurt the ordinary people of Iraq, particularly children, and that those people have been hurt more than the ruling elite. That is why the Committee concluded that

> If sanctions are to be retained as a credible instrument of foreign policy, they must increasingly seek to target the assets of specific groups or individuals responsible for breaches of international law...The Committee recommends that the United Kingdom argue and gather support for the establishment of a properly staffed and financed sanctions unit within the United Nations to receive and coordinate information on the enforcement of financial sanctions.

I hope that the Minister will respond to that point.

Everybody knows that ordinary Iraqis are suffering. British people know that. One of my constituents, Andrea Needham, travelled to Iraq in 1998 carrying medicines to a children's hospital. Andrea and I have disagreed. I took a view fundamentally different from hers, and more or less suggested that the suffering of the people of Iraqi people must be laid at the door of Saddam Hussein. None the less, I agreed with her comments when she wrote to me and said:

> even if you believe that the responsibility for the suffering in Iraq lies with Saddam Hussein, the UN Security Council remains accountable to human rights principles regardless of the conduct of the Iraqi government. Intransigence by a government does not give the Security Council the right to punish that country's citizens. Human rights are based on the inherent dignity and worth of every human being, and are owed directly to individuals. They are not forfeited because of a government's alleged misconduct, especially when—as in the case of Iraq—citizens have no voice in the decisions of the government.

Many of my colleagues have argued convincingly that, although we need a sanctions regime in Iraq to deal with the behaviour of Saddam Hussein, we must change the policy that we have at the moment. I will not rehearse those arguments because we have heard them in full. A sanction that is not applied currently but which should be applied is that of the International Criminal Court. We have touched on that subject, but it is important to recognise that individual criminal liability already exists.

We must consider the UK record. We have had no prosecutions under the Geneva conventions, or under the United Nations convention against torture. We have had only one prosecution under the post-war treaties, and that was under the War Crimes Act 1991 and specifically concerned crimes in Belarus during the second world war. However, if we wanted to take responsibility on certain matters, we could. We could follow the Swiss example, for instance. The Swiss have indicted war criminals living in Switzerland. We have war criminals in Britain. We are talking in general about sanctions, but if we allow the culture of impunity to continue, we will do nothing in the long term to discourage criminals such as Saddam Hussein.

[Ms Oona King]

There have been criticisms regarding delays affecting humanitarian goods going to Iraq. Richardson Supply Company Ltd., in my constituency, was requested by the World Food Programme to supply computers for its project in Iraq. The managing director, Justin McArdle, explained:

> We received an order for...computers and software...Accompanying the order were United Nations Security Council Authorisation letters acknowledging notification of the intention...We subsequently sent copies of the purchase order and the UN letters of authorisation to the DTI Sanctions Unit on 3rd April 1998 to support our request for an export licence...We finally received the export licence...on 9th July 1998...The World Food Programme have indicated to us that they are considering abandoning the United Kingdom as a source for computer products because of the inexplicable delay which they have experienced in receiving this order...An element of common sense would have allowed these humanitarian supplies to be despatched with the minimum of delay—the World Food Programme is a United Nations agency.

The problem is that there has been a significant absence of common sense in the sanctions debate. That point was brought back to me most clearly to me when I visited Burundi, where regional sanctions had been imposed. The United Kingdom Government were not involved with the imposition of those regional sanctions, but we had imposed our own form of sanctions to the extent that we were involved in providing humanitarian assistance but not developmental assistance.

When I talk about a lack of common sense, I am referring, for example, to young children being taken to the feeding centre funded by our Government, leaving when they reached a certain body weight to return to their village, only to return within a month or two because the Government have stopped our programmes to provide clean water—that was termed development assistance, not humanitarian assistance—they have fallen sick; our money again pays to get them up to a certain weight. That does no one any good, nor does it help us to achieve our aims.

The British Government have been strident in their efforts to seek out abusers of human rights, and to adopt an ethical foreign policy, for which we have received little thanks, I might add. I support the Foreign Office fully when it says that it is better to try to take an ethical approach than not to make the effort in the first place.

The British Government should consider seriously how to improve the targeting of sanctions, which has been argued for cogently today. For example, the current sanctions regime against Iraq is not working. It is not achieving our goals and it is harming the lives of ordinary Iraqis. I hope that the Minister will be able to take the Committee's inquiry into account. It was a long inquiry, and at its outset I was entirely in agreement with those who argued that we must maintain the present sanctions regime, and that the problems were entirely Saddam Hussein's fault. That last point is, of course, true. If he wanted to divert resources towards feeding his people, he could. However, he does not want to. The Select Committee report states:

> A sanctions regime which relies on the good faith of Saddam Hussein is fundamentally flawed.

4.33 pm

Mr. Nigel Jones (Cheltenham): This has been a very good debate so far, and I congratulate the Select Committee, of which I have fairly recently become a member, on producing such a readable and detailed report. It addresses some very serious issues. I should also like to thank the Minister for the useful Government response.

I want to comment mainly on the sections of the report that concern Iraq. I want also to thank the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) for taking me back a decade or more to the time when I worked in Iraq for five months and was able to experience Saddam Hussein's regime at first hand. I can confirm many of the points that she made. For example, the stories about deserters being rounded up and shot, and their families being called in and given the bodies while being charged for the bullets, were circulating when I was in Iraq in 1987 and 1988.

I should explain that I was in Iraq to put in a computer for the university, and agreed to go for a year. On the second day, a military wagon pulled up outside the university and a major got out. I was asked if I wanted to see the Ministry of Defence computers. I agreed—I do not know what would have happened if I had said no—and we went to six different computer sites, all of which had British equipment. There was an arms embargo at the time because of Iraq's war against Iran and I do not know how the equipment got through to the Iraqi Ministry of Defence. During the conflict over the invasion of Kuwait, I was able to identify on television some of the buildings being obliterated by allied bombers. I had been in some of those buildings.

The Saddam Hussein regime is very harsh and has no regard for human rights. A large notice on the board at work stated that under no circumstances should the Government be criticised in any way because it would lead to an automatic life sentence. Everyone in this country would have been locked up had that rule applied under the previous Government.

I was supposed to remain in Iraq for a year, but stayed for only five months, having got the job done super quick, and I can honestly say that that was the worst five months of my life. I have a firm line on sanctions, which is that we need to continue them, although we certainly need to make them smarter. It is 10 years since the tanks rolled across the border into Kuwait. Saddam Hussein is still in power, but most of the western leaders who opposed him are not. The right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) is still a Member of the House but is no longer Prime Minister and President Bush is no longer President of the United States. Saddam Hussein has become the albatross around the neck of the international community. He is a constant reminder of defiance in the face of, initially, overwhelming force and, later, unending economic and diplomatic pressure. He does not need to confront irritating elections, but he cannot slip into retirement. The only alternative for him and his cohorts in the Ba'ath party, other than remaining in power, is oblivion. That is a basic fact of Iraqi political life and the starting point for all his strategic consultations. Such is the bluntness of the tools available to the international community—the United Nations and allied powers—that Iraq's cheat and retreat strategy is remarkably successful in sustaining

the Ba'ath party and transferring the blame for the suffering of its people on to the international community and particularly the USA.

Saddam has been successful in slowly defusing the alliance against him. Only Britain and the United States now stand prepared to oppose Iraq militarily. Other partners, both in Europe and the middle east, although concurring with the necessity to contain Iraq, are not prepared to sustain the united front that ejected Iraqi troops from Kuwait.

Russia is owed approximately $5 billion and is keen to see the Iraqi regime in a position to begin repayment. Ankara is also owed a considerable sum. There has been informed speculation that the interests of French oil companies have been instrumental in France's reticence to contribute to the maintenance of the no-fly zones and its stance in the Security Council. The computers that I saw in Iraq's Ministry of Defence 12 years ago were obtained with loans from the Export Credits Guarantee Department, which have not been repaid. The British taxpayer paid for the computers in Saddam Hussein's military installations.

Kofi Annan is worried that Saddam is winning the propaganda war and stated:

> the humanitarian situation in Iraq poses a serious moral dilemma for the Organisation. The United Nations has always been on the side of the vulnerable and the weak, and has always sought to relieve suffering, yet here we are accused of causing suffering to an entire population. We are in danger of losing the argument, or the propaganda war—if we haven't lost it already—about who is responsible for this situation in Iraq—President Saddam Hussein or the United Nations.

Clearly, it is President Saddam Hussein. The sanctions are necessary to stop him building up his arsenal. He has a huge number of weapons. I have a list that shows his potential for causing significant damage in the region. It says that with sufficient black market uranium or plutonium, Iraq could fabricate a nuclear weapon within one year. Iraq does not yet have that uranium or plutonium, but, if we lift sanctions, those items will be first on the shopping list. Iraq could produce weapons-grade fissile material within several years.

Iraq retains stockpiles of chemical weapon munitions, including special chemical-biological al-Hussein ballistic missile warheads. I was in Iraq when it proudly announced that it had made its own missile—the al-Hussein—which was a variation of an imported missile. Iraq has 2,000 aerial bombs, between 15,000 and 20,000 rockets and 15,000 artillery shells. It has biological weapons, which it has used. It has components for dozens of Scud B and al-Hussein missiles, as well as indigenously produced scud missile engines. It has cruise missile equivalents and Exocets—I wonder where they came from—and delivery systems that include approximately 300 fixed-wing aircraft. There is still a lot of stuff, and, if we lift the sanctions, Saddam will build up his arsenal and begin the development of nuclear weapons with which to threaten his neighbours and others.

We have heard that the sanctions are having a devastating effect on the people of Iraq. It is estimated that, as a result of the war and sanctions, Iraq's gross domestic product fell by nearly two thirds in 1991, because of an 85 per cent. decline in oil production. Per capita income fell from $3,416 a year to $1,500 in 1991, and has since decreased to less than $1,036. In 1995, it was estimated to be as low as $450. Most of the Iraqi people are being asked to live on about $4 a day. Meanwhile, average shop prices for essential commodities stand at 850 times the level in July 1990. When I visited Iraq, I saw how the shelves in supermarkets would be stacked with just one product. One week, it was corn oil, so everyone bought that; the following week, the corn oil was gone, but there were toilet rolls—that was a good week. Even then, during the Iran-Iraq war, there was little in the shops. Prices have since gone up, and the people face shortages. The Government's response tells us that

> Iraq's oil revenues are back to—if not above—their peak historical level of around $15 billion per annum, seen only briefly in 1980—

and—

> this means a potential $10 billion a year is available for the humanitarian programme.

We must get the message to the people of Iraq that it is Saddam Hussein who is preventing $10 billion of humanitarian assistance from coming into the country.

The hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) said that we should get away from the "something must be done" syndrome and identify what can be done. There are two strategies. One is to increase international pressure, and the other is to sweeten the current sanctions. The key is to co-opt Russia. Russia's President Putin is vital to putting pressure on Saddam, whether through a visit or a Russo-Iraqi conference. That might break the deadlock, and our Government should try to persuade President Putin to play that important role. Iraq owes Russia £5 billion for equipment purchased, including weapons and fighter aircraft, so it is in the president's interest to get Iraq back into the international community.

We need to ease the pain that sanctions against Iraq are indirectly inflicting on neighbouring countries, particularly Jordan, Turkey and Russia. That should be considered to prevent unilateral moves to break the UN embargo. Various countries, particularly Turkey, are breaking the sanctions. On a visit to Bahrain a couple of years ago, I boarded HMS Cumberland, which was on sanctions duty. Every night, it left the Shatt al-Arab waterway to try to stop Saddam Hussein's oil tankers from disappearing into the night with illegal shipments of oil. That sanctions duty continues to be fulfilled by other vessels.

We must continue to repair relations with Iran. Notwithstanding legitimate human rights concerns and Iran's continuing support of terrorism, the balance of power in the middle east requires that Iraq be particularly sensitive to Iranian diplomacy. A non-rogue Iran would boost the position of the majority Shi'ite population and undermine the Ba'athist regime.

Peace in the middle east is also very important. I visited Israel just two weeks ago, and met President Weizman, who is retiring shortly. I also met Shimon Peres, who said that peace in the middle east must be sorted out between Israel, Syria and the other countries, before one of them develops nuclear weapons. He did not mention Iraq, but I think that he had Iraq in mind. Most countries in the middle east have accepted that Israel has a right to exist, but I wish that something could be done about the Palestinian settlements. I visited one settlement, and the conditions were pretty

[Mr. Nigel Jones]

squalid. The peace issue must be resolved, so that Saddam Hussein will know that he is taking on not just Israel but other countries in the region.

We also need to win the propaganda war. Were Saddam to comply with the current Security Council resolution, sanctions could be lifted in 120 days. There should be a 120-days campaign in Jordan and the Gulf states, so that people in the region can start to put pressure on Saddam.

We must also reform the United Nations. The inspection regimes are too western oriented, and there should be more Arabs on the inspection bodies to help ensure Iraqi compliance. That would sweeten the implementation of UN security resolution 1284, and might encourage Saddam to realise that there is another purpose to it. Otherwise, we are engaged in mere containment. If containment were not damaging the population of Iraq, we could live with it, but, as the figures have shown, the number of deaths, particularly among children, is increasing. We must persuade the United Nations to review the sanctions and to make them smarter, and to move in the direction that I have outlined.

4.50 pm

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): I wholeheartedly welcome the debate and praise the Select Committee, under the distinguished chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells), on its report.

The report has raised a number of important issues about the effectiveness of sanctions and their impact on the populations affected by them. We have heard some excellent speeches this afternoon on matters ranging from what happened in South Africa in the past to the current situation in Angola, Burma, Sierra Leone and, most pertinently, in Iraq. The speeches have been comprehensive and worthwhile. On a personal note, I am delighted to see the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones) in his place.

The key question is how best sanctions can be targeted against countries and particularly against individual leaders without harming civilian members of the population. That is dealt with comprehensively in the Committee's report. We now look to the Government to take on board the Committee's conclusions, so that innocent civilian populations do not bear the brunt of sanctions and that the ruling elite of the country that is subject to the sanctions is effectively punished. The Committee's discussion of smart sanctions is a positive way forward and should be looked at carefully.

I was pleased to see from the Government's response that they share the Committee's belief that the most careful consideration must be given to the humanitarian impact of sanctions. I share that belief. The Committee suggested that sanctions, if not properly implemented, may have an unforeseen humanitarian impact on a country's population. The Committee concluded that, based on clear evidence, the impact of sanctions may fall disproportionately on certain vulnerable groups in society such as women, children, those with disabilities, and refugee groups.

The UN Security Council has invoked chapter VII of the UN charter in 15 cases to date with sanctions having been lifted in four of those cases and suspended in one. The Committee looked at such cases in detail and it has highlighted a vacuum in international relations between military intervention on one hand and diplomacy on the other. If that vacuum can be filled through effective and targeted use of sanctions, it will mean not only that innocent populations suffer less, but also that the world community will have greater confidence in the use of sanctions.

The report details two strands in the concept of smarter sanctions: to improve their efficacy by targeting those in power and those who support them, and to reduce their humanitarian impact on civilian populations. That is to be welcomed. The Committee concludes that some sanctions implemented in the past may in fact have had a greater impact on the innocent population than on the leadership of that country. That is important. In evidence to the Select Committee, the Government seem to have accepted that, in their review of sanctions policy, there is a need to move away from the so-called blunderbuss approach, which hits the whole population with sanctions rather than targets the regime specifically. We support that stance.

One form of smarter sanctions that the Committee explored was so-called private sanctions targeted specifically on individuals of the ruling elite rather than on the population as a whole. The Committee's report at paragraph 64 states:

> Witnesses have suggested that targeted financial sanctions might offer significant potential to exert pressure on the political elite of a target country,

for example, by freezing their assets. However, during the discussions at Interlaken 2, the chairman, Ambassador Rolf Jeker stated in his report that it was

> indicated that much of the conceptual, technical and practical elements required to bring targeted financial sanctions into effect are available and could be effected whenever the Security Council decides to impose targeted financial sanctions.

I agree with the ambassador's conclusions at the end of the Interlaken seminar that:

> if you shoot at a big target, your weapon does not need to be very accurate—it can be a scatter gun like the comprehensive sanctions applied in the past. If the target is small, the weapon must be very accurate.

Indeed, even smarter sanctions targeted against individuals in the ruling elite of a sanctioned country need careful and considered implementation if the weapon of private sanctions is not to fire like a scattergun.

However, the Committee was right to note in its report that the potential of private financial sanctions remains untested. We must therefore proceed with caution. The UN has rarely mandated the use of financial sanctions against individual members of a transgressor state.

States are free to impose whatever sanctions they wish, so long as they do not conflict with other obligations. Switzerland is often singled out as an example, because it is not a member of the United Nations and is therefore not subject to UN Security Council resolutions. However, it voluntarily introduces its own legislation to track UN legislation. That is necessary to ensure that, when sanctions are

implemented, they have the full backing of all those who will enforce them. That will be all the more necessary in future, as some of the concepts of smarter sanctions detailed in the Committee's report remain, as yet, untested.

Some have said that unilateral economic sanctions sometimes prove counterproductive, because they undermine a target country's emerging middle classes, not its political leaders. Many countries, such as Chile, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand, have seen that the development of a large, financially secure middle class is necessary before authoritarian Governments can give way to democracy.

The report states that withdrawal of development assistance can sometimes have a greater impact than traditional sanctions. The Government seem unsure of their policy on that subject, and I hope that the Minister of State will provide some clarification. For example, the Government refused to stop Government-to-Government aid to Zimbabwe, but seriously cut aid to Ethiopia, although both countries were undergoing a period of considerable instability and tension. Will the Minister of State clarify the criteria that the Government use when deciding to suspend Government-to-Government aid? Does he agree that, instead of withdrawing aid altogether, more aid should be provided through non-governmental organisations?

The Committee was right to address the enforcement of sanctions, especially with regard to arms embargoes. Arms embargoes are becoming widely used by the Security Council, so we must ensure that, where sanctions are imposed, they are effectively implemented. The Committee underlined the need to tighten controls on arms embargoes. What do the Government plan to do in response to that?

Sanctions are effective only if they are properly monitored. I share the Committee's concerns that the quality of reporting to sanctions committees remains low. The report rightly concludes that the United Kingdom must take a lead by putting in place a system that can target and monitor sanctions effectively. The current approach is somewhat casual. That is not helped by the Government's failure to allow NGOs formally to input evidence on the review of sanctions. Surely, NGO reports are vital. What do the Government intend to do to ensure that NGOs are formally consulted on Government approaches and attitudes to sanctions?

The failure of the Security Council's sanctions committees in effecting sanctions against sanctioned countries must be addressed to end the passive nature of monitoring and enforcement. The principle of smart sanctions used as a tool against oppressive regimes will be redundant unless there is effective supervision of their execution against sanctioned countries. The use of sanctions against President Mugabe stopped the Land Rover project and implemented arms embargoes. Under what circumstances will they be lifted, and do the Government have any plans to do so?

We must recognise where the blame for suffering in countries such as Iraq really lies. We were all moved by hon. Members' speeches on Iraq. Its people face an horrific situation. Last Friday, *The Independent* carried a report from Hans Blix, chairman of the new UN commission for inspecting arms in Iraq, in which he warned that Baghdad might block his inspections because of its "fury" over sanctions. Indeed, a former UN weapons inspector, Carl Ritter, has called for economic sanctions against Iraq to be lifted.

Saddam Hussein has chosen not to use the oil for food arrangements to provide adequate health care and social services for his citizens. He has instead chosen to purchase weapons. The hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) movingly pointed out the comment made by Jeremy Carver, the partner and head of international law at Clifford Chance, that

> It is not the imposition or maintenance of international sanctions, but the policies of the Iraqi Government which are the primary cause of this suffering.

I absolutely believe that to be true.

The use of smart sanctions outlined in the report, if properly targeted against the ruling elites of sanctioned countries, can help to ensure that in future the guilty will ultimately be punished and that the innocent populations of those countries do not suffer as they have so often. That is a worthy objective. The Committee's findings in this excellent report on the future of sanctions are indeed to be supported.

5 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Peter Hain): I agree with the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring) that the International Development Committee's report on sanctions provides a valuable and thought-provoking contribution to the debate, which the Government are taking very seriously. Having considered it, we are seeking to modify and improve our approach.

I must, however, disagree with the Committee's Chairman, the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells), who said that sanctions had never been effective in any case in which they had been applied. His fellow Committee member, my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett), refuted that statement by speaking from her own experience of the conclusive effect of sanctions on bringing down apartheid. I also agree with her that, if those sanctions had been more rigorously applied earlier and had been better targeted, apartheid might have been brought down even earlier.

Sanctions are the only coercive measure available to us, other than the use of force, to respond to threats to international peace and security as provided for under the United Nations charter. Over the past decade, the UN Security Council and the European Union have made increasing use of sanctions. When Britain sees a pressing need for sanctions to exert pressure on a rogue regime, but a Security Council resolution is not achievable, we shall press for European Union action, as was the case most recently over Burma.

I agree with all the arguments put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson) on the atrocious denial of human rights and democracy in Burma. In response to the severe and systematic violation of human rights and continuing repression in that country, the United Kingdom persuaded its partners in Europe to adopt, on 16 April, a common position strengthening the existing sanctions against Burma by the addition of an asset freeze targeted at key figures in the leadership and military and a ban on the export of equipment that might be used for internal repression. I think that that answers many of the points that my hon. Friend raised.

[Mr. Peter Hain]

With experience, we have become better able to design sanctions regimes to have the maximum impact on leadership elites and/or their military capability while minimising their impact on ordinary people. Britain has played a leading role in shaping the emerging international consensus in favour of smarter sanctions, to which the Committee has rightly directed its attention, and about which my hon. Friends the Members for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) and for Stevenage, among others, spoke.

At the request of the Department for International Development, the Overseas Development Institute hosted an international symposium in December 1998 on smarter sanctions. Since then, we have played an active part in seminars sponsored by the Swiss Government on developing targeted financial sanctions, and by the German Government on arms embargoes and travel sanctions. In the United Nations Security Council, we check the fine print of draft sanctions resolutions—as we are doing at present in relation to Sierra Leone—to ensure that the findings of those seminars are fully taken into account.

We strongly supported the recent establishment of a Security Council working group to develop recommendations on improving the effectiveness of UN sanctions. The answer to the question raised by the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford on that issue is yes, the working group has already been established and all members of the Security Council belong to it. The secretariat is providing administrative support, and Britain is devoting resources to ensure that the working group develops practical recommendations that will improve the effectiveness of United Nations sanctions.

We shall feed into that group the conclusions of the recent Foreign Office and Department for International Development mission to the United Nations, which examined ways to strengthen the UN secretariat's capacity to support the Security Council and the sanctions committee in respect of sanctions. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie and others—

Mr. Worthington: My constituency is difficult to pronounce. Milngavie is pronounced "mullguy".

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): The hon. Gentleman has borne it very well—we had already noticed.

Mr. Hain: I represent one of the Welsh constituencies, some of which hon. Members have even more difficulty pronouncing, so I plead guilty.

The Committee invited the Government to make a statement on our sanctions policy, the core of which can be summarised simply. Sanctions are most effective when they are multilateral, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage noted. They are not intended to be punitive, and they should be imposed to achieve specified objectives. The criteria for lifting sanctions should be made clear from the outset, and they should not be lifted until the target has complied with the criteria. As far as is possible, sanctions should be targeted to hit leadership elites and impact minimally on ordinary people. They should be tailored to circumstances, and there should be effective implementation, enforcement and monitoring arrangements. Humanitarian exemptions and the mechanisms for their effective implementation should be built into sanctions regimes, as appropriate, from the outset.

That is the ideal for which we will strive. Multilateral sanctions are, of necessity, the result of a negotiation process. We are doing our utmost to enhance existing procedures for implementing sanctions, often in the face of considerable opposition from member states in the United Nations. As far as I know, Britain is the only country in the world that has established a dedicated sanctions unit that co-ordinates all aspects of Government sanctions policy and administration. We have ensured that the lessons learned from one sanctions regime are taken into account when designing others.

The Committee noted the potential of financial sanctions, as a form of smarter sanctions, to target leadership elites. The UK currently implements UN financial sanctions in relation to the Taliban, Angola's UNITA rebel army and Iraq. We also implement EU sanctions in relation to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Burma. In answer to the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford, British banks and building societies hold more than $850 million in frozen funds that were identified as belonging to the targets of UN or EU sanctions.

We take our international obligation to implement financial sanctions seriously, and go to considerable lengths to ensure that they are implemented effectively. The Bank of England, which acts as an agent for the Treasury in the administration of financial sanctions, has a dedicated unit—the sanctions emergency unit—that works solely on that task. We want financial sanctions to become a more effective tool for putting pressure on international pariahs, such as UNITA's Jonas Savimbi.

Barbara Follett: With regard to Angola, will my hon. Friend do all that he can to ensure that other countries take their obligations as seriously as Britain does? For example, Burkina Faso, Liberia, Zambia and Rwanda are supplying the UNITA regime, as are business men such as Mr. Victor Bout, whose planes are transporting supplies to UNITA in Angola.

Mr. Hain: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Victor Bout is the main sanctions-buster in respect of Angola and Sierra Leone. Together with our agencies, the Government are taking what action we can to try to ensure that that activity stops. She is also right to say that he and others use light planes to transport supplies from Kigali airport, Burkina Faso, Monrovia and other places to airstrips in Angola that are controlled by UNITA. It is imperative that the Governments of all the countries to which she referred take the maximum possible action to stop the flights. After all, they are African countries, and a fellow African state is being destroyed and its people devastated by the continuing civil war.

Effective enforcement depends on agencies proactively seeking information on targets and sharing it with members of the international community. To that end, British sanctions experts liaise regularly with experts in other countries. International meetings at which sanctions-related issues are discussed are held regularly, and information is exchanged between the United Kingdom and other United Nations and European Union member states.

The hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford made a strong case on Iraq, but it was brilliantly answered by my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) with the most detailed and devastating indictment of Saddam Hussein's murderous activity and repression of his people. We have made a serious difference to the lives of the Iraqi people. United Nations resolution 1284, which we drove through the Security Council in seven to eight months of painstaking negotiation, could create a totally new situation in Iraq and is beginning to do so. We should urge Iraq to comply with that resolution, rather than continue to identify the problems associated with the past regime, which we have sought to reform with the new resolution.

The new resolution provides for the early suspension of sanctions: it was designed to do so. Britain took the lead in achieving that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley said, there is a simple answer to those who want the sanctions on Iraq lifted or suspended—they should back resolution 1284. That is what I say to the Chairman of the Committee. Even though Baghdad has not accepted it, the resolution has already raised the ceiling on Iraqi oil exports. An estimated $10 billion will be available for the humanitarian programme this year. That is a huge amount, and it will make a real difference to the people of Iraq.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) quoted UNICEF statistics. Other UNICEF statistics show that child mortality rates in northern Iraq—where Saddam Hussein's writ does not run, but where exactly the same sanctions apply—are lower than they were before sanctions were applied. We ought to recognise that comparison with northern Iraq.

If the Iraqi people continue to suffer, it will be clearer than ever that it is Saddam Hussein who is denying his people food and medicine. He wants to play on our emotions with their undoubted suffering in the hope of weakening our resolve, while he rebuilds weapons of mass destruction with which to threaten the region. The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones) expertly described that scenario.

We continue to refine and streamline procedures at the United Nations to ensure that more humanitarian contracts are approved and approved more quickly. On our initiative, the sanctions committee has agreed lists of foodstuffs, medical, agricultural and educational goods and spare parts for the oil industry that no longer need to be referred to the committee, only notified to the United Nations secretariat. Already, contracts worth almost $1 billion have been processed through that accelerated procedure. That makes a real difference.

European Union sanctions against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia were put in place because Milosevic was responsible for the most brutal campaign of terror in Kosovo. He continues to wage a campaign of repression against his own people. We shall continue to target sanctions as closely as possible on that regime and its supporters and we shall monitor the situation for any adverse humanitarian impact.

The plight of the Angolan people was eloquently described by my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Ms Kingham)—perhaps no more eloquently than when she quoted me. The United Kingdom has put extra resources and diplomatic energy into turning the spotlight on violations of UN sanctions against UNITA.

On a personal note, when I became Minister of State 11 months ago, I was amazed at how little active energy was put into using the enormous intelligence in sanctions-busting to put pressure on Jonas Savimbi's UNITA group. We are now beginning to do that, and we are calling on others to do the same. We are particularly alert to suggestions of sanction busting by UK nationals or from UK territory. We shall immediately inform the appropriate authorities of such reports. The sanctions in place include arms and fuel embargoes, a targeted asset freeze, the closure of UNITA's overseas offices, a travel ban on senior UNITA officials, restrictions on the sale of mining equipment and a ban on the import of uncertificated Angolan diamonds. All those measures have been carefully calculated to put pressure on UNITA and undermine its ability to continue fighting without harming ordinary Angolans. In that sense, they are a good example of smarter sanctions.

Last year, the Security Council established an expert panel to investigate reports of sanctions violations and to make recommendations on how to improve the implementation of sanctions. I accept many of the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie made about it being a somewhat toothless operation. Nevertheless, by UN standards it is and has been an effective body. As the members of the Committee have said, Ambassador Fowler deserves considerable praise for the way in which he drove it through against many obstacles. We strongly supported the panel's efforts and contributed $200,000 to fund its work.

In resolution 1295 of 18 April, the Security Council formally welcomed the panel's report, which contained valuable information on sanctions busting. In response to the panel's recommendation, the council requested the Secretary-General to establish a monitoring mechanism, which I shall describe. Five experts will collect additional relevant information and investigate allegations. We hope that a UK national will be appointed. We shall give the monitors every support in that important task. I look to the new monitoring mechanism to take forward the pioneering work of the expert panel. It is essential that international sanctions should be made more effective.

I respond next to the well expressed points made by my hon. Friends the Members for Bethnal Green and Bow and for Clydebank and Milngavie. Enforcement of UN sanctions is the responsibility of United Nations member states, not the UN itself. The United States of America, Russia and other countries would strongly resist giving the UN greater investigative powers. That is one of the problems with which we are grappling, and we need to deal with that as best we can.

[Mr. Hain]

On the question of diamonds, my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie mentioned Liberia. I agree that the revolutionary united front would not be able to carry out its war of mutilation against the people of Sierra Leone were it not for the diamonds that it smuggles across the border to Liberia. Indeed, they do not need to be smuggled; one can simply walk across the border. Liberia must account for its role in fuelling that bloody war. A United Nations Security Council resolution to enforce diamond sanctions on Sierra Leone will, I hope, be agreed shortly—perhaps in days—mainly as a result of British pressure. I think that Liberia will have to be included in the scope of the measure as well.

I have given special priority to the enforcement of sanctions against traders in blood diamonds from Angola, Sierra Leone and the Congo. The Government continue to play a leading role in international efforts to tackle the problem. We want to ensure that when people buy a diamond from a jeweller's shop they will know when they put it on the finger of their loved one that they are not pledging a diamond that has cut off the finger of a child in Sierra Leone or Angola. That message must go out to people buying diamonds in jewellery shops across the world.

Yesterday, I hosted a ground-breaking meeting of leading diamond importing and marketing countries to discuss the way forward: never before had representatives of Belgium, India, Israel, the United States and the international diamond industry, with Canadians and Russians also attending, gathered to discuss the problem. I called on importing and marketing states to continue to intensify their efforts to deny blood diamonds access to their markets, stressing the urgency of denying UNITA, the RUF in Sierra Leone and groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo the means to wage the vicious wars in which so many innocent lives are being lost. I also emphasised the need to improve the transparency of the international diamond trade to maintain consumer confidence and to protect the legitimate trade on which so many livelihoods depend. Clean diamond producers in countries such as Botswana, Namibia and South Africa must be protected. It is in their interests and those of the whole industry to block the trade in blood diamonds.

Yesterday's meeting agreed several specific steps that could be taken straight away to help. They included, most importantly, working with others to explore the feasibility of a global certification scheme for rough diamonds. I strongly support that proposal, and hope that other Governments, especially in southern Africa, will join us in pressing for it. We will encourage diamond banks, insurance companies and shipping companies with links to the diamond industry to require customers to sign a declaration that they will not trade in conflict diamonds. The trade bodies of Antwerp and Tel Aviv have already, I am glad to say, agreed to suspend or to expel members found trading in conflict diamonds. We will call on those trade bodies and others internationally and nationally to encourage their members to make it clear that no diamonds are feeding conflicts in any of their diamond parcels.

The meeting also agreed important steps for sharing expertise to help to combat illegal trafficking. They included offers of training, including technical assistance, to diamond authorities in producer countries and co-operation between national customs authorities and the industry to identify practical measures to improve the availability of diamond identification expertise.

We also want to ensure that hard currency is involved in diamond trades. Sanctions busters such as Victor Bout fly into UNITA territory with a plane full of arms and take off with bags of diamonds not paid for in hard currency. We want the international diamond regime to insist on proper transactions being properly accounted for and receipted and made in hard currency or being conducted using properly certificated financial exchange, without which diamonds would not be allowed to enter the international trading loop. That would take us a big step forward. We want to help to crack down on the illicit diamond trade and to restore consumer confidence in the legitimate diamond industry.

I will respond to a few of the points made by the hon. Member for West Suffolk. He compared Ethiopia with Zimbabwe. There was a war in Ethiopia—it is still going on to some extent—and we could not increase our aid in items that could have been diverted easily into maintaining that war, although we continued to supply food aid because of the famine. Zimbabwe's situation was different. We have imposed an arms embargo on Zimbabwe and have restricted aid to a minimal level to deal with severe problems, such as AIDS and anti-poverty measures.

I do not think that the hon. Gentleman would want us to cut aid to tackle the crisis of AIDS in Zimbabwe, where one in four citizens are infected. We will not increase aid to Zimbabwe by an extra £36 million—we have promised that we could do so to deal with problem of land reform—unless its policies change. The President of Zimbabwe has imposed a sort of negative sanctions regime on himself by adopting policies that do not allow countries such as Britain to provide the support that we want to provide. We agree that NGOs play a vital role in the provision of development aid and assistance. The Secretary of State for International Development has a clear policy on that. We consult NGOs on sanctions policy, as well as on wider policies. Indeed, there has never been a more open-door policy towards NGOs than the one pursued by the present Government.

Controls on arms are now stricter than they have been under any previous British Government, and certainly are much stricter than they were under the previous Government, which exported hundreds of millions of arms to the Suharto regime in Indonesia to crack down on the people of East Timor. The Scott committee reported on the scandal of arms to Iraq. We now have a more accountable, open and transparent arms export regime. We do not export arms where they could be used for internal repression or external aggression. That might not be perfect, and we are always looking for improvements, but it is a better regime than has ever existed before. In addition, we have pledged to introduce legislation to curb the trafficking and brokering of arms, which continues despite our tightened policy. I am grateful to the Committee for its

hard work on the report, which we take very seriously, and to hon. Members who have contributed to an excellent debate this afternoon.

Ann Clwyd: As we have three minutes left, may I use the time to put a question to the Minister?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I take it that the hon. Lady has the leave of the Chamber.

Ann Clwyd: Before my hon. Friend leaves the Chamber, I should like to press him on one question that he did not answer. In addition to pressing for the acceptance of resolution 1284, will the United Kingdom make some attempt to secure the official establishment of an ad hoc tribunal on Iraqi war crimes by the United Nations? That is very important, especially as war crimes tribunals have been set up for so many other countries. So much evidence is available that I can see no reason why the UN should not take that action.

Mr. Hain *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I take it that the Minister has the permission of the Chamber to speak again.

Mr. Hain: I agree that Saddam Hussein is a war criminal: no one could dispute that. The issue is how such a tribunal could be created, but I am extremely sympathetic to the idea. As my hon. Friend will know, I have spoken on platforms for Indict, the campaign which she chairs and which the Foreign Office and I strongly support. The problem that she has identified is not easy to solve, but we will certainly bear in mind the points that she has argued so forcefully and do what we can.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Five o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 19 June 2000

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Football Banning Orders

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Solicitor-General what guidance has been issued to Crown prosecutors about securing international football banning orders in respect of persons convicted of violence associated with football matches. [126869]

The Solicitor-General: Detailed internal guidance on the Football (Offences and Disorder) Act 1999, which widened the circumstances in which the courts can prevent those convicted of football-related offences from attending matches abroad, was issued to all Crown Prosecutors on 14 September 1999. This guidance stressed the importance of the legislation in relation to the Euro 2000 tournament, and advised prosecutors that the courts should be reminded of their duty to impose international football banning orders, whenever appropriate.

Further guidance was circulated on 16 June 2000 informing all Crown Prosecutors of two statutory instruments which now allow criminal offences committed by English and Welsh football supporters in Belgium and the Netherlands to be used as the subject of international football banning orders imposed in our domestic courts.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

GM Crops

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the dates on which the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment has met to discuss the contamination by GMOs of rape seed. [123833]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 25 May 2000]:* Advanta were unable to give sufficient information at the meeting with officials on 17 April for ACRE to be consulted at that stage. Advanta were initially unable to state for certain what type of GMs were found, the level of GM presence (and how reliable the information was) or which seed batches were involved.

When this information was available the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment were consulted through correspondence with the DETR on 10 May. This is normal procedure for seeking their views on issues outside their normal meeting schedule. The advice was clear on 17 May, prior to the Government's announcement, and ratified at their meeting on 25 May.

ACRE's advice is that there is no risk to human health or the environment.

Local Authority Grants

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the percentage changes in grants to local authorities, including revenue support grant, in each of the last three years, broken down by *(a)* London boroughs, *(b)* Metropolitan councils, *(c)* counties, *(d)* unitary authorities and *(e)* shire districts. [124989]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The table sets out the percentage change in the amounts of grants made by my Department to local authorities in each of the last three financial years. It has not been possible to provide the requested breakdown by local authority class, because information is not held in that form for all the grants concerned. In addition, local government reorganisation during this period means that any data provided on a local authority class basis would not be comparable year on year.

Percentage

Description of Grant	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Disabled facilities grant	2.2	4.5	13.2
Housing investment programme (private sector renewal grant)	–27.7	–10.3	–3.8
Housing revenue account subsidy (rent rebate element)	–4.8	–11.8	1.0
Estates renewal challenge fund	124.3	–45.0	–75.3
Housing defects grants	–64.6	–53.6	–38.5
Gipsy site grant	–68.1	–76.3	–33.3
Home improvement agencies	15.8	18.2	17.3
Estates action	–22.3	–36.1	–43.6
European regional development fund	7.1	11.0	31.8
LA social housing grant	4.1	–8.0	–2.0
Loan charges: defective housing	–2.4	–2.5	1.9
Overhanging debt	—	—	[1]—
Rural bus challenge grant	—	[2]—	176.2
Rural bus subsidy grant	—	[2]—	26.7
Public transport facilities grant	–12.7	–84.6	–77.7
Transport supplementary grant	–17.4	–20.2	1.6
Metropolitan railways passenger services grant	[3]—	–11.7	–9.1
Industrial Development Act 1982 grant	–66.2	53.1	–20.0
Planning redevelopment grant	261.7	16.6	[4]—
Air quality grant	–98.3	–93.8	[4]—
Revenue support grant	3.4	4.6	2.1
National non-domestic rates	–4.6	5.8	8.8
Bellwin scheme of emergency financial assistance[5]	–82.6	74.4	–15.2
SSA reduction grant	–45.8	–11.5	–39.4
PFI special grant	—	[6]—	185.4

Percentage

Description of Grant	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
Central support protection grant	—	—	[7]—
Total	–0.1	2.4	4.1

[1] One-off payment made to Burnley Council in 1999–2000.
[2] New funds for public transport in rural areas in the form of Rural Bus Subsidy and Rural Bus Challenge Grants announced in 1998 Budget and first paid in 1998–99.
[3] Since 1997–98 MRPS Grant has supported railway services in metropolitan areas outside London.
[4] Schemes wound up. Last payments made in 1998–1999.
[5] Figures take into account the special grant paid in 1996–97 and 1997–98 to local authorities affected by the Docklands and Manchester terrorist attacks in 1996.
[6] Grant first paid in 1998–99.
[7] Grant first paid in 1999–2000.

Single Regeneration Budget

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the value of grants made through the single regeneration budget in *(a)* Kensington and Chelsea and *(b)* Westminster boroughs for (i) 1999–98, (ii) 1998–99 and (iii) 1999–2000; what is his estimate for 2000–01. [125420]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The following grants were paid in respect of single regeneration budget schemes in the boroughs of Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster:

£

	Kensington and Chelsea	Westminster
1997–98	435,718	9,000,000
1998–99	1,411,816	5,900,000
1999–2000	1,522,352	2,843,933
2000–01 (estimate)	1,376,500	5,894,267

Low Bridges

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many strikes have been recorded on low bridges *(a)* over and *(b)* supporting railway lines from 1998–99 to 1999–2000. [125589]

Mr. Hill: The numbers of bridge strike incidents over and under railway lines are as follows:

Year	Overbridge	Underbridge	Total
1998–99	96	1,332	1,428
1999–2000	104	1,533	1,637

Note:
The figures for 1999–2000 are provisional.

Asthma

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he plans to take to make schools safer for children with asthma. [125390]

Mr. Hill: The policies we are pursuing generally to improve air quality are set out in the Air Quality Strategy for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland that we published in January. The Strategy sets objectives for driving down levels of the most common air pollutants. This is an important step in protecting health, particularly of those most vulnerable to air pollution, such as children with asthma.

My Department set up the School Travel Advisory Group in 1998 with colleagues in DfEE and DH, to advise on work to reduce car use, improve air quality and develop safer journeys to school.

In addition in October 1999 colleagues in DH and DfEE launched a National Healthy School Standard as part of the Government's Healthy Schools Programme. Many activities related to this programme will help make the school environment safer for children with asthma.

Diabetic Drivers

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research has recently been undertaken by his Department on the relationship between driving and diabetes; and if he will make the research available to the public. [125709]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 12 June 2000]:* No research has recently been undertaken by the Department. Projects will be initiated during this financial year. The specifications for the projects are currently being developed and they will address issues raised by The House of Commons Science and Technology Committee report on Diabetes and Driving. Tendering for this work is expected to take place in the early autumn.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what funding he is making available for research into the relationship between driving and diabetes. [125710]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 12 June 2000]:* The House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, in its report on Diabetes and Driving, recommended that the scope and depth of the fitness to drive research programme be enhanced and adequately funded. Provision has been made for £160,000 to cover the cost of the research projects on diabetes and driving which are being set up during this financial year.

Land Rover Rail Link

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will indicate *(a)* when a public inquiry is likely to be set up into Land Rover's proposed rail link to the West Coast main line and *(b)* the likely venue of such an inquiry; and if he will make a statement. [125869]

Mr. Hill: On 10 February the Secretary of State announced his decision to hold a public inquiry into the application under the Transport and Works Act 1992 by Rover Group Ltd. for an Order to authorise a rail link from Land Rover's Solihull factory to the West Coast Main Line. At that time, Rover Group Ltd. owned the Land Rover business.

Following the disclosure in March that BMW intended to dispose of the Rover Group and to sell the Land Rover business in a separate transaction, the application has been held in abeyance pending the outcome of the proposed sale. I understand that BMW and Ford have now signed an agreement for the sale of the Land Rover business.

Once the completion of the disposal has been confirmed, it will be for the new owners of Land Rover to decide whether they wish to proceed with the proposed rail link. If they do, we will need to consider with them whether the Order applied for by the Rover Group can properly be taken forward, or whether that application should be withdrawn and a new one submitted. I shall keep the hon. Member informed of progress.

Flaxmill Project, Shrewsbury

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received about the delayed funding from Advantage West Midlands for the Flaxmill project in Shrewsbury; and if he will make a statement. [125942]

Ms Beverley Hughes: As my hon. Friend will no doubt be aware, there have been several representations in connection with the funding package from Advantage West Midland (AWM). I refer him to my response of 13 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 548W, which states that the project has received an approval for a grant from AWM towards restoration of the building, to be given when funds are available.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to visit the Flaxmill project in Shrewsbury to view progress in saving the building; and if he will make a statement. [125944]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I currently have no plans to visit the Flaxmill project.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the significance of the Flaxmill building in Shrewsbury to the United Kingdom's national heritage. [125941]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I understand that the former Ditherington Flax Mill and attached former malt kiln were designated Grade 1 listed buildings on 10 January 1953. The cast iron framed building dates from 1797. The mill also includes several Grade II buildings at risk. All buildings appear on the English Heritage register as Grade A—buildings at risk of further rapid deterioration or loss of fabric with no solution agreed.

Section 28

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with *(a)* Childline, *(b)* the NSPCC and *(c)* Barnardo's about the repeal of section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988; and if he will make a statement. [126166]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government have had no discussions with Childline, the NSPCC or Barnardo's about the repeal of section 28. I understand that the organisations do not hold official positions on the repeal.

M60 (Denton to Middleton)

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects the M60 from Denton to Middleton to be open for public use; and if he expects it to be opened as a whole or in sections. [126094]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 15 June 2000]:* I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Peter Nutt, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Nutt to Mr. Andrew Bennett, dated 19 June 2000:

I have been asked by the Transport Minister, Keith Hill, to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about the completion of the M60 between Denton and Middleton.

We expect to open both sections at the same time later this summer.

I shall write to you again when I have a firm date.

Byker Heat Station

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 6 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 195–96W, what assessment he has made of the possible occurrence of potential health risk to small children using the bridleway and allotments listed as having received toxic ash from the Byker Heat Station. [126006]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 15 June 2000]:* Following discussions involving senior officials of the City Council and the Environment Agency, and having received advice from the Food Standards Agency, the Director of Public Health for the Newcastle and North Tyneside Health Authority and the Head of Public Health and Environment Protection for Newcastle City Council jointly issued precautionary advice on 6 April 2000 which included the recommendation that children aged two and under should not play in the named allotments to avoid contact with the ash.

This precautionary advice is expected to remain in force until further investigations have been undertaken to enable proper assessment as to whether or not there has been any exposure to the dioxins and heavy metals, and therefore a potential risk to health. This will include further testing on eggs, soil and vegetables.

London Underground

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 8 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 311W, concerning EU legislation relating to direct expenditure by London Underground, for what reason his answer did not list the legislation concerned. [126205]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 15 June 2000]:* The arrangements are, in principle, subject to a wide range of treaty provisions including, notably, Title V (Transport) and Title VI (Common rules on competition, taxation and approximation of laws). Specific legislation which may be relevant includes the state aid rules, the EC Merger Regulation and the Utilities Directive. Ultimately, it would, of course, be for the European Court of Justice to rule on the applicability of treaty provisions and associated legislation.

Road Closures

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will amend

the road traffic regulations so that a formal road closure order is not required by the police to close roads for carnivals and parades organised by charities. [126204]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 15 June 2000]:* Local authorities have powers under section 21 of the Town Police Clauses Act 1847 to close roads for the purposes of local carnivals and fairs. Additional powers in the Road Traffic Regulation (Special Events) Act 1994 enable authorities to make orders to close roads for any sporting event, social event or entertainment which is held on a road. The police's powers to close roads are to enable them to deal promptly and safely with emergencies and public order matters.

It is a matter for the local authority to decide whether to support a request to close a road for a carnival or parade organised by a charity and, if so, whether use of their powers under the 1847 Act or 1994 Act would be appropriate.

We have no plans to amend the requirement on local authorities to make orders before they close roads. There are no Regulations governing the procedures local authorities must follow under these Acts. It is therefore entirely for the local authority to decide, in the light of the likely impact of the event on the community, the procedures to follow, including the level of publicity and notices in the press.

We have no information on the numbers of parades and carnivals held every year on the road and consequently cannot estimate the cost to charities if local authorities charge, as they can do, for orders under the 1994 Act.

Home Ownership

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to promote home ownership. [126405]

Mr. Raynsford: Our policy on home ownership is set out in the Housing Green Paper "Quality and Choice: a Decent Home for All", launched by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister on 4 April.

Single Currency

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the costs of switching from the pound to the euro for his Department. [126401]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Should the UK decide to join the euro, the cost of a changeover would depend on the detailed approach taken to a changeover.

Dioxin

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) of 24 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 539W, on dioxin, if he will list the research programmes which assess and monitor the levels of dioxins in the environment which have been sponsored by his Department, stating in each case the level of sponsorship, for each of the last five years for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [126262]

Mr. Meacher: Since 1995 DETR has sponsored the following research programmes to assess and monitor the levels of dioxins in the environment. Many are co-sponsored with other Departments and/or Agencies and include a range of organic contaminants in addition to dioxins. A year by year breakdown of costs is not readily available for all the projects but the overall contribution by DETR is indicated in brackets:

Monitoring of hazardous air pollutants programme (HAPs) (around £250,000 per year);

Compilation of EU dioxin exposure and health data (in kind support through HAPs programme);

National air emissions inventory includes dioxins among many other pollutants (around £250,000 per year);

Organics in sewage sludge (£123,000 over three years);

Modelling of Persistent Organic Pollutants on a national and global scale (£160,000 over two years);

Modelling human exposure to dioxins and PCBs: projection of future UK exposures (£30,000).

Further programmes to begin this year include:

Chemical contaminants in human milk: a pilot study towards establishing an archive of samples from the UK (around £80,000);

UK soil and herbage pollutant survey (around £100,000)

The results of these and additional programmes sponsored by other Government Departments and Agencies will feed into a UK position paper on dioxins and PCBs which is currently being drafted by DETR. The paper will estimate the effectiveness of abatement measures already taken to reduce emissions of dioxins and assess what further action is required.

Waste Disposal

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the percentage of waste produced by his Department which was *(a)* re-used and *(b)* recycled during the last year for which figures are available. [126635]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My Department is at present compiling and validating the figures for the annual greening operations report—published in November. The percentage of total office waste separated (and collected) for recycling in our headquarters buildings over each of the past two years was 37 per cent. and 46 per cent.

Sir Paul Beresford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on the proximity principle relating to planning applications and permissions for new waste incinerators. [126466]

Ms Beverley Hughes: PPG10 "Planning and Waste Management" advises that waste management decisions should in part be based on the proximity principle. It should therefore be taken into account by waste planning authorities alongside other issues in deciding planning applications for all waste management facilities.

Brownfield Development

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his policy on land value taxation and brownfield development. [126105]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government are considering the potential role which fiscal instruments could play in helping to regenerate our towns and cities

and protect our countryside. Our forthcoming Urban White Paper will take forward the Government's programme for achieving an urban renaissance and our response to Lord Rogers's Urban Task Force.

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has no plans to make a statement. Final decisions on taxation are a matter for the Chancellor.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many local authority private finance initiative schemes *(a)* are in progress, *(b)* have been completed and *(c)* are currently awaiting approval by region, what is the (i) average cost per scheme and (ii) overall cost of approved schemes to date; how many of each type of scheme (1) have been approved, (2) are awaiting approval and (3) have been turned down; and what type of scheme has been approved in each region. [126106]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The information is as follows:

(a) 126 local authority PFI schemes have been endorsed by the inter-departmental Project Review Group. This means that they have been awarded central government financial support and that the local authorities concerned can proceed with the procurement for their schemes.

(b) 38 schemes have reached contract signature and of these, 23 are in operation.

(c) About 35 schemes are currently awaiting approval. The breakdown of these schemes by region is:

Region	*Number*
Eastern	3
East Midlands	3
London	4
North East	3
North West	7
South East	6
South West	1
West Midlands	5
Yorkshire and The Humber	3

(i) The average cost per scheme of all the schemes endorsed so far is approximately £20 million. However, the schemes vary greatly in size, scope and type of service provided and the costs of individual schemes range from less than £1 million to more than £100 million.

(ii) The overall cost of all the endorsed schemes is approximately £2.5 billion.

(1) The breakdown of endorsed schemes by type of scheme is:

Scheme	*Number*
Depot and Vehicle Services	2
Fire Service	6
Housing	13
Information Communication and Technology	6
Leisure	2
Magistrates Courts	6
Police schemes	14
Property rationalisation and libraries	10
Residential homes and other social services	11
Schools	43
Transport and street lighting	6
Waste Management	7
Total	126

(2) How many of each type of scheme are awaiting approval:

Scheme	*Number*
Housing	2
Information Communication and Technology	2
Leisure	6
Schools	7
Transport and street lighting	7
Waste management	3
Cross-agency	8
Total	35

(3) All schemes which are selected for assessment need to satisfy various criteria. There are a number of stages in the approval process and schemes may be turned down at any of these stages. Records are not kept of the number of schemes that are turned down.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many local authorities have initiated PFI schemes; and if he will make a statement. [126107]

Ms Beverley Hughes: 86 local authorities, including fire, police and waste authorities and one passenger transport executive, have initiated PFI schemes that have been endorsed by the inter-departmental Project Review Group. The total number of endorsed local authority PFI schemes is 126. It should be noted that these figures exclude PFI schemes that are financially free standing or which do not require central government revenue support.

Motor Vehicle Traffic

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the estimated annual percentage change in motor vehicle traffic was in *(a)* Great Britain and *(b)* each region for each year since 1984. [126108]

Mr. Hill: Regional estimates of traffic are not available for the years requested. The annual percentage changes for all GB roads for each year from 1984 to 1998 are shown in the table.

Road traffic in Great Britain

Year	*Percentage change*
1983	—
1984	5.2
1985	2.2
1986	5.1
1987	7.7
1988	7.2
1989	8.3
1990	1.0
1991	0.2
1992	0.1
1993	0.0
1994	2.5
1995	2.0
1996	2.7
1997	2.3
1998	1.5

Regional Development Agencies

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment

he has made of the effectiveness of *(a)* the north-east regional development agency and *(b)* other regional development agencies; and if he will make a statement. [126497]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My Department has commissioned consultants to undertake an evaluation of the strategies and action plans produced by all eight RDAs, including One North East. Research is also being carried out by consultants into partnership working by RDAs in the development and production of their strategies. It is the aim that both pieces of research will be published and that the findings will contribute to a report on the RDA's performance in their first year of operation.

The 2000–01 research programme of my Department's Local and Regional Government Research Unit also includes provision for a long-term evaluation of the operation and effectiveness of RDAs.

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the relationship between the north-east regional development agency and local regeneration partnerships; and if he will make a statement. [126498]

Ms Beverley Hughes: One North East sees the four sub-regional partnerships in the north east as having a key role in delivery of the Regional Economic Strategy, and is giving high priority to developing and supporting those sub-regional partnerships.

My Department has employed consultants to undertake research on partnership working by RDAs in the development and production of their regional economic strategies. This will examine the extent and form of partnership working by all the RDAs, including One North East, with sub-regional and local partnerships, including those with a regeneration remit. We hope to publish this research in the autumn.

The 2000–01 research programme of my Department's Local and Regional Government Research Unit includes proposals to undertake a review of the nature and form of governance relationships at the regional and sub-regional level, including partnership working with, and ownership by, local and regional stakeholders and the wider community.

Cabinet Governance

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of Cabinet governance in *(a)* Teeside area and *(b)* local authorities across the country; and if he will make a statement. [126493]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We have made no general assessment of initiatives individual councils are currently pursuing. These initiatives are being carried out under the existing legislative framework which is not designed for cabinet governance. The Local Government Bill [*Lords*] provides a framework tailor made for executive arrangements, including cabinet governance and directly elected mayors. There is considerable international experience of the benefits that these forms of governance can bring, particularly of the benefits directly elected mayors can bring for their local communities.

Central Railway

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if representatives of Central Railway attended his recent Rail Summit. [126533]

Mr. Hill: No.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 8 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 315W, on Central Railway, if officials of his Department have met representatives of Central Railway within the last two months; and if he will make a statement. [126564]

Mr. Hill: Officials from the Government Office for the South East and the Highways Agency held discussions earlier this month with representatives of Central Railway about its proposed rail project.

Central Railway also took part in a seminar in May hosted by the Government Office for the West Midlands as part of its transport Multi-Modal Study.

New Deal for Communities

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much has been spent on New Deal for Communities; and what projects qualify for funding under New Deal for Communities. [126545]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The New Deal for Communities (NDC) fosters the intensive regeneration of some of our poorest neighbourhoods, supporting projects that tackle such problems as poor job prospects, high levels of crime, educational underachievement, and poor health. To get funding, community based partnerships in eligible areas must first develop a long-term strategy for delivering sustainable change. Since November 1999, 16 pathfinder partnerships have received offers of long-term support and made a start on implementing their strategies. As at April 2000, spending under the NDC had reached £4.9 million.

Treaty of Nice

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the matters currently decided by the Department of *(a)* the Environment, Transport and the Regions, *(b)* of Health and *(c)* for Education and Employment which would be decided by the EU if the present Draft Treaty of Nice is agreed. [126578]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The current Intergovernmental Conference, which will lead to the Treaty of Nice in December, is about reforming the European institutions in preparation for enlargement. It is not envisaged that this will entail any transferring of competence.

Social Housing

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for schemes enabling tenants of social housing to convert their rents to mortgages. [126793]

Mr. Raynsford: There is already such a scheme called "Rent to Mortgage". It was introduced by the previous administration in 1993 and was publicised at a cost of

£414,000. Yet to date there have only been 51 sales. Because of this lack of demand there are no plans to extend or expand such schemes.

Shimizu *v.* Westminster City Council

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he proposes to take following the House of Lords judgment in the case of Shimizu (UK) Ltd. *v.* Westminster City Council in 1997. [126967]

Mr. Raynsford: My Department and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport have today jointly issued a consultation paper inviting views on whether any further action should be taken by Government following the House of Lords ruling in this case. The paper proposes that an application for planning permission should in future be required for certain works of partial demolition within conservation areas, such as the demolition of boundary walls and fences.

The proposals issued today are designed to address problems that have been identified as arising as a direct result of the Shimizu judgment. They are separate from, and do not prejudge, the broader review of heritage policy which my hon. Friend the Minister for the Arts announced in November 1999.

Comments are requested by 14 August 2000. Copies of the consultation paper have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Experience

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment his Department has made of the advantages and disadvantages of changing the planned end date of the Millennium Experience exhibition at the Dome. [125931]

Mr. Chris Smith: There are no plans to close the Millennium Experience before 31 December 2000.

Live Theatre

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the total public subsidy that will be paid to live theatre in England, and its total audience, in each of the last five years. [126322]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I have asked the Arts Council of England, as the national body responsible for supporting live theatre, to provide this information. When it is available, I will write to my hon. Friend, and place a copy of my reply in the Library of the House.

Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent representations he has received from the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, about its funding. [126868]

Mr. Alan Howarth: My right hon. Friend has received no recent representations from the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, about its funding.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Contractors

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what measures Her Majesty's Government proposes to ensure that those British contractors who have been debarred by the World Bank from future funding on grounds of fraud and corruption in the procurement of goods and services are restricted in access to UK bilateral aid funds, ECGD credits and funds from other multilateral development banks. [125781]

Clare Short: We welcome the action by the World Bank to investigate cases of alleged corruption. We have asked the Bank to make available to national authorities the information on which they have taken a decision to debar firms from procurement. We understand that the Bank is in discussion with other multilateral development agencies about corruption cases. It is up to the Board of each agency to reach its own conclusions based on the evidence, but we would support a robust line against corruption within their programmes. There are no procedures to limit access to ECGD facilities by any company debarred by the World Bank from receiving funds, but ECGD are looking at how to tighten up their anti-corruption procedures.

We will consider information on the World Bank's and others' lists of debarred contractors, along with other commercial data, about any company or individual bidding for DFID work, before awarding a contract.

Brazil

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will give details of the Brazilian Government's land reform initiatives supported by her Department since 1997. [126019]

Clare Short: We have not supported any Brazilian Government land reform initiatives since 1997. Our current Country Strategy Paper for Brazil (published December 1998) states our aim to pursue specific opportunities to support the Brazilian Government's land reform programme in order to assist the needs of the poorest. However, despite discussions with INCRA, the National Land Resettlement Agency, we have not yet been able to identify a suitable entry point into this highly politically sensitive and difficult area.

Uganda

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proportion of her Department's bilateral country programme aid for Uganda is spent by the Government of Uganda. [126454]

Clare Short: Our programme of bilateral assistance to Uganda is set at £57 million in the current financial year. Of this we anticipate that £38 million will be disbursed as budget support, flowing directly through the Government of Uganda consolidated fund. Over the next two financial years the programme is expected to increase to £60 million and £70 million respectively. Of these amounts, £42 million and £53 million respectively will be channelled through the Government of Uganda's budget. Thus the proportion flowing through the budget will rise from 67 per cent. in 2000–01 to 76 per cent. in 2002–03.

Opinion Polls

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what has been the total cost of opinion polls conducted by her Department since 1 May 1997. [126447]

Clare Short: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave him on 7 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 267W.

Good Governance Programmes

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the need for programmes to promote good governance in *(a)* Ghana, *(b)* Rwanda, *(c)* Nigeria, *(d)* Uganda and *(e)* China; and what assessment she has made of the extent of Government corruption in each case. [126652]

Clare Short: The promotion of good governance is an objective of our published country strategies for Ghana, Rwanda, Uganda and China. The country strategy papers also explain the means by which we propose to address this. In Ghana, Uganda and Nigeria we are working with the World bank and other international development agencies on corruption assignments.

We are also working with the World bank and other international development agencies to ensure that governance issues are properly reflected in poverty reduction strategies being prepared for decision on debt relief and for World bank and IMF lending.

Bosnia-Herzegovina

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is the gap between aid provided and aid needs in 2000 for refugee return in Bosnia-Herzegovina. [126641]

Clare Short: The UNHCR's consolidated appeal for Bosnia-Herzegovina (BH) for 2000 is for $38 million to support 130,000 vulnerable displaced persons and refugees. $352,000 has so far been earmarked by donors for the appeal. We understand that UNHCR will transfer non-earmarked funds to the appeal. We do not have information on bilateral commitments separate from the UNHCR appeal. Our own bilateral commitment for 2000 is £800,000, bringing our total commitment to £1.6 million.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the extent of Government corruption in Sierra Leone. [126651]

Clare Short: We have made no specific assessment of the extent of corruption in Sierra Leone, but the Government there recognise the seriousness of the problem and requested help to deal with it. In response, we have helped the Government of Sierra Leone draft new anti-corruption legislation, and plan to help them set up the resultant Anti-Corruption Commission, which is due to become operational later in the year. We expect our support to continue over the next two to three years.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Gary Graham

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will meet the British parliamentarians and lawyers concerned with the case of Gary Graham to discuss the international obligations that apply to the planned execution in Texas of Gary Graham. [125983]

Mr. Battle: We have written to the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), who has made representations on behalf of a number of hon. Members, inviting him to arrange an appointment to discuss the case of Gary Graham.

Iran

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last made representations to the Government of Iran concerning the conduct of the trial of 13 Jews accused of spying for Israel. [126441]

Mr. Hain: This Government and our EU colleagues have raised with the Iranians at every appropriate opportunity our concerns about the trial on espionage charges in Shiraz of 13 Jews and eight Moslems. Iran is aware of the importance that we and our EU partners attach to this issue.

Most recently the Director for Middle East and North Africa at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office raised the issue with the Iranian Ambassador on 1 June and the EU Presidency in Tehran presented demarches on behalf of all EU partners to the Iranian authorities on 29 April and 23 May.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent assessment he has made of the situation of members of the Jewish community in Shiraz who are undergoing the legal process in Iran; what recent representations he has made to the Iranian Government concerning this case; and if he will make a statement. [126522]

Mr. Hain: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) today, *Official Report*, column 16W.

In addition, it has been reported that all the defendants have now appeared before the court and that defence statements have been lodged. We understand that two legal questions need to be resolved, following which, according to Iranian law, verdicts should be pronounced within one week.

Cuba

Mr. Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what legal assistance was given via the British Consular staff in Cuba to Ms Rachel McGee, prior to her trial there in September 1999. [126767]

Mr. Hain: Our consular staff are not legally trained and are not able to offer legal advice. We are able to provide lists of English speaking local lawyers.

In Ms McGee's case our consular staff in Cuba provided to both Ms McGee and her family the details of the only law firm that is allowed to represent foreign nationals in Cuba. They also offered to facilitate payment for private legal services prior to her trial in September 1999.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of progress made in establishing a Truth and Reconciliation Commission and National Human Rights Commission in Sierra Leone as envisaged by the Lomé Peace Agreement. [126616]

Mr. Hain: Prior to the attacks mounted by the Revolutionary United Front in May, some limited progress had been made in the establishment of both Commissions. Britain has supported the efforts of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to prepare for the establishment of an effective Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if he will list his officials who took part in observer missions during the negotiations in Lomé between the Government of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front; [126609]

(2) what role was played by the British Chargé d'Affaires in Lomé, at the Lomé peace negotiations. [126623]

Mr. Hain: Britain has no diplomatic representation in Lomé. A senior official from London, and a visiting official from the British High Commission in Accra accredited to Togo, observed these negotiations.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) which officials from his Department received representations from the Justice Minister of Sierra Leone during the Lomé talks; [126622]

(2) what representations were made by the Sierra Leone Justice Minister to his Department regarding the progress of the Lomé peace negotiations from April to July 1999. [126621]

Mr. Hain: The Minister of Justice led the Government of Sierra Leone delegation at the Lomé peace negotiations. UK observers remained in close touch with the Minister of Justice throughout the negotiations.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the role played by his Department during the Lomé negotiations on Sierra Leone. [126615]

Mr. Hain: Britain was among those present as observers during the negotiations in Lomé between the Government of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he received from the UN Commissioner on Human Rights, on Sierra Leone, following her visit there in June 1999. [126624]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and the then Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), met the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in London on 15 July 1999.

Discussion centred on the High Commissioner's impressions of the prospects for lasting peace and long-term reconciliation in Sierra Leone following her visit, and on the importance of international support to sustain the peace process and to rebuild the country.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what role he envisages for the Revolutionary United Front in implementing of the Lomé Peace Agreement. [126617]

Mr. Hain: The leader of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), Foday Sankoh, is now in detention. It is our view that he must remain so until he is brought to justice. Nor, after the attacks by the RUF on United Nations peacekeepers and the RUF's clear violation of the Lomé Peace Agreement, can there be any role for members of the RUF in the present Government of Sierra Leone.

For those RUF combatants willing genuinely to disarm and to commit themselves to peace, a revised Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programme must quickly be established to help them, and other combatants, move back into civilian life and to help train them for civilian employment.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the future of the Lomé agreement. [126614]

Mr. Hain: The provisions of the Lomé Peace Agreement include: a permanent cessation of hostilities; disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of all former combatants; creation of effective and democratically accountable Sierra Leone armed forces to protect the country in the future; democratic elections; and an international peacekeeping force to supervise the process.

All these elements remain essential for any lasting peace in Sierra Leone.

At the same time, we have made clear that, in the light of recent events, there can be no place for RUF Ministers in the present government; and that the Revolutionary United Front leader, Foday Sankoh, must face justice.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what assessment he has made of the possibility of bringing Foday Sankoh to justice; [126629]

(2) what assessment he has made of the proposals to establish an international war crimes tribunal for Sierra Leone. [126613]

Mr. Hain: We welcome the Government of Sierra Leone's determination to bring to justice those responsible for the horrific atrocities in Sierra Leone. There are various judicial processes by which this could be achieved. We are discussing the options with the Government of Sierra Leone and the United Nations and have offered UK assistance.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what representations were made by his Department to *(a)* President Kabbah and *(b)* the Revolutionary United Front regarding granting of an amnesty to all the RUF members suspected of committing crimes in Sierra Leone prior to 7 July 1999; [126608]

(2) what factors influenced the decision of the parties to the Lomé peace accord to accept the inclusion of a general amnesty for members of the RUF. [126618]

Mr. Hain: This was one of the many difficult choices made by the Government of Sierra Leone in the interest of securing a negotiated solution to a brutal eight year conflict.

The Government of Sierra Leone recognised that the conflict could not be solved by military means alone, not least because it had little capacity to fight the Revolutionary United Front rebels. We are now leading international efforts to help create effective, accountable armed forces, so that the Government of Sierra Leone can restore law and order throughout Sierra Leone.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent reports he has received of illegal arms shipments to Sierra Leone. [126620]

Mr. Hain: I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will understand that the reports that the Government have received are sensitive in nature. It would be inappropriate for me to comment other than to reassure the right hon. Gentleman that appropriate action is being taken wherever possible.

We will be passing as much information on alleged violations as possible to the UN Sanctions Committee.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what research his Department has undertaken on ways of preventing British weapons from falling into the hands of child soldiers. [126625]

Mr. Hain: We rigorously assess all arms export license applications against UK and EU criteria. These include the need to consider the risk that exported arms might be diverted to undesirable end-users, such as child soldiers. Similar considerations apply to exports of arms by the Government. The FCO and our posts overseas consult a wide range of contacts—both official and non-governmental—in order to inform the decision making process and thus reduce the risk of exports from the UK being diverted to undesirable end-users.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations were made to him by the Sierra Leone Government after 1 May on the deteriorating situation in Sierra Leone. [126619]

Mr. Hain: We have remained in close and regular touch with the Government of Sierra Leone throughout.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what estimate his Department has made of the number of children fighting in *(a)* the Sierra Leone army, *(b)* militias supporting the Sierra Leone Government and *(c)* factions fighting against the Sierra Leone army. [126639]

Mr. Hain: We are totally opposed to the use of child soldiers wherever they may be employed. During my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary's visit to Sierra Leone on 8 June, President Kabbah reaffirmed his assurances that children would not be used by the Sierra Leone armed forces. The leaders of the two main factions loyal to President Kabbah gave similar assurances to the Foreign Secretary.

Thousands of children have been forcibly recruited by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) during the conflict in Sierra Leone, and forced to fight. Several thousand children are believed to remain in RUF hands.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many times he has met President Kabbah of Sierra Leone since January 1999; where the meetings took place; and what was discussed. [126611]

Mr. Hain: Since January 1999, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has met President Kabbah on six occasions: in Abuja, in London, in New York, in Durban, in Cairo, and, most recently, in Freetown.

Discussion at these meetings centred on the prevailing situation in Sierra Leone, and on Britain's efforts to help the Government of Sierra Leone build lasting peace and stability.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what factors underlay the decision to introduce a twin-track strategy on Sierra Leone; and when this strategy was introduced. [126612]

Mr. Hain: The international community and the region have long pursued a military/diplomatic twin track policy for achieving lasting peace in Sierra Leone. The ECOWAS Summit of 1998 endorsed the recommendations of ECOWAS Ministers of Foreign Affairs to combine the strengthening of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) with efforts at dialogue.

European ABM System

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received from *(a)* his European counterparts, *(b)* the US Government and *(c)* the Russian Government regarding the Russian proposal for creating a pan-European ABM system. [126606]

Mr. Vaz: The Russian Defence Minister, Igor Sergeyev, presented Russia's proposal in outline to NATO Defence Ministers in the NATO/Russia Permanent Joint Council on 9 June.

On the basis of that presentation, NATO Permanent Representatives have had an initial discussion of the Russian proposal. Officials have also separately had preliminary bilateral discussions about the proposal with a number of NATO Allies, including the United States.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what commitments the Government entered into for providing financial support for land reform in Zimbabwe at the time of granting independence; what obligations remain for providing such

funding; what further requests have been received from the Government of Zimbabwe; and if he will make a statement. [120086]

Clare Short: I have been asked to reply.

I am informed that at the Lancaster House Constitutional Conference in October 1979, the UK Government undertook to assist with land resettlement alongside other donors—noting that scale of assistance required was beyond the scope of any individual donor. No specific figure was pledged. £20 million was offered through the 1981 Land Resettlement Grant; though this grant closed in 1996 with £3 million unused by the Zimbabwe Government. A further £27 million was provided during the 1980s as budgetary support to help the Zimbabwe Government meet their share of resettlement costs.

Since taking office in May 1997, we made it very clear that we were willing to support land reform and resettlement in Zimbabwe, because Zimbabwe needs land reform to reduce poverty. We are willing to fund schemes which are focused on helping the poor. We also made it clear that we will only support a programme that is fair, transparent, cost effective, within the rule of law, and which will genuinely benefit the poor. Because these principles are not being fulfilled we cannot support the Zimbabwean Government's Land Reform and Resettlement Programme.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Retail Fuels Market

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the size of the road transportation retail fuels market in Northern Ireland for *(a)* diesel and *(b)* petrol in (i) 1998 and (ii) 1999. [122934]

Mrs. Liddell: I have been asked to reply.

Retail sales of petrol in Northern Ireland were 401,000 tonnes in 1998 and 329,000 tonnes in 1999. Retail sales of diesel were 122,000 tonnes in 1998 and 95,000 tonnes in 1999. The data are based on deliveries made into the Northern Ireland market.

Departmental Vehicles

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* cars and *(b)* commercial vehicles operated by his Department were manufactured (i) in the UK, (ii) in the EU and (iii) elsewhere. [122256]

Mr. Mandelson: The information requested is set out in the table.

	Cars	*Commercial vehicles*	*Total*
UK	2	1	3
EU	10	1	11
Elsewhere	1	—	1
Total	13	2	15

Green Transport

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the key buildings for which his Department *(a)* submitted and *(b)* did not submit green transport plans by March. [122617]

Mr. George Howarth: *(a)* Green transport plans have been submitted for:

County Hall, Ballymena
Rathkeltair House, Downpatrick

(b) The following is a list of those key buildings for which green transport plans have not been submitted; the process has been affected by the creation of new Departments as a result of devolution and the subsequent movement of staff. However, for many of these buildings plans are currently being developed.

Marlborough House, Craigavon
Hydebank, Belfast
Northland House, Belfast
Altnaglevin, Londonderry
Academy House, Ballymena
College Street, Belfast
Bullock House, Belfast
County Hall, Omagh
Commonwealth House, Belfast
Calvert House, Belfast
Hill Street, Belfast
Boucher Road, Belfast
Bedford House, Belfast
Queens Court, Belfast
Victoria Hall, Belfast
McAuley House, Belfast
Lincoln Buildings, Belfast
Oxford House, Belfast
Londonderry House, Belfast
River House, Belfast
Lancashire House, Belfast
Boaz House, Omagh
Adelaide House, Adelaide Street, Belfast
Gloucester House, Chichester Street, Belfast
Longbridge House, Belfast
Commercial Union Building, Belfast
IDB House, Chichester Street, Belfast
Fermanagh House, Belfast
Health and Safety Agency, Ladas Drive, Belfast
Castle Court, Belfast
Churchill House, Belfast
Frances House, Belfast
Magnet House, Belfast
Plaza Building, Belfast
Windsor House, Belfast
York House, Belfast
State Buildings, Belfast
Andersonstown Road SSO
Antrim SSO
Armagh SSO
Ballymena SSO
Ballymoney SSO
Bangor SSO
Coleraine SSO
Corporation Street SSO
Dungannon SSO
Enniskillen SSO
Falls Road SSO
Foyle SSO
Hollywood Road SSO
Knockbreda SSO
Larne SSO

Lisburn SSO
Lisnagelvin SSO
Lurgan SSO
Magherafelt SSO
Newry SSO
Newtownabbey SSO
Omagh SSO
Portadown SSO
Shaftesbury Square SSO
Strabane SSO
Lisahally Paid Order Unit
Orchard House, Londonderry
Greenmount College, Antrim
Loughry College, Cookstown
Agriculture and Food Science Centre, Belfast
Sperrin House, Omagh
Inishkeen House, Enniskillen
Glenree House, Newry
Kilpatrick House, Ballymena
Waterside House, Londonderry
Centre House, Belfast
OSNI, Colby House, Belfast
PRONI, Balmoral Avenue, Belfast

Responsibility for this subject has been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and is therefore no longer a matter for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Opinion Research

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will place copies of the results of all market and opinion research carried out by his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies since May 1997 in the Library. [123812]

Mr. Mandelson: Copies of all published items relating to market and opinion research since May 1997 will be placed in the Library.

Departmental Responsibilities

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what statistics relating to the responsibilities of his Department are collated by parliamentary constituency, indicating the dates covered in each case. [123836]

Mr. Mandelson: A comprehensive list of all statistics that can be collected by parliamentary constituency is not held centrally by Northern Ireland Departments, and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Firearms Certificates

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many appeals were made to the Chief Constable on the removal of firearms certificates under the Firearms (N.I.) Order 1981 in each year from 1995 to date. [126656]

Mr. Ingram: Appeals against decisions by the Chief Constable to revoke firearm certificates or to refuse to renew them are made to the Secretary of State under Article 55 of the 1981 Order. The following table sets out the number of such appeals since 1995:

Year	*Revocation*	*Refusal to renew*	*Total*
1995	47	7	54
1996	35	5	40
1997	75	25	100
1998	50	23	73
1999	34	10	44
2000[1]	21	6	27

[1] To 15 June 2000

Informants

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if the use of informants by RUC officers is governed by Home Office guidelines. [126235]

Mr. Ingram: The Royal Ulster Constabulary is subject to the five Codes of Practice on Covert Law Enforcement Techniques issued by the Association of Police Officers and Her Majesty's Custom and Excise. These are public documents.

Union Flag

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on which Government buildings the Union Flag was flown on 2 June; and how many of these buildings are under *(a)* his direct control and *(b)* the control of the Northern Ireland Assembly. [125544]

Mr. Mandelson: The responsibility for flying the Union Flag rests with the department which has the main occupancy of each building and where that building has a flagpole. The Union Flag was flown on 2 June at Hillsborough Castle, Maghaberry, the Prison Service College, Maze and Magilligan. It was not practical to fly the flag at the YOC on that date due to defective equipment which has since been replaced. Following restoration of the political institutions on 30 May, the provision of details concerning the flying of flags on other public buildings on 2 June is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Young Offenders

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for how long the convictions of young offenders are held on record; and what is the period after which applicants are not required to declare past offences when applying for public sector employment. [125743]

Mr. Ingram: All records of convictions are held in accordance with the terms of the publication "Weeding Rules for Criminal Records", a copy of which is available in the Library. The period for which young offenders' convictions are retained depends on the age of the person when he was convicted and the seriousness of the offence(s).

A conviction where a person has been sentenced to more than 2½ years imprisonment, or the equivalent, can never become spent. There are employments where spent convictions must be disclosed and professions in which spent convictions may be taken into account in assessing a person's suitability for admission. These are set out in

the Rehabilitation of Offenders (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 and the Rehabilitation of Offenders (Exceptions) Order (Northern Ireland) 1979, both of which are also available in the Library.

I am also placing in the Library of the House copies of the booklet "Your Way to a Fresh Start", which explains the operation of the legislation.

DEFENCE

Shipbuilding

Mr. Bradshaw: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Glasgow, Govan (Mr. Sarwar) of 25 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 612W, on shipbuilding, what progress has been made on placing the contract for the survey vessels. [127003]

Mr. Hoon: I am pleased to be able to announce that the prime contract for the procurement of two new specialist warships, known as Multi-Role Hydrographic and Oceanographic Survey Vessels, has today been awarded to Vosper Thornycroft (UK) Ltd. The contract includes the provision of 25 years contractor support for the vessels and is worth some £130 million in total over the life of the ships.

Following a competition run by Vosper Thornycroft, the sub-contract to build the ships has been awarded to Appledore Shipbuilders in Devon. The ships, which are due to enter service in 2002 and 2003, will be named HMS Echo and HMS Enterprise.

These important new warships demonstrate our commitment to the modern force structure that emerged from the Strategic Defence Review. They will be equipped with the latest survey systems, and provide a significantly enhanced surveying capability and much improved sea-keeping capability over the vessels which they will replace, which are old and increasingly costly to maintain. They will be part of the Fleet's front-line in a variety of world-wide operational roles, as well as undertaking specialist surveying tasks necessary to the long-term effectiveness of the Royal Navy.
Construction of the new ships will sustain some 500 jobs directly in the shipyard and some 300 in other suppliers, mainly in the local area.

Type 45 Destroyers

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the planned date by which the Principal Anti Air Missile System will be available to install in the first Type 45 destroyer; and if he will make a statement. [124994]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked him to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Paul Keetch, dated 19 June 2000:

I am writing in response to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence with regard to installation of the Principal Anti Air Missile System (PAAMS) in the first Type 45 Destroyer. This falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

It is planned that the various elements of the PAAMS system (including radars, the vertical launch and below deck equipment) will be installed in the first Type 45 Destroyer by early 2006. This date provides the time required for PAAMS integration, setting to work and trials to support the in-service date for the first-of-class ship of 2007.

Collaborative Procurement Programmes

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will make a statement on United Kingdom participation in the United States' Future Combat System programme; [125319]

(2) if he will make a statement on the future of the TRACER-FSCS programme. [125318]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked him to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Robert Key, dated 19 June 2000:

I am replying to your questions to the Secretary of State for Defence on the collaborative TRACER/FSCS and the US FCS programmes. These matters fall within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

On the future of the TRACER/FSCS collaborative programme, I can confirm that the United Kingdom requirement for a replacement armoured reconnaissance vehicle to form part of the UK's overall battlefield reconnaissance and surveillance capability remains extant. The current phase of the programme is of 42 months duration and is scheduled for completion in July 02. The programme is proceeding to schedule and both participating Governments are pleased with progress to date. In parallel, studies are being conducted to examine the potential use of unmanned air vehicles. The outcome of these studies will be used to inform the UK decision on the optimum mix of platforms, technology and sensors and the role that TRACER would play in the Army's future battlefield information gathering system. Any decision to proceed to the next project phase will be the subject of future national approvals.

A feature of defence procurement is the need to accommodate new, sophisticated systems within the resources expected to be available. Competing demands on available resources inevitably lead to priorities being kept under review. The current budgetary review process in the US, which could have implications for the TRACER programme, is being closely monitored. We are in regular contact with the US DoD on this and their FCS programme. It would be premature at this stage to speculate on the prospect of UK involvement in the FCS programme.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) of 5 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 17W, on Porton Down, if he will make a statement on *(a)* the species of animals involved in, *(b)* the number of and *(c)* the types of, experiments performed by the Chemical and Biological Defence Sector for the US Department of Defense. [125675]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 12 June 2000]:* The work being undertaken by the Chemical and Biological Defence Sector, Porton Down, as referred to in my answer provided on 5 June, is being conducted through a contractor for the US Department of Defense. The aim of the work is to produce a fully licensed vaccine against a potential biological warfare agent. Such a vaccine would also be potentially useful in countries where the disease

is naturally present. The study at Porton Down involves evaluating the ability of the prospective vaccine to prevent disease and to investigate safety aspects of possible use.

Details of the study are commercially sensitive and I am withholding this information under Exemption 13 of the Code of Practice of Access to Government Information.

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many depleted uranium shells have been fired at hard targets in the Solway Firth from DERA's Kirkcudbright ranges; and what quantity of depleted uranium was used in each of the last five years; [125717]

(2) if he will estimate the amount of depleted uranium particulate dust that has been released as a result of test firings of depleted uranium shells from DERA's Kirkcudbright ranges on hard targets in the Solway Firth in the last five years. [125718]

Mr. Spellar: Although the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) conducts the depleted uranium (DU) firings at Kirkcudbright, ownership of the range, since 1 April 1997, has rested with the Army.

There have been no deliberate firings of DU at hard targets at Kirkcudbright and, therefore, in the normal course of events there is no release of particulate dust. However, there have been three occasions in the last five years when shells have misfired and hit either the ground or the target gantry. A small amount of DU dust will have entered the atmosphere as a result of these events. Remedial action has been taken in each case and the contamination removed to the satisfaction of the regulatory bodies, the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency(SEPA) and Dumfries and Galloway Council. Air samplers which have been running since 1997 have not detected any particulate DU in the atmosphere above background levels.

A total number of DU shells fired at the range in each of the past five years is as follows:

1995: 280
1996: 147
1997: 749
1998: 134
1999: 111

E-mail

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when *(a)* the private offices of Ministers in his Department and *(b)* officials in the Main Building will be accessible by e-mail via the internet. [125809]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 June 2000]:* Internet e-mail access has been available to Ministers Outer Offices and senior MOD officials since 22 March 1999 via a dedicated MOD Main Building network. This provides web browsing and e-mail for both the Cabinet Office sponsored Government Secure Intranet (GSI), and the internet from a single account at any of the dedicated network workstations. Currently, this network has 104 accounts. This is an interim solution while the Department works to connect its main headquarters IT system, CHOtS, to the GSI and the internet, allowing e-mail only access to the internet for unclassified material.

Work is also in hand to provide web browsing of the internet, using separate workstations on a dedicated RESTRICTED only version of CHOtS, CSV8 Open. CSV8 Open will initially not be able to provide access to the GSI, but work is in progress to establish this link by 4th Qtr 2000.

The provision of the standard CHOtS and CSV8 Open solutions are both subject to the successful completion of pilot testing, currently being undertaken within MOD.

In addition to these initiatives, internet access, where needed and backed by an approved business case, has been provided by stand-alone PCs purchased through an MOD catalogue. These stand-alone internet PCs will either be replaced by the CHOtS initiatives mentioned above or will become part of a fully managed network—the Decant Migration Network (DMN)—which will support CHOtS Open. It is intended that the DMN will be provided when staff move out of Main Building into the decant buildings during its redevelopment.

RAF Neatishead

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) when the defence housing at RAF Neatishead was disposed of; and how many dwellings were disposed of; [125567]

(2) when the defence housing at RAF Neatishead was last renovated prior to disposal; and what the cost was of the renovations; [125568]

(3) how much was received by his Department in total and by unit for each house disposed of at RAF Neatishead. [125569]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 June 2000]:* There are no married quarters sited at RAF Neatishead. Personnel serving at that unit are housed in Service Family Accommodation (SFA) at either nearby Coltishall or Norwich, which has 644 properties available to accommodate families serving at RAF Coltishall, RAF Neatishead and other Service establishments in the area.

The majority of the Married Quarters Estate (some 57,000 properties or 95 per cent. of the total married quarter estate) in England and Wales was sold to Annington Homes in November 1996 on a 999 year lease. The Ministry of Defence retained the freehold. The properties were sold as a package with the receipt of some £1.6 billion going direct to the Exchequer rather than the Ministry of Defence; properties were not individually priced, so no unit cost is available.

Prior to 1996, SFA was managed by the three Services individually, and the costs of maintaining them was included in the wider provision for maintenance of Defence Establishments as a whole. It is not possible therefore to separate the costs incurred in maintaining SFA serving RAF Neatishead prior to the leasehold sale to Annington Homes.

Clothing and Textiles

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what development work is currently being carried out by the Defence Clothing and Textile Agency on new glove designs for the armed forces. [126212]

Mr. Spellar: Development work is being carried out by the Research and Technology Group of DCTA, on four different Glove Designs, as follows:

NBC Protective Outer Glove Mk5

A new glove is being developed to replace the current black rubber NBC Glove Mk2. The new design will give similar protection from chemical warfare agents, but will be thinner and less restrictive in fine handling tasks. Made from synthetic elastomers, it will also be flame-retardant and capable of being coloured. The Mk5 handwear is expected to enter service in 2003.

Gloves, Gauntlet (Household Cavalry Mounted Regiment)

One new Gauntlet being developed to replace two Gauntlets at present in service. It will be a combined pattern of the present gloves, and will rationalise the present materials employed.

Gloves, Combat Mk11

The present in-service glove is a complicated construction, made up of many components. It is difficult to make and is believed to be over specified for the use to which it is put. Trials of new designs, materials and constructions are underway, together with trials of several other gloves for comparative purposes.

Male and Female Parade Dress Gloves

At present, there are least 12 to 14 types of parade gloves in Black, Brown and White. It is hoped these can be reduced to two basic styles in Black, Brown and White by rationalising patterns, materials and fastening systems.

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) which companies, and from which countries, submitted bids for the contract for the Mark II Combat glove; [126216]

(2) for what reasons Feuchter was awarded the contract to supply the Mark II Combat glove; [126209]

(3) what is the value of the contract to supply the armed forces with the Mark II Combat glove; how many pairs have been ordered; and from which companies; [126215]

(4) what visits personnel from his Department made to foreign factories and manufacturing outlets during the process of awarding contracts for the Mark II Combat glove; [126213]

(5) what representations he has received about the quality and fit of the Mark II Combat glove. [126211]

Mr. Spellar: The current DCTA contract awarded to Feuchter for the supply of the Mark II Combat glove was placed in November 1998 (reference: STIA/1279) following competitive tender action. Complaint bids were received for the subject contracts from the following companies:

Feuchter Gmbh and Co KG, Bavaria, Germany
Burfield and Co (Gloves) Ltd., Martock, Somerset, UK
Vaughan Tapscott Gloves, Torrington, Devon, UK
Southcombe Brothers Ltd., Stock-Sub-Hamdon, Somerset, UK

DCTA's Quality of Product Support branch have made several visits to the companies tendering for the contracts for Mark II Combat gloves. During the period May 1997 to April 1999, a total of three visits were made to Zova, the sub-contractor used by Feuchter. One of these visits was specifically to scrutinise manufacturing processes for the Combat gloves. Records exist of visits to two other firms involved in the tendering process for these contracts: three visits have been made to Burfield and Co (Gloves) Ltd. since 1997, and two have been made to Southcombe Ltd.

The contract was split between the two lowest tenders: Feuchter Gmbh and Co KG for the quantity of 163,877 pairs, and Burfield and Co (Gloves) Ltd., for the quantity of 41,800 pairs. While Burfield submitted the cheapest priced offer, their tender had stated that they did not have the capacity to produce the full DCTA requirement in the timescale required. They were, however, given the contract for the maximum quantity which their tender had specified, which was the 41,800 pairs. As Feuchter had submitted the next lowest tender, and had stated that they had the capacity to meet DCTA's requirement, they were awarded the contract for the remainder of the requirement.

The total value of current contracts for the Mark II Combat gloves is £5,198,384. The breakdown of values and quantities is as follows:

Feuchter Gmbh and Co KG
Total value: £4,108,804
Quantity: 171,977 pairs
(Contract ST1A 1279)

Burfields and Co
Total value: £1,089,580
Quantity: 48,300 pairs
(Contract ST1A 1280)

Both contracts included an option for supply of a further 7,500 pairs of Mark II Combat gloves (total 15,000 pairs) for delivery in Financial Year 2000–01 and therefore is a further option in the contracts for Financial Year 2001–02.

Although reports were received by DCTA of a little tightness of fit being experienced in the early stages of production of the Mark II Combat gloves, no items necessitated rejection or return to place of manufacture. The reporting of defective items is facilitated by Defect Reports, which are raised by users of products in the three Armed Services. There are no records of any Defect Reports having been received for the Mark II Combat glove.

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what assessment his Department makes of the past record and experience of clothing and textile manufacturers in competition for clothing contracts; and if he will make a statement; [126210]

(2) what account his Department takes of security of supply considerations when deciding to acquire clothing and textiles from foreign suppliers. [126214]

Mr. Spellar: DCTA have confirmed that full account is taken of Clothing and Textile manufacturers' past records and experience in terms of delivery, quality performance and price competitiveness, both at the time firms are considered for award of an Invitation to Tender and when considering competitive bids received.

As part of the procurement strategy for any clothing item, the overall risk assessment comprises many elements. The risks are managed as a series of processes, one of which includes a review of past performance of potential suppliers. All potential suppliers are subjected to the same consideration of providing evidence of operating an accredited quality system. This is usually satisfied

through ISO 9000 registration. This risk reduction mechanism is used throughout the Ministry of Defence as part of the approved NACNOC policy.

In addition, in light of the Government's recent announcement of a 12 point plan for the UK Textile and Clothing Industry, I will be reviewing our current procurement policies.

Gulf War Syndrome

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of recent evidence from the USA on the correlation between chemical cocktails and Gulf War Syndrome. [126043]

Mr. Spellar: I will assume my hon. Friend is referring to the research undertaken by Dr. Abou-Donia of Duke University, North Carolina, which was mentioned in a recent BBC radio programme. Dr. Abou-Donia examined the interaction of Pyridostigmine Bromide (PB), (the active ingredient of Nerve Agent Pre-treatment Sets tablets) with permethrin and DEET (N-Diethyl-m-toluamide), two non-organophasphate pesticides used during the 1990–91 Gulf Conflict. Dr. Abou-Donia published his findings in an article entitled, "Neurotoxicity Resulting from Coexposure to Pyridostigmine Bromide, DEET and Permethrin: Implications of Gulf War Chemical Exposures" in the Journal of Toxicology and Environmental Health in April 1996. The research had a number of significant limitations: the doses administered to the animal subjects were in quantities and in a manner very different from that which Service personnel may have experienced; there were no data to support the suggestion that PB inhibits the metabolism of DEET and permethrin; the dosage route and schedule of administration of chemicals were different to those Service personnel may have experienced; and the toxicities experienced by animals were acute in nature whereas many veterans' health concerns have emerged months, or more, after their service in the Gulf.

A further study addressing the interaction of PB and DEET entitled "Acute effects of an Insect Repellent, N, N-Diethal-m-toluamide, on Cholinesterase Inhibition Induced by Pryidostigmine Bromide in Rats" by Chaney et al from the University of Mississippi Medical Center was published on 1 June 2000. I will write to my hon. Friend once my Department has reached a considered view of this work and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Defence Electronic Commerce Service

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will announce the placement of a contract for the Defence Electronic Commerce Service IT system. [124797]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 7 June 2000]:* I announced on 30 May that Cap Gemini Ernst & Young has been selected as the preferred supplier of the Defence Electronic Commerce Service to the MOD. Subject to a successful conclusion to negotiations, we hope to place a contract under PPP arrangements, and commence delivery of the service, in early July.

Sea Harrier Aircraft

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what replacement air to surface ship strike capability he plans to procure for Sea Harrier aircraft. [125082]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 8 June 2000]:* There are no plans to procure a replacement air to surface ship strike capability for Sea Harrier aircraft.

UAVs

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the Army's original inventory was of Phoenix UAVs; what the current inventory is; and what plans he has to procure *(a)* further Phoenix UAVs and *(b)* next generation UAV systems for the armed forces. [125704]

Mr. Spellar: Nine complete Pheonix systems with 198 Air Vehicle Taxis (ACTs) and 198 Air Vehicle Pods (AVPs) were originally purchased for the Army. Currently the Army has nine systems, 177 AVTs and 182 AVPs. There is currently no plan to procure further Pheonix AVTs or AVPs. We propose to let contracts in the near future to examine possible solutions for delivering the future tactical UAV capability.

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the purchase cost is of each of the Army's Phoenix UAVs; how many Phoenix UAVs were lost in operations during the Kosovo campaign; when the Phoenix UAVs entered into *(a)* trials and *(b)* operational service with the Army; and how many Phoenix UAVs have been lost since they have been in operational service. [125703]

Mr. Spellar: The contract for Phoenix UAVs was awarded in 1985 on a firm price basis. The cost of the individual UAVs was £164,000 plus VAT, exclusive of design and development costs.

Ten Phoenix UAVs were lost or destroyed during operations in support of the Kosovo campaign in 1999. A further three UAVs have since been lost during operations in Kosovo in 2000.

Phoenix UAVs entered into trials with the Army in the early nineties. These were completed in July 1997. Phoenix was formally accepted into service in December 1998.

Over 200 missions have been flown in the 18 months since Phoenix entered service. During this period a total of 16 Phoenix UAVs have been lost or destroyed (13 during operations and three in training).

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of *(a)* Phoenix UAVs used by UK forces and *(b)* UAVs utilised by other NATO nations during the Kosovo campaign. [125705]

Mr. Spellar: Operational reports have indicated that Phoenix is effective as a general reconnaissance and surveillance system. Its real-time imagery capability proved of considerable benefit in a wide variety of tasks including campaign analysis and safe surveillance over and beyond suspected mined areas. Detailed assessment of the system is continuing.

The utility and effectiveness of the Phoenix system in 1999 was recognised by the headquarters of KFOR, who asked for the system to return to theatre, which it did in May this year.

It would not be appropriate for us to comment on the effectiveness of equipment used by our Allies.

Sierra Leone (Malaria)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he was first informed that armed forces personnel contracted malaria in Sierra Leone; and if he will make a statement. [126057]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 15 June 2000]:* I was first informed on 26 May that Service personnel deployed to Sierra Leone had contracted malaria. At that time, there were seven confirmed cases among personnel who had deployed there.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many troops deployed to Sierra Leone returning to the UK have so far been diagnosed as having signs of malaria; and if he will make a statement. [125190]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 9 June 2000]:* As of 12 June, 27 cases of malaria had been confirmed among the 4,500 personnel who had been deployed to Sierra Leone; a further three unconfirmed cases had been admitted to hospital for investigation. No anti-malaria tablet guarantees 100 per cent. protection: mefloquine, the preferred anti-malaria drug for the Sierra Leone region, is estimated to afford only 90–95 per cent. protection against malaria. In West Africa, where rates of transmission for malaria are far higher than in any other region, some cases of malaria are to be expected. Therefore the number of cases confirmed are within the medically expected numbers.

Former Personnel (Private Sector Employment)

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the conditions that apply to senior officials from his Department applying to join private sector companies. [126021]

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his policy is on former personnel of the Defence Procurement Agency and Defence Clothing and Textile Agency joining commercial organisations with which they had dealings as civil servants. [126208]

Dr. Moonie: Under the Cabinet Office rules on the acceptance of outside appointments by Crown servants, all Ministry of Defence non-industrial civilian staff and officers in the Armed Forces are required, within two years of leaving the Department, to apply for permission before taking up employment with an organisation connected with their official duties or with a foreign government or foreign publicly-owned organisation. In addition, senior officials are required under these rules to apply for permission to take up any paid employment on leaving the Department.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* senior Ministry of Defence officials and *(b)* officials from his Department's procurement organisation have joined private sector companies in the last five years. [126020]

Dr. Moonie: Under the Cabinet Office rules on the acceptance of outside appointments by Crown servants, all Ministry of Defence non-industrial civilian staff and officers in the Armed Forces are required, within two years of leaving the Department, to apply for permission before taking up employment with an organisation connected with their official duties. The rules only require senior officials whose applications are approved by the Prime Minister to confirm that they have taken up a new appointment on leaving the Ministry of Defence. Records of applications form such officials are only readily available from 1 January 1998, which show that 14 have notified Ministry of Defence that they have taken up appointments in the private sector.

Northern Ireland

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 5 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 15W, concerning the mission statement of the Army in Northern Ireland, what his definition is of the normality to be restored; and on how many occasions the mission objective has been reviewed since the Belfast Agreement. [126221]

Mr. Hoon: Normality, in the context of the Army's mission statement, is the ability of the RUC to carry out their duties without support from the armed forces.

There has been no requirement to review the mission statement since the Belfast Agreement. However, the level of support provided to the RUC to fulfil that mission is regularly reviewed and has reduced substantially since the Belfast Agreement.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the use of informants by military intelligence officers operating in Northern Ireland is governed by Home Office guidelines. [126222]

Mr. Spellar: I am withholding this information under Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

BAe 146

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the airworthiness directives his Department has issued relating to BAe 146 aircraft operated by No. 32 (The Royal) Squadron of the RAF about *(a)* engine icing and *(b)* the ingestion of fumes from the engines into the cabin. [125987]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 14 June 2000]:* RAF BAe 146 flight crew, including those of 32 (The Royal) Squadron, adhere strictly to the limitations imposed by the manufacturer on flight above 26,000 feet in known or forecast icing conditions. They are also fully aware of the advice offered by BAe Systems on action to take in the event of ingestion of engine fumes into the cabin. There have been no reported problems of either kind on RAF BAe 146 aircraft.

Service Personnel (Medical History)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made with the project to issue every serviceman and women with an ID tag which will record on the chip current medical history including inoculations and current medication. [126052]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 15 June 2000]:* The possible development of an ID tag or card to store medical information electronically is being considered in the context of plans to provide the Defence Medical Services with a comprehensive and integrated information system.

Service Accommodation

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received from the Army Families Federation regarding the quality of housing available to service families. [126508]

Dr. Moonie: The Chair of the Army Families Federation wrote to the Secretary of State for Defence at the beginning of November 1999 on the importance of investment in housing. The Chairs of the Service family associations raised this with my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces in the Families Forum of the Service Families Task Force on 15 November 1999. My hon. Friend reiterated the MOD's commitment to the upgrade programme for Service family accommodation, recognising its importance to Service families. The issue was also raised at the Army Families Federation Conference on 26 May 2000 where my hon. Friend said that around 60 per cent. of Service Families Quarters were categorised as Standard 1 or close to it (this means that each property meets a series of strict criteria covering factors such as energy efficiency, double glazing and modern bathroom facilities); that approximately 2,400 properties had been upgraded or rebuilt during the financial year 1999–2000 (630 above target); that by the end of that year some £200 million had already been spent on Service family accommodation; and that a minimum of over £60 million would be invested in the programme in the current year.

Service Families (Anti-depressants)

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the quantities of anti-depressants prescribed to members of service families by MOD medical facilities in each of the last five years. [126510]

Dr. Moonie: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Bilateral Defence Relations (Czech Republic and Poland)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on joint working with *(a)* Poland and *(b)* the Czech Republic on military matters; and how many United Kingdom personnel are working in (i) Poland and (ii) the Czech Republic on training and related matters. [125379]

Mr. Spellar: The UK has developed strong bilateral defence relationships with the Czech Republic and Poland. We co-operate on a range of activities designed to support what they themselves are doing to achieve full integration with NATO. This includes provision of places for both nationalities at the Royal College of Defence Studies, as well as providing English language training and organising other staff exchanges and visits. Another example is the development of links between the Czech and British Army units assigned to the Allied Command Europe Rapid Reaction Corps.

We place great value on the practical co-operation we have enjoyed with the forces of the Czech Republic in operations in the Balkans. We are also proud of our involvement with the Poland-Ukraine Peacekeeping Battalion which has included joint exercising taking place successively in all three countries over the last few years.

The number of UK military personnel in either the Czech Republic or Poland at any given time is not held centrally.

Internet Access

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when all military personnel will have access to the internet in *(a)* Bosnia, *(b)* Cyprus, *(c)* Incirlik (Turkey), *(d)* Kuwait, *(e)* Saudi Arabia, *(f)* Sierra Leone, *(g)* the Falkland Islands, *(h)* Brunei, *(i)* Germany and *(j)* Gibraltar. [125785]

Mr. Spellar: Personnel in Cyprus, Brunei, Germany and Gibraltar have access to internet facilities via local service providers, as do the majority of personnel in the Falkland Islands. Personnel serving in Incirlik, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia also have access to e-mail and internet facilities via the US forces NIPRNET service.

Currently, internet access is available only for approximately 800 personnel deployed in the Banja Luka area of Bosnia. Full internet access is planned to be available to all personnel, except those serving in dispersed locations such as the hilltop sites (approximately 200 individuals), by the end of August 2000.

We have no plans to provide internet facilities for personnel serving in Sierra Leone.

Anglo-Irish Meeting

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the name and rank were of the person who arranged the meeting on 30 July 1974 in the Republic of Ireland, described in his answer of 19 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 424W; and what were the name, rank and unit of each person who accompanied Major Peter Maynard. [126223]

Mr. Spellar: I understand that this informal meeting was arranged and attended by a mutual acquaintance. I am withholding further details in accordance with exemptions 4, 12 and 14 of Part II of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Naval Procurement Contracts

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many naval procurement contacts for military vessels were made with Scottish yards in each of the last 10 years. [125573]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 14 June 2000]:* In the last 10 years the following contracts for new RN or RFA vessels have been placed where the construction is being/has been undertaken in Scottish yards:

Vessel	*Order date*	*Prime contractor*	*Ship yard location*
Royal Naval Vessels			
3 x Type 23 Frigates	January 1992	Yarrow Shipbuilders Ltd.	Scotstoun
Landing Platform Helicopter—HMS Ocean[1]	May 1993	Kvaerner Govan	Govan
3 x Type 23 Frigates	February 1996	Yarrow Shipbuilders Ltd.	Scotstoun
10 x Landing Craft Utilities Mk10	May 1998	BAe SEMA	Ailsa Troon
Royal Fleet Auxiliary Vessels			
Auxiliary Oiler[2]	March 1997	Marconi Marine (VSEL) Ltd.	Govan

[1] The order for HMS Ocean was for the construction of the Hull, propulsion and Domestic systems and excluded the fitting of the weapon systems

[2] Following conflicting demands at their Barrow yard Marconi Marine (VSEL) Ltd. transferred the construction to the Govan yard in summer 1999

RAF Feltwell

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to the answer of 13 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 559W, on RAF Feltwell, how many visits, during each of the last five years, were made to RAF Feltwell by *(a)* hon. Members, *(b)* Members of the House of Lords, *(c)* members of the US House of Representatives, *(d)* members of the US Senate and *(e)* representatives of the US Government. [126601]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence has no record of any visits by hon. Members or by Members of the House of Lords. The Ministry of Defence does not maintain records of visits by representatives of the US Government or members of the US House of Representatives or US Senate.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to the answer of 13 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 559W, on RAF Feltwell, on how many days in each of the last 12 months RAF personnel visited RAF Feltwell; and what was the last date on which RAF personnel were stationed at RAF Feltwell. [126600]

Mr. Spellar: RAF Feltwell falls within the administrative responsibility of the RAF Commander Lakenheath who regularly visits the base in the course of his day to day duties. The last RAF personnel to be based at RAF Feltwell were members of the 204th Signals Unit, which disbanded on 17 March 1975.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to the answer of 5 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 22W, on RAF Feltwell, what was the costs to the RAF of the administration of RAF Feltwell for each of the last five years. [126602]

Mr. Spellar: RAF Feltwell is administered as part of RAF Lakenheath and as such the cost of its administration cannot be separately quantified.

European Convention on Human Rights (Cyprus)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his reply to the hon. Member for Kingston-upon-Hull North, of 9 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 388W, for what reason the European Convention on Human Rights is not extended to the sovereign base areas in Cyprus. [126291]

Mr. Spellar: The Sovereign Base Areas are retained solely for military purposes, and it has therefore been considered inappropriate to include them in the notifications of the extension of the European Convention on Human Rights.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Oilseed Rape

Mr. Brake: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what studies he has commissioned into the medical impact on the population of planting of oilseed rape; what controls are applied to planting of oilseed rape; and if he will make a statement. [125396]

Ms Quin: The most recent study funded by MAFF was conducted by the Medical Research Council Institute for Environment and Health (IEH), University of Leicester. This took stock of UK and foreign research and was held in conjunction with medical experts to review the epidemiological studies and consider what, if any, further research was needed.

The study concluded from the available evidence that sensitisation to oilseed rape pollen alone, in the absence of sensitisation to other pollens or other common allergens, appeared to be rare.

There are no legal restrictions on the growing of oilseed rape. Oilseed rape is widely grown in the UK and in other member states. It forms part of a cereals rotation and is a valuable crop in its own right.

GM Crops

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to rescind permission for planting and growing GM crops on farms contaminated with GM products through the planting of oilseed rape. [123764]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 June 2000]:* None. Farmers do not need permission to grow conventional crops and the GM rapeseed involved in the recent incident was planted inadvertently. The Government could act in relation to the growing of the affected rapeseed crops or others only if there were a risk to public health or the environment. The Government have been advised that this is not the case.

We have, however, explained carefully the position regarding potential marketing of the affected crop, and the arrangements we have secured in relation to entitlement to AAPS payments to farmers.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the outcome was of the visit to Canada by a departmental seeds expert to investigate the production of contaminated oilseed rape seeds by Advanta; and if he will make a statement. [126097]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* We are considering the findings of the visit to Canada. Further investigations are being carried out by the Canadian Authorities.

Common Agricultural Policy

Mr. Cox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the cost to the UK of its funding of the Common Agricultural Policy in 1999. [125982]

Ms Quin: The United Kingdom contributes to the EU budget as a whole, and not to any particular part. The budget for 1999 was set at euro 85.5 billion (around £59 billion), of which the CAP accounted for euro 40.5 billion (around £28 billion). The UK's contribution to the overall EU budget was 12.68 per cent., after the effect of the Fontainebleau abatement was taken into account.

Upper Mole Flood Plain

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for what reasons the Environment Agency has not provided copies of the Upper Mole Flood Plain Study and associated maps, known as the Babties report, to members of Reigate and Banstead Borough Council; and when these will be made available. [126058]

Mr. Morley: The Environment Agency issued maps of the "100 year" floodplain for the Upper Mole and main river tributaries to Reigate and Banstead Borough Council in April 1999. The Agency expects the associated final report from Babties to be delivered in about three weeks; a copy will be provided to the council. It will be available to residents with whom a further meeting is planned for 4 July.

Farm Incomes

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what changes took place in average farm incomes in real terms in each year from 1988 to 1999 in the deciles of the *(a)* largest and *(b)* smallest farms. [126000]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 15 June 2000]:* The information is available only for full-time farms. Average Net Farm Incomes, in real terms, of full-time farm businesses in England for the deciles are given in the table. Estimates for the years before 1990–91 are obtainable only at disproportionate cost. Farm income estimates for 1999–2000 will be available early in 2001.

Net farm incomes of full-time farm businesses in real terms (at 1999–2000 prices) England

	Largest 10 per cent. of farms		*Smallest 10 per cent. of farms*	
	Average net farm income (£/farm)	*Percentage change from previous year*	*Average net farm income (£/farm)*	*Percentage change from previous year*
1990–91	77,400	—	6,200	—
1991–92	74,600	–4	2,400	–62
1992–93	93,900	+26	3,800	+60
1993–94	90,500	–4	2,500	–35
1994–95	117,100	+29	4,400	+78
1995–96	161,900	+38	6,700	+52
1996–97	110,800	–32	6,700	0
1997–98	55,000	–50	1,300	–81
1998–99	38,700	–32	600	–53

Note:
The smallest ten per cent. of farms are represented by small samples and income estimates are subject to larger than normal sampling errors.
Source:
Farm Business Survey

Farm Subsidies

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what percentage of subsidies to farmers in each of the past five years was distributed to the deciles of *(a)* the largest and *(b)* the smallest farms. [126001]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 15 June 2000]:* The information is obtainable only at disproportionate cost.

Horticulture (North-west)

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of job losses in the horticultural industry in the north-west consequent upon the introduction of the climate change levy. [124595]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 15 June 2000]:* It is not possible to say with precision what the effect of the climate change levy on the horticulture industry in the north-west will be, as this will depend, among other things, on the extent to which horticultural businesses in the region make use of the various incentives offered under the levy to improve energy efficiency. Further, subject to State Aids clearance from the European Commission, a specific package to help the horticulture industry has been announced.

BSE

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent discussions he has had with the United States *(a)* Department of Agriculture and *(b)* Food and Drugs Administration on comprehensive risk analysis relating to BSE. [123391]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 23 May 2000]:* None.

PRIME MINISTER

Serbia

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will hold discussions with the Government of Bulgaria about the lifting of sanctions against Serbia. [124405]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 14 June 2000]:* The Government are in regular contact with the Bulgarian government on a wide range of issues. I have no immediate plans to hold talks with the Bulgarians specifically on this subject.

Daily Press Briefings

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister what his policy is in respect of attendance at daily press briefings by his official spokesman. [126802]

The Prime Minister: My Official Spokesman is responsible for ensuring the press are briefed regularly; either by him, or his press office team.

Lockerbie

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will place in the Library his correspondence with Pamela Dix of the Lockerbie relatives on the Lockerbie Trust. [126252]

The Prime Minister: I have not written to Pamela Dix.

Central Railway

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 8 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 355W, on Central Railway, when members of the Number Ten Policy Unit met representatives of Central Railway. [126540]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 8 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 355W.

Poverty

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the recent UNICEF report on Poverty in The United Kingdom. [126570]

The Prime Minister: This report shows that in the last 20 years child poverty has trebled in the UK. The data used in the report relate to 1995 and reflect the situation under the previous administration.

I have already made a commitment to eradicating child poverty within 20 years, and halving it within 10. The report confirms this government have made a very good start and that the measures we have already announced will lift around one million children out of poverty by 2002.

The report also highlights the importance of work for those who can as the best way of reducing child poverty. We are already tackling this through the New Deals, the Working Families Tax Credit and the minimum wage. Increases in the income-related benefits and Child Benefit will help those for whom work is not yet an option. By the end of this parliament we will be spending £7 billion extra on families with children.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Higher Education

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the trend is in *(a)* numerical and *(b)* percentage terms of applications for higher education places from social classes L11, L6, L7, L3, L5 and L4; and what assessment he has made of which changes in Government policy are affecting the trends. [125181]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 9 June 2000]:* The available information on full-time students is contained in the following table, and covers only those who apply to full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS); data on the family background of applicants to part-time courses are not held centrally.

UK domiciled applicants to full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses in the UK

	Year of entry					
Social Class	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
Numbers						
I Professional	50,270	50,245	49,931	48,423	47,024	46,533
II Intermediate	142,661	140,137	138,995	150,294	147,309	144,804
IIIN Skilled non-manual	43,388	42,377	42,969	49,567	47,057	47,102
IIIM Skilled manual	61,784	61,915	58,235	60,735	58,894	58,540
IV Partly skilled	28,340	28,785	28,340	32,200	31,012	30,805
V Unskilled	7,208	7,644	7,033	7,904	7,305	7,451
Total known	333,651	331,103	325,503	349,123	338,601	335,235
Unknown	31,672	38,598	39,382	49,204	50,987	53,456
Total	365,323	369,701	364,885	398,327	389,588	388,691
Percentages[1]						
I Professional	15.1	15.2	15.3	13.9	13.9	13.9
II Intermediate	42.8	42.3	42.7	43.0	43.5	43.2
IIIN Skilled non-manual	13.0	12.8	13.2	14.2	13.9	14.1
IIIM Skilled manual	18.5	18.7	17.9	17.4	17.4	17.5
IV Partly skilled	8.5	8.7	8.7	9.2	9.2	9.2
V Unskilled	2.2	2.3	2.2	2.3	2.2	2.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

[1] Excluding applicants with unknown social class

This Government are committed to ensuring that everyone who is capable of benefiting from higher education will have the opportunity to do so. Widening participation on a sound basis requires policies across a broad front, from improving school performance through to funding formulae that target help on those students that need it most. This is a complex area and the results will not be immediate. We will of course continue to monitor applications in order to evaluate the longer term impact of our action.

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for each institution of higher education in Great Britain the *(a)* total budget and *(b)* amount of budget deficit for each year since 1995 for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [126176]

Mr. Wicks: The income and expenditure of each higher education institution in Great Britain is set out in "Resources of Higher Education Institutions" published annually by the Higher Education Statistics Agency. Copies are in the Library of the House.

Commonwealth Students

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many commonwealth students are studying at universities in the UK for whom the UK has contributed towards the cost of college fees. [125766]

Mr. Wicks: The UK Government currently contribute towards the costs of college fees, and in some cases maintenance, for 2,037 commonwealth students at UK universities. There are five main Government schemes open to commonwealth students, as listed. The first three are exclusively for commonwealth students. In addition, there are a number of scholarship schemes operated by recognised charities from which commonwealth students may benefit.

	Number of commonwealth students 2000
Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (DFID/FCO)	843
DFID Shared Scholarship Scheme (DFID/Universities)	170
Montserrat Emergency Award Scheme (DfEE)	171
British Chevening Scholarships (FCO)	502
Overseas Research Students Awards Scheme (DfEE)	351

Disabled People

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions he has had with local education authorities in the Greater London area to ensure that all possible assistance is given to enable disabled people to enter further and higher education; and if he will make a statement. [125765]

Mr. Wicks: Local education authorities are active in securing the transition of young people with special educational needs, including many disabled young people, from school to further and higher education. They must have regard to the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs, which sets out a transition planning process to support this group of learners. A revised Code will come into effect in September 2001 which will set out strengthened arrangements. These arrangements will, in part, be informed by provisions in the Learning and Skills Bill, which should receive Royal Assent in July.

The Bill includes a range of provisions to improve the learning opportunities available for people with learning difficulties and disabilities, including their transition from school to other learning. In addition, the Government are committed to legislate as soon as Parliamentary time allows, in response to the Disability Rights Task Force's recommendations in respect of further and higher education, which featured in its report published in December 1999.

Over half of local education authorities in England, Wales and Scotland have responded to the recent consultation exercise on how those recommendations should translate into specific legal rights and duties. Those responses will help inform and refine the legislation.

Connexions Service

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what will be the role and responsibilities of *(a)* personal advisers, *(b)* learning mentors and *(c)* Connexions advisers in the Connexions Service; and to whom each will be contractually accountable. [125865]

Mr. Wicks: The document "Connexions: The best start in life for every young person" published in February this year contained information on the role and responsibilities of the personal adviser working within the Connexions Service. We have started work on developing the new profession for personal advisers and this week we aim to publish the consultation document, "Connexions Service: Professional Framework for Personal Advisers—proposals for consultation" asking for views on the profession. This document outlines proposals for a comprehensive training programme which aims to ensure that personal advisers have the appropriate skills and knowledge for the role and meet agreed standards for the profession.

Learning mentors work alongside teaching staff and are responsible for helping pupils to overcome barriers to learning both inside and outside the school. They are employed in schools covered by the Government's Excellence in Cities initiative and report to the headteacher or a member of the senior management team. Learning mentors are available to all secondary age pupils who need them and they devote the majority of their time to those individuals needing extra support in order to realise their full potential.

We will be asking for Connexions Partnership to include in their proposals information about which organisations will employ personal advisers. We expect some personal advisers will be employed directly by the Connexions Service, some will be seconded from partner organisations and some will be employed by organisations which hold a subcontract or franchise for the delivery of some Connexions services.

Education Action Zones

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans the Government have to announce a third bidding round for Education Action Zones; and if he will make a statement. [125960]

Ms Estelle Morris: We have no current plans for a third bidding round for Education Action Zones.

Pupils (Expenditure)

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for *(a)* Great Britain and *(b)* each local education authority the real terms expenditure per pupil for (i) 1979, (ii) 1990 and (iii) each year since 1992 for which figures are available. [126177]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is not readily available. I will write to the hon. Member when I am able to reply and place a copy of my letter in the Library.

Leeds LEA

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the statutory functions that will remain with Leeds Local Education Authority under the new arrangements for education services announced on 14 June. [126823]

Ms Estelle Morris: The announcement on 14 June of a new joint venture company to deliver education services to schools in Leeds, set out the broad framework for the way forward. Detailed discussions will continue as to precisely which statutory functions will transfer to the new company to allow it effectively to discharge its responsibilities for service delivery and increasing attainment.

Computers for Teachers Scheme

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many applications he has received under the Computers for Teachers scheme from schools in Bury, North; and how many refund payments have been made within one month of the submission of the application; [124770]

(2) how many applications he has received under the Computers for Teachers scheme; how many refund payments have been made within one month of the application; how many refund payments are still pending; and what is the current average length of time for making refund payments. [124771]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 14 June 2000]:* Data relating to the number of applications from constituency areas are not held centrally.

The Computers for Teachers scheme has been very popular and early indications are that over 27,000 computers have been purchased under the scheme from the authorised suppliers. The scale of the response has unfortunately meant that there have been delays in processing payments. The Department very much regrets these delays and has taken urgent action to put in place measures which will ensure that:

Any teacher who submitted a claim which was received in the Department before 12 May will either have their claim cleared for payment or have been contacted to resolve any issue related to their claim, by 23 June. It should be noted that "cleared for payment" means that the payment will have been entered into the BACS system and will then take between three and 10 days to clear into an individual's bank or building society account.

Any teacher whose claim was received in the Department between 13 and 31 May will have their claim cleared for payment or will be contacted by 30 June.

Any teacher whose claim was received in June will have their claim cleared for payment or will be contacted within the four week timescale originally anticipated.

Music Colleges

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if the *(a)* Royal Academy of Music, *(b)* Royal College of Music, *(c)* Trinity College of Music, *(d)* Royal Northern College of Music, *(e)* Birmingham Conservatoire, *(f)* Guildhall School of Music and Drama and *(g)* Leeds College of Music has its own concert hall. [126034]

Mr. Wicks: Trinity College of Music performs at a variety of venues including the South Bank Centre, and St. Johns, Smith Square, London but will have its own concert hall when it moves to the Old Naval College Greenwich. Leeds College of Music also performs at a number of venues.

All the other named institutions have their own concert halls.

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much capital investment the *(a)* Royal Academy of Music, *(b)* Royal College of Music, *(c)* Trinity College of Music, *(d)* Royal Northern College of Music, *(e)* Birmingham Conservatoire, *(f)* Guildhall School of Music and Drama and *(g)* Leeds College of Music has received in each of the last five years for which information is available. [126050]

Mr. Wicks: The funding for these institutions comes from a variety of sources both public and private. Information on the total amount of capital investment received by each of the specified institutions is not available centrally.

Further Education Funding Council

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will publish the Treasury rules on economic appraisal of projects as they apply to the Further Education Funding Council's capital programme. [126049]

Mr. Wicks: The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) assesses applications for capital support for projects submitted by further education colleges against a range of criteria based on the Treasury's guide for Government departments. The Guide is called "Appraisal and Evaluation in Central Government Departments—A Treasury Guide" and is a published document available from the HMSO.

British Association for Early Childhood Education

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much grant his Department has paid to the British Association for Early Childhood Education in each of the last four years; and how much is being paid in the current year. [125974]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 15 June 2000]:* The Department has provided the following financial support to the British Association for Early Childhood Education (BAECE) since 1996:

Early education grant

	£
1996–97	44,180
1997–98	51,413
1998–99	51,300
1999–2000	59,112
2000–01	90,000
Total	296,005

Learning and Skills Council

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to ensure that schools and colleges are represented on learning and skills councils. [126278]

Mr. Wicks: Appointments to the Learning and Skills Council and its local councils will be merit-based following open competition. We intend to appoint members who have understanding and experience of the wide variety of interests in post-16 education and training, including people with experience in a senior capacity in schools and further education.

Nursery Education

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many nursery schools have closed in each of the last three financial years in each local education authority; and how many closures of nursery schools are currently being proposed by local education authorities. [119491]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* The maintained nursery schools that have closed in the financial years 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000 are listed in the tables, copies of which have been placed in the Library. There are no proposals for nursery school closure currently under consideration as far as the Department is aware. All the nursery school closures were linked to the establishment of alternative nursery units at other schools except one where the nursery school was closed as there were surplus nursery places in the area.

The nursery schools that have closed over the three years represent 4.6 per cent. of the total number of nursery schools in England. Since 1997, four new nursery schools have been established. An extra 8,297 four-year-old places have been created since 1997.

HEALTH

Meat Hygiene Service

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps the Meat Hygiene Service takes to ensure that there are no conflicts of interest affecting the work of Official Veterinary Surgeons. [122046]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 15 May 2000]:* I am advised by the Food Standards Agency that, all official veterinary surgeons (OVSs) working on behalf of the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) are contractually obliged to avoid any conflicts of interest. Any allegations of potential conflicts will be fully investigated by the MHS and appropriate action taken.

In addition to this, all OVSs have to be Members of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and as such are bound by the stringent ethical obligations placed upon them by their professional Codes of Practice.

Vaccinations

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what childhood vaccinations have been withdrawn on safety grounds since childhood vaccinations were started. [122159]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 15 May 2000]:* The childhood vaccination programme predates the modern licensing system for medicines. Comprehensive records are not available for this entire period.

In the last decade no vaccines have had their licences withdrawn owing to safety issues. However, in September 1992, following concerns of a possible association between the Measles, Mumps, Rubella vaccines which contained the Urabe mumps vaccine strain, and aseptic meningitis, all vaccines containing this strain were replaced in the vaccination programme. Vaccines containing this strain were recalled and no further vaccine has been supplied to the National Health Service.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what evidence his Department has evaluated on a causal link between routine vaccination and brain-damage. [122911]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 19 May 2000]:* The Medicines Control Agency and Committee on Safety of Medicines continuously monitor the safety, quality and efficacy of all medicines including vaccines. For vaccinations, the independent expert advisory committee, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation also considers issues relating to vaccination policy, including safety and efficacy. The evidence evaluated includes data from spontaneous reports from the yellow card scheme, the published medical literature, pre- and post-marketing clinical trials and epidemiological studies.

Evidence does not support a causal association between any of the recommended childhood vaccines and long-term damage other than the risk of vaccine—associated paralytic polio which occurs in one out of approximately every million immunisations.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children have suffered brain damage following a routine vaccination in each year since 1990; and if he will break this figure down by the vaccine given in each case. [124763]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 7 June 2000]:* Since 1990, there has been one case of brain damage and one case of mental handicap reported to the Medicines Control Agency/Committee on Safety of Medicines following vaccination in United Kingdom children aged 12 years or under.

The case of brain damage was reported in association with measles, mumps and rubella in 1996. The case of mental handicap was reported in 1995 following polio immunisation.

Spontaneous reports are of suspected adverse drug reactions: they do not necessarily mean that the drug is the cause of the reaction.

Ms Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the health authority areas in the UK where the MMR vaccine can be administered in single doses. [125804]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 13 June 2000]:* Delivery of Measles, Mumps and Rubella as three separate vaccines has never been recommended in the UK. Single antigen measles and mumps vaccines are not licensed in the UK. The importation of unlicensed single antigen measles and mumps vaccines is restricted by Medicines Control Agency under the Medicines Act. As a result the Department is not aware of any health authority which either recommends or gives MMR as three separate vaccines.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the procedures for trials of new vaccines. [126256]

Yvette Cooper: Before new vaccines can be studied in human subjects in the United Kingdom, approval should be sought from the Medicines Control Agency by submitting relevant scientific data to the Agency for evaluation. Applicants are obliged to report any serious unexpected adverse reaction associated with the administration of the product.

Water Fluoridation

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list the research projects funded by his Department since 1990 that have investigated the causes of mottling, opacities and dental fluorosis in children and young adults; [124641]

(2) when he last met representatives of the water companies in England and Wales; and what matters were discussed; [124621]

(3) what plans he has to restrict or control the ingestation of fluoride, mouth washes and dental floss by *(a)* adults and *(b)* children; [124640]

(4) what plans he has to amend sections 87 to 91 of the Water Industry Act 1991; and if he will make a statement; [124620]

(5) if he will commission research into the incidence of hip fractures in women aged 50 to 64 years in *(a)* fluoridated and *(b)* unfluoridated areas in England and Wales. [124622]

Yvette Cooper: The Department has commissioned the National Health Service Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, at the University of York, to conduct a systematic review of the evidence on the safety and efficacy of fluoride in drinking water. The review will cover studies on hip fractures, including studies undertaken in the United Kingdom. It is expected to report in July. We will review policy on fluoridation including any need for further research and advice on the use of topical fluoride in the light of the report's conclusions.

The Department has not funded any recent research projects into the causes of mottling, opacities and dental fluorosis in children and young adults, but the systematic review is covering these matters.

I met with the chief executive of Water UK on 24 May to discuss the progress of the review.

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has commissioned into the fluoridation of water and the intake of fluoride from sources other than water; and if he will make a statement. [124882]

Yvette Cooper: The fluoride concentration of drinking water, whether occurring naturally at levels up to the maximum permitted concentration of 1.5 milligrams per litre, or artificially supplemented to a concentration of 1 milligram per litre, principally affects dietary intake of fluoride through consumption of tapwater, and of domestically-prepared soft drinks, beverages and meals. The intake of fluoride from retail food is estimated from the UK Total Diet Study. The estimate from data gathered between 1978 and 1980 is included in Chapter 36 of Department of Health Report on Health and Social Subjects 41 "Dietary Reference Values for food energy and nutrients for the United Kingdom" (sixth impression and later revisions, 1994 onwards). Copies are available in the Library. The Food Standards Agency has recently completed a survey of fluoride levels in the 1997 Total Diet Study and will report the results in full once they have been assessed.

The Department has commissioned the National Health Service Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, at the University of York, to conduct a systematic review of the evidence on the safety and efficacy of fluoride in drinking water, which is expected to report in July.

Oral Cancer

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to reduce *(a)* the incidence of and *(b)* the mortality rate for oral cancer; and if he will make a statement. [124471]

Yvette Cooper: Some cases of oral cancer are linked to smoking, the chewing of tobacco and betel quid and heavy alcohol consumption.

The reduction of smoking is one of our top priorities and a number of measures are in place including up to £50 million new money for a major campaign to shift attitudes and change behaviour and up to £60 million new money for National Health Service smoking cessation services.

We are funding a number of voluntary organisations to produce ethnic minority health materials aimed at improving information on oral cancer including material on paan chewing with tobacco which is widespread among Bangladeshi communities.

We plan to publish a consultation paper later this year prior to the publication of a national strategy on alcohol misuse.

From October 2000, all patients suspected of having oral cancer should be given an outpatient appointment within 14 days of their general practitioner making an

urgent referral. The National Institute of Clinical Excellence is expected to produce guidance for commissioners of head and neck cancer services in 2002.

Waiting Lists

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many patients are waiting for admission to hospital, broken down by specialty and health authority area; and if he will make a statement; [124418]

(2) how many patients are waiting for admission to hospitals in each health authority in England for *(a)* child health treatment, *(b)* cancer treatment, *(c)* cardio-thoracic treatment, *(d)* treatment of the elderly, *(e)* general medical treatment, *(f)* general surgery and urology and *(g)* neurosurgery and neurology; and if he will make a statement. [124419]

Mr. Denham *[holding answers 6 June and 7 June 2000]:* All the available data are published on the Department of Health website at www.doh.nhsweb.nhs.uk/nhs/waitingtimes and in the Library in the quarterly publication entitled: "Hospital Waiting List Statistics: England (Responsible Population Based) Quarter Ended 31 March 2000". The latest data are for the end March 2000.

Hepatitis C (Norwich)

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to tackle the problems of the hepatitis C infection in Norwich among intravenous drug users; and if he will include hepatitis C infection in a general programme on blood-borne viruses. [124889]

Yvette Cooper: Norfolk health authority funds specific initiatives to prevent and control blood-borne viruses, including hepatitis C, among injecting drug misusers. These initiatives include needle exchange schemes; outreach services; an immunisation programme against hepatitis B; information and advice on preventing blood-borne virus transmission; testing for hepatitis B, hepatitis C and HIV; and training and guidance for health professionals.

We recognise that blood-borne viruses, in particular hepatitis C, are a public health issue in relation to injecting drug misusers. We are therefore commissioning research specifically about hepatitis C and injecting drug misusers, who currently form the largest source of new cases.

We have also asked the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) to consider the use of combination drug therapy (interferon alpha plus ribavirin) for the treatment of hepatitis C. NICE is also looking at evidence-based clinical guidelines for the management of patients with hepatitis C. NICE's recommendations, which are due this autumn, and the clinical guidelines will provide authoritative guidance to health care commissioners and clinicians.

Hereford Hospital

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received over the number of acute beds for the new Hereford hospital; and if he will make a statement. [125128]

Yvette Cooper: The British Medical Association Herefordshire Division held a meeting on 31 May at which I understand it was agreed they would write to me asking me to review the provision of hospital beds in Herefordshire.

The important issue for the health service in Herefordshire is the number of patients who need to be treated and the appropriateness of their care. In line with this the services and bed provision for Herefordshire have been reviewed, validated and agreed between the health authority, acute trust, and the community health council.

The agreed plan for Herefordshire has two key elements: consolidating split site acute services and investing in intermediate care in rural and city locations. Intermediate care investment includes provision of modern community hospitals at Ledbury and Kington, additional community health staff, fast response hospital-at-home teams and joint use of re-ablement beds with the local authority.

The report of our National Beds Inquiry, set up to review assumptions about the demand for inpatient care and the implications for hospital bed numbers, was published for consultation on 10 February 2000. Consultation will focus on how health services, and specifically hospital beds, should be developed over the next 10–20 years.

Abortion Clinics

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many complaints he has received against abortion clinics in the past year; which clinics were concerned in each case; and what the nature of each complaint was. [125408]

Yvette Cooper: The Department has only received one complaint in the last year and as this is currently being investigated it is inappropriate to comment further.

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the fees that are paid to private abortion clinics for the receipt of fetal tissue by NHS organisations. [125407]

Yvette Cooper: No fees are paid to private abortion clinics. The "Code Of Practice On The Use Of Fetuses And Fetal Material In Research And Treatment" issued by the Department in July 1989 states there should be no monetary exchange for fetuses or fetal tissue.

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what statutory provisions govern the disposal of the bodies and organs of induced-aborted babies. [125405]

Yvette Cooper: Before 24 weeks gestation, there are no specific legal requirements but we recommend that full account be taken of any personal wishes that have been expressed about disposal of foetal tissue. If appropriate the options available should be raised with parents especially where there is an identifiable body at later gestations. If no personal wishes have been expressed foetuses should be incinerated.

Terminations carried out after 24 weeks gestation (the legal age of viability) are registered as stillbirths and the law requires the body to be buried or cremated.

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the abortion clinics which send fetal tissue to the fetal tissue banks at *(a)* the Medical Research Council based at Hammersmith Hospital, *(b)* the Institute of Child Health, London and *(c)* the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. [125406]

Yvette Cooper: The Marie Stopes Park View Clinic supplies foetal tissue to the Medical Research Council tissue bank based at Hammersmith Hospital. No abortion clinics supply foetal tissue to the other tissue banks listed.

Meningitis C

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of *(a)* the average cost to the NHS of treating someone with meningitis C, *(b)* the number of people who were treated in the last year for meningitis C by the NHS, *(c)* the annual cost of treatment for meningitis C by the NHS and *(d)* the cost of giving one vaccination for meningitis C, including (i) costs of publicising the availability of the vaccine and (ii) other costs for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [125035]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 9 June 2000]:* The average cost per hospital admission for a patient with meningococcal Group C disease is estimated at £3,200. However, information on the full cost of National Health Service treatment, including post- and pre-hospital admission costs and the cost of caring for those patients with long term sequelae arising from meningococcal Group C disease, is not available.

In the year July 1998 to June 1999 there were an estimated 1,500 cases of meningococcal Group C disease in England and Wales; about 150 of these patients died.

The cost of meningococcal Group C vaccine is commercially confidential. However, at the end of the current meningococcal Group C immunisation programme we hope to be able to give an aggregate cost for the whole programme including vaccine purchase, distribution, implementation, information and publicity.

The new meningococcal Group C conjugate vaccine is already having a welcome effect on this deadly disease. Early reports show that the number of cases of meningococcal infection in those groups who have been immunised has been dramatically reduced, with a reduction on the expected number of cases of around 75 per cent. The United Kingdom is the first country in the world to benefit from this new vaccine, putting the UK in the forefront of tackling this devastating disease and signalling a great success for the NHS.

Influenza

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of *(a)* the average cost to the NHS of treating someone with influenza, *(b)* the number of people treated for influenza in the last year by the NHS, *(c)* the annual cost of influenza treatment by the NHS and *(d)* the cost of giving one vaccination for influenza, including (i) the costs of publicising the availability of the vaccine and (ii) other costs for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [125036]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 9 June 2000]:* It is not possible to give an exact cost to the National Health Service of treating someone with influenza, as the information recorded relates solely to the cost of a hospital episode for respiratory illness, not just influenza. The latest data available, which are for 1997–98, average that cost at £1,900.

The number of admissions to NHS hospitals in England coded as influenza for the financial year 1998–99 was 2,281. This will not include all admissions due to influenza which may be categorised as, for example, respiratory illness.

There is no breakdown of costs to distinguish between flu and other respiratory illnesses and therefore cost of influenza on the NHS cannot accurately be identified.

General practitioners order their own vaccines direct from manufacturers. The cost of giving an influenza vaccination would vary from practice to practice. There are five vaccines to choose from varying in price from £3.99 to £5.70 for winter 1999–2000. On top of the vaccine price, under the personal administration scheme a GP will also receive 10.5 per cent. of the list price and around £1 for each vaccine given. Information on the costs of publicity for influenza vaccine across the NHS is not collected centrally.

Waiting Lists (Gloucestershire)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many patients on NHS waiting lists in Gloucestershire have left them to be treated privately in each of the last five years for which figures are available; [125545]

(2) how many patients in Gloucestershire died while on NHS waiting lists in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [125538]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many patients in Gloucestershire were on NHS waiting lists in each month during the last five years for which figures are available; [125536]

(2) how many patients in Gloucestershire had been waiting for their operation for more than *(a)* six months and *(b)* one year in each month during the last five years for which figures are available. [125537]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is shown in the table. Gloucestershire Health Authority intend that by the end of 2000–01 no Gloucestershire resident will be waiting longer than nine months for treatment at local National Health Service trusts and no longer than 12 months at trusts elsewhere in the country.

Number of patients waiting for elective admission at the end of the month quoted at Gloucestershire Health Authority

Year	Quarter or month	Total	6–11 months	More than 12 months
1994–95	4	7,331	696	0
1995–96	1	7,351	744	0
1995–96	2	6,921	810	0
1995–96	3	7,018	615	1
1995–96	4	7,708	613	17
1996–97	1	7,772	588	5

Number of patients waiting for elective admission at the end of the month quoted at Gloucestershire Health Authority

Year	Quarter or month	Total	6–11 months	More than 12 months
1996–97	2	7,428	640	20
1996–97	3	8,589	802	17
1996–97	4	8,634	697	5
1997–98	1	8,643	903	45
1997–98	2	8,983	1,025	53
1997–98	3	9,678	1,488	47
1997–98	4	10,456	1,489	54
1998–99	June	10,040	1,536	46
1998–99	July	10,092	1,585	42
1998–99	August	9,619	1,474	49
1998–99	September	9,389	1,385	48
1998–99	October	9,408	1,330	54
1998–99	November	9,127	1,146	48
1998–99	December	9,074	1,188	63
1998–99	January	8,945	1,154	51
1998–99	February	8,632	1,101	47
1998–99	March	8,087	1,053	40
1999–2000	April	8,418	1,099	41
1999–2000	May	8,216	1,156	42
1999–2000	June	8,562	1,152	58
1999–2000	July	8,696	1,129	55
1999–2000	August	8,721	1,178	55
1999–2000	September	8,756	1,125	76
1999–2000	October	8,609	1,094	82
1999–2000	November	8,416	997	77
1999–2000	December	8,835	1,087	99
1999–2000	January	9,478	1,172	87
1999–2000	February	9,272	1,129	96
1999–2000	March	8,249	1,050	83
2000–01	April	8,103	1,071	98

Source:
QF01 and monthly waiting times returns

NHS National Plan

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what consultations prior to his recent consultation exercise he has had with *(a)* the Grimsby and Community Health Council and *(b)* the National Association of Community Health Councils concerning the future policies and operation of the National Health Service; and what part he expects them to play in his current consultation process. [125384]

Yvette Cooper: Community health councils have the statutory right to be consulted about major services changes planned for their districts. Since we took office, the North East Lincolnshire Community Health Council, which is based in Grimsby, has been consulted about two proposed trust mergers, a review of acute services in the district and the proposed closure of a hospital in a neighbouring district. In common with the rest of the population the Council has had the opportunity to provide comments on the National Health Service for consideration as we work towards our National Plan.

We are in regular contact with the National Association of Community Health Councils in England and Wales and there have been many opportunities for them to contribute to the development of policy for the National Health Service. They have submitted their views as part of the national consultation exercise.

St. George's Hospital, Tooting

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many ward beds are available at St. George's Hospital, Tooting. [125986]

Mr. Denham: Bed data for individual hospitals are not collected centrally. The data are collected annually at NHS trust level, rather than by individual hospitals or site. NHS trusts provide healthcare but may provide it at more than one site.

St. George's Hospital is part of the St. George's Hospital NHS Trust. The average daily number of available beds for the St. George's Hospital NHS Trust during the period 1998–99 was 1,037.

Primary Care Groups

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what formal channels of communication exist between primary care groups in the West Midlands and other primary care groups *(a)* locally, *(b)* regionally and *(c)* nationally. [125680]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 12 June 2000]:* From the outset primary care groups (PCGs) have recognised the importance of working together both formally and informally.

The East Midlands is not recognised as a designated health region. However, in the West Midlands PCG chief officers and chairs, as well as board members, contribute to local working groups on clinical governance, health improvement, and commissioning as well as other functional areas. A local forum for chief executives and chairs of PCGs meet on a regular basis in Coventry.

In addition, PCG officers attend quarterly network meetings and PCG nurse board members hold bi-monthly network meetings across the West Midlands depending on availability of appropriate venues.

There are currently no formal channels of communication for PCGs at national level, but a number of networking developments have been well received. PCGs moving to primary care trust status this year have had the benefit of a national development network and I understand that PCGs in the West Midlands were part of the Northern network.

Many PCGs took up the opportunity to participate in the national primary care collaborative and one of the successful applicants from the West Midlands was Coventry East.

The National Health Service at all levels is making increasing use of e-mail and websites to facilitate communications.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what advice he has issued to primary care groups about local health information campaigns. [126102]

Mr. Denham: Primary care groups are expected to work with other local health and partner organisations to tackle local and national health priorities identified in the Health Improvement Programme. In doing so, they will need to play a full and appropriate role in local campaigns to inform and educate their local populations about health and health services.

Confidentiality

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the safeguards in place to protect the confidentiality of personal genetic and similar information. [125731]

Yvette Cooper: Personal genetic information held in confidence, as with other confidential information, is protected by law. Health professionals also have ethical duties imposed by their regulatory bodies and the majority of National Health Service staff have equivalent contractual obligations. The Human Genetics Commission has indicated that it will be examining the protection of genetic data as a priority in its work programme.

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance he gives to health trusts on the confidentiality of patient records under the Data Protection Act 1998. [126085]

Mr. Denham: Guidance on patient confidentiality, issued by the Department to trusts in March 1996, remains relevant and in force. Consideration will be given to whether amendments or additional guidance are needed. Department officials are discussing the implications of the new Act with the Data Protection Commissioner's office.

Air Ambulance Services

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the funding of air ambulance services. [125958]

Ms Stuart: The need for helicopter air ambulance services is a matter for local health economies as the case for supporting these from public funds has not been made. Professor Jon Nicholls' report "The costs and effectiveness of helicopter emergency ambulance services", commissioned by the Department of Health, did not show benefits to justify National Health Service investment. The position will be reviewed if any further evidence is presented. A copy of this report has already been placed in the Library.

Hospital Infections

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many cases of death arising from hospital infection were recorded in 1999; and what estimate he has made of the number of deaths amongst patients discharged from hospital caused by infection acquired whilst in hospital in the same period. [126188]

Mr. Denham: There are no centrally held statistics on deaths caused by hospital acquired infections (HAIs). The role which any HAI might play in a patient's death is a matter for the clinical judgment of the doctor concerned.

Outpatient Appointments

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many outpatient appointments were *(a)* missed by patients and *(b)* cancelled by hospitals in the most recent year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement; [126090]

(2) what the annual cost was to the NHS of outpatients failing to keep appointments in the most recent year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [126089]

Mr. Denham: During 1999–2000, 1,454,000 patients failed to attend a first outpatient appointment following referral by their general practitioner. Data on the numbers of outpatient appointments cancelled by National Health Service trusts are not collected centrally.

The Department does not collect data on the cost of missed outpatient appointments, but the number of appointments missed suggests that the cost to the NHS is significant.

We are committed to improving the reliability and convenience of care for all patients. This is why we are investing £40 million this year to extend the national booked admissions programme. The programme allows patients to book hospital appointments or admission dates in advance at times that are convenient to them. Pre-booking in this way leads to demonstrable improvements in the numbers of hospital appointments missed by patients and the numbers of appointments cancelled by both the patient and the hospital.

Cervical Cancer Screening

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans he has to implement hydrolysised DNA assay testing for cervical cancer screening; and if he will make a statement; [125965]

(2) what advice he has received from the Advisory Committee on Cervical Cancer Screening on the effectiveness of hydrolysised DNA assay testing. [125966]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 14 June 2000]:* The Advisory Committee on Cervical Screening (ACCS) discussed the hydrolysised DNA assay (HDA) test developed by Dr. Andrew Sincock of King's College, and funded by Quest Cancer Research, at its meeting on 26 May 2000. Three members of the committee agreed to view a demonstration of the test at King's College, with a view to reporting back to the committee when it next meets. The Chairman of the ACCS will shortly be writing to Quest to make the appropriate arrangements.

We welcome any new technology that would improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the cervical screening programme. However, before any technology is introduced we must be sure that it is safe and effective, and that quality standards can be maintained.

By establishing the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE), we have taken responsibility for helping to clarify, both for patients and professionals, which technologies are clinically and cost effective. If a technology is likely to have a significant impact on patient care or National Health Service resources, Ministers may refer the technology to NICE after consultation with leading professionals.

NHS Census

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 12 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 468W, how many NHS census replies he has received to date *(a)* on tape and *(b)* by dictation over the telephone; [126184]

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the cost to public funds of the recent NHS census, including printing, distribution, posting, processing and analysis and publication of the results. [126180]

Mr. Denham: I refer the hon. Members to the reply given to the hon. Members for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) and for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) on 15 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 671–72W.

Sexual Health

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whom the Government have consulted on the development of a sexual health strategy for young people. [126100]

Yvette Cooper: The Integrated Sexual Health/HIV Strategy will set a programme of action on sexual and reproductive health and HIV for England, for the whole population. A wide range of stakeholders have been involved in the development of the strategy, including a written consultation with health professionals working in the field, meetings with the Royal Colleges, professional organisations and other key players. There have also been specific consultations with young people, black and ethnic minority groups and gay men and lesbian women.

A draft strategy will be issued for consultation in the autumn.

Correspondence

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will send a substantive reply to the letter sent to him by the hon. Member for North Thanet on 18 May concerning Mrs. A. Richardson and Miss Carrie Richardson. [126328]

Mr. Hutton: I shall let the hon. Member have a reply to his letter of 18 May as soon as possible.

NHS Dentistry

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the revenue to the NHS from charges for *(a)* NHS dental examinations and *(b)* NHS dental treatments for the last year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [126060]

Mr. Hutton: In 1999–2000 patient charge revenue in the General Dental Service in England for *(a)* dental examinations was about £75 million and for *(b)* all dental treatments (including examinations) was £432 million. Patient charges are paid direct to the dentist, with the gross fee payable to the dentist reduced accordingly.

Dental examinations and treatments for children are free. About a quarter of adults do not pay or pay a reduced amount for their National Health Service dental care.

Opticians

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the revenue to the NHS from charges for *(a)* examinations and *(b)* prescriptions by opticians for the last year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [126061]

Mr. Hutton: There are no charges for National Health Service sight tests or prescriptions for spectacles. People ineligible for free NHS sight tests pay for a private test. Where children under 16 and people on low incomes are prescribed glasses they are entitled to an optical voucher which they may use to pay for spectacles from a basic range or put towards a more expensive pair of their own choice.

Medical Training Costs

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the total cost *(a)* to his Department and *(b)* in total of training a medical student for one year for (i) pre-clinical training and (ii) clinical training; and if he will make a statement. [126063]

Mr. Denham: The Department meets the additional costs to hospitals and general practices of supporting the clinical training of medical students from the Service Increment for Teaching (SIFT) levy. In 2000–01 the average SIFT cost per student for each of the three years of clinical training is £46,157 in London and £37,202 outside London. In allocating funding to universities, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) assumes a total resource of £5,462 per year for each full-time equivalent student studying pre-clinical medicine and £12,290 per year for each full-time equivalent student studying clinical medicine. The HEFCE's assumptions on total resource include the statutory £1,050 full-time undergraduate fee which is usually paid by the student, but may be paid by the local education authority after means-testing.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many medical students entered NHS employment and what was the cost to his Department of training those students, in the last year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [126062]

Mr. Denham: Data on the number of students taking up employment in the National Health Service are not held centrally. However, for the year ending July 1999, the latest date for which figures are available, 3,097 students graduated from English medical schools. In 1999–2000 the Department of Health made funding available to support approximately 3,400 newly qualified doctors at a cost of £74.5 million through the medical and dental education levy.

Hospital Bed Costs

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the average unit cost to the NHS of a new hospital bed in *(a)* an existing district general hospital, *(b)* a new district general hospital paid for exclusively by public money, *(c)* a new district general hospital paid for exclusively by private money and *(d)* a new district hospital paid for through a PFI scheme; and if he will make a statement. [126059]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not held centrally but an indicative capital cost of creating a new hospital bed place in a new hospital is approximately £325,000 (excluding Value Added Tax) at current prices. The cost includes the capital construction cost, equipment costs and professional fees incurred as well as a proportion of the costs of the supporting services within the new hospital such as operating theatres, outpatient departments, accident and emergency services, catering, office accommodation, public areas, pharmacy, pathology and radiology. It does not include the running costs necessary to make the bed operational, such as staffing, linen or cleaning.

Every hospital is designed to meet specific local needs, so no two will be the same, and future hospitals may have different functions and departments. It is not therefore possible from available information to give the average capital cost of providing a new bed in an existing hospital. The cost of upgrading or adapting an inpatient ward within an existing hospital should not exceed a maximum of 70 per cent. of the cost of new provision and would generally be a much lower percentage.

Under private finance initiative rules it is the responsibility of consortium bidders to cost an overall design, construction and service solution. One element of this will be the number, type and layout of hospital beds. Because costing and pricing factors will vary between PFI projects to reflect factors like design innovation, greenfield build or refurbishment and competitive pressures in the private sectors supply chain, it is not possible to provide a unit cost for a hospital bed built under PFI.

NHS Trust Budgets

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for each NHS trust in Great Britain the *(a)* total budget and *(b)* amount of budget deficit, for each year since 1995 for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [126109]

Mr. Denham: National Health Service trusts are not given budgets. They are required to break even, on an income and expenditure basis, taking one year with another.

Information on NHS trust deficits in England will be placed in the Library.

The information relating to Wales and Scotland is a matter for the devolved administrations.

Child Protection

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if his Department's register of sex offenders outlined in the Protection of Children Act 1999 will include British sex offenders who are known to have been convicted abroad; [126778]

(2) what measures he is taking to ensure that British citizens who sexually abuse children are not able to escape registration under the Protection of Children Act 1999 by travelling overseas. [126780]

Mr. Hutton: There is nothing in the Protection of Children Act 1999 which would preclude a child care worker from being referred to the Secretary of State for possible inclusion in the list to be maintained under that Act in circumstances where he has been dismissed, or has otherwise left his position, related to a conviction for sexual abuse against children committed abroad.

If a decision is taken to include a person on the list to be kept under the Protection of Children Act 1999 the name will remain on the list irrespective of where the person lives or travels.

As regards the wider question of British sex offenders convicted abroad, Part I of the Sex Offender Act 1997 does not at present require such offenders to register with the police on their return to this country. The Home Office will shortly be starting a major policy review of the Act and this question will be looked at very carefully as part of that review.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

CCTV Cameras

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee in what circumstances CCTV cameras are installed in hon. Members' offices. [126313]

Sir Sydney Chapman: No CCTV cameras are, or ever have been, installed in hon. Members' offices. Installation of such cameras in an hon. Member's office would be done only with the consent of the hon. Member concerned, and with the personal authorisation of the Serjeant at Arms.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Magistrates Courts Committees

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the predicted weighted case load and cash limit allocation for 2000–01 for each magistrates courts committee ranked by cost per case on the weighted case load used in the grant formula. [126465]

Jane Kennedy: The formula for distributing revenue grant is currently under review. The cash allocation for 2000–01 and 1999–2000 was distributed using the same proportion of the available funds as allocated for 1998–99. The weighted case load was therefore based on 1997–98 figures. Additional payments were made in cases of hardship. Weighted case load accounts for 35 per cent. of the cash allocation. The cash limit allocations by MCC are in table A, the latest cost per case information is in table B. Cash allocations are not based on cost per case. We aim to complete the review of the grant formula so that a new formula is applied to the 2001–02 allocation. We will be consulting stakeholders on the elements that should constitute the formula.

Table A: Cash limit allocations

Magistrates courts committees	*Revised cash limit 2000–01 at 100 per cent.*
Avon and Somerset	8,027,417
Barking and Dagenham	1,054,757
Barnet	1,761,392
Barnsley	1,353,526
Bedfordshire	3,081,376
Bexley	1,253,819
Brent	2,499,716
Bromley	1,569,672

Table A: Cash limit allocations

Magistrates courts committees	*Revised cash limit 2000–01 at 100 per cent.*
Cambridgeshire	3,461,107
Cheshire	4,831,675
City of London	2,347,036
Cleveland	3,989,437
Croydon	2,064,339
Cumbria	3,350,845
Derbyshire	4,297,539
Devon and Cornwall	7,389,005
Doncaster	1,990,778
Dorset	3,539,365
Durham	3,326,219
Dyfed-Powys	3,442,142
Ealing	1,856,339
East Sussex	4,058,389
Enfield	1,594,178
Essex	7,389,218
Gloucestershire	3,389,357
Gwent	3,596,672
Hampshire (New)	9,093,776
Haringey	1,916,403
Harrow	913,146
Havering	1,145,676
Hereford and Worcester	3,830,034
Hertfordshire	5,079,372
Hillingdon	1,551,170
Hounslow	1,812,834
Humberside	5,061,266
Inner London	37,484,300
Kent	7,091,588
Kingston upon Thames	1,009,570
Lancashire	7,450,875
Leicestershire	4,767,764
Lincolnshire	3,350,669
Manchester	4,745,616
Merseyside	10,216,373
Merton	2,154,383
Newham	2,139,976
Norfolk	4,429,585
North and West Manchester	7,940,109
North Wales	4,103,506
North Yorkshire	3,370,299
Northamptonshire	3,473,385
Northumbria	9,929,374
Nottinghamshire	8,200,795
Oldham	1,653,789
Redbridge	1,282,912
Richmond upon Thames	1,058,590
Rotherham	1,628,044
Sheffield	3,158,241
Shropshire	2,548,447
South Wales (New)	9,084,555
Staffordshire	5,569,068
Stockport	1,778,043
Suffolk	3,295,557
Surrey	4,801,547
Sutton	913,153
Tameside	1,666,227
Thames Valley	10,490,546
Trafford	1,313,371
Waltham Forest	1,380,069
Warwickshire	2,330,096
West Midlands	16,973,847
West Sussex	3,859,367
West Yorkshire	14,630,093
Wiltshire	3,621,690
England and Wales	331,814,415

Table B: Cost per case

Magistrates courts committees	*1999–2000 Weighted case load*	*1999–2000 Gross expenditure (£)*	*1999–2000 Cost per unit of weighted case load (£)*
City of London JR	37,343	2,086,714	55.88
Inner London Area	705,337	37,953,523	53.81
Bromley	30,975	1,647,774	53.20
Brent	49,218	2,490,085	50.59
Sutton	18,077	914,498	50.59
Barnet	34,577	1,749,086	50.58
Hounslow	41,902	2,008,890	47.94
Kingston upon Thames	21,413	1,005,068	46.94
Croydon	43,817	2,048,383	46.75
Richmond upon Thames	24,187	1,074,143	44.41
Newham	50,844	2,165,278	42.59
Suffolk	79,672	3,316,615	41.63
Merton	31,780	1,303,869	41.03
Waltham Forest	35,117	1,390,992	39.61
East Sussex	106,114	4,162,679	39.23
Hillingdon	40,238	1,569,226	39.00
Surrey	129,339	5,025,000	38.85
Redbridge	33,639	1,2[illegible],858	37.99
Havering	31,186	1,163,255	37.30
Enfield	42,597	1,582,890	37.16
Barking and Dagenham	28,081	1,037,041	36.93
North Wales	115,258	4,180,733	36.27
Bexley	36,175	1,262,848	34.91
Ealing	51,812	1,808,201	34.90
Haringey	54,822	1,907,273	34.79
Dyfed-Powys	104,270	3,379,269	32.41
Dorset	112,202	3,553,073	31.67
Bedfordshire	106,370	3,341,768	31.42
West Sussex	125,617	3,923,357	31.23
Tameside	52,249	1,609,685	30.81
Nottinghamshire	265,768	8,123,700	30.57
Cambridgeshire	115,341	3,448,394	29.90
Northamptonshire	117,209	3,444,244	29.39
Thames Valley	353,143	10,328,845	29.25
Wiltshire	125,124	3,608,012	28.84
Cheshire	177,016	5,059,214	28.58
Hertfordshire	184,246	5,233,408	28.40
Norfolk	161,518	4,531,210	28.05
Manchester	225,988	6,266,081	27.73
Warwickshire	86,138	2,384,348	27.68
Shropshire	97,766	2,659,840	27.21
Stockport	65,675	1,779,731	27.10
Cumbria	123,865	3,317,011	26.78
Gloucestershire	116,889	3,128,079	26.76
Rotherham	60,900	1,612,949	26.49
Trafford	52,774	1,381,208	26.17
Lincolnshire	133,240	3,461,023	25.98
West Midlands	680,775	17,450,676	25.63
Kent	283,765	7,264,799	25.60
Derbyshire	182,455	4,536,086	24.86
Harrow	36,190	883,938	24.42
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	383,190	9,339,010	24.37
Durham	144,004	3,437,960	23.87
Humberside	220,536	5,262,855	23.86
North Yorkshire	142,510	3,383,793	23.74
Merseyside	411,511	9,694,336	23.56
Staffordshire	237,912	5,594,140	23.51
Avon and Somerset	349,902	8,111,671	23.18
Barnsley	59,248	1,365,733	23.05
Essex	327,537	7,425,224	22.67
Hereford and Worcester	179,273	4,050,214	22.59
South Wales	411,930	9,169,279	22.26
Gwent	164,996	3,638,723	22.05
N&W Greater Manchester	365,678	8,019,428	21.93

Table B: Cost per case

Magistrates courts committees	*1999–2000 Weighted case load*	*1999–2000 Gross expenditure (£)*	*1999–2000 Cost per unit of weighted case load (£)*
Northumbria	425,620	9,236,646	21.70
Sheffield	149,246	3,208,789	21.50
Doncaster	91,618	1,956,100	21.35
Lancashire	355,853	7,414,212	20.84
Oldham	79,916	1,657,104	20.74
West Yorkshire	688,478	14,092,226	20.47
Devon and Cornwall	406,654	7,594,050	18.67
Leicestershire	252,921	4,597,220	18.18
Cleveland	212,184	3,724,598	17.55
Total	12,080,719	333,815,179	27.63

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Domestic Utility Bills

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what were the average annual domestic bills for *(a)* electricity and *(b)* gas in the Yorkshire region for each of the last three years broken down by (i) direct debit, (ii) standard quarterly credit and (iii) pre-payment meter payment methods. [126078]

Mrs. Liddell: Average annual domestic bills[1] for *(a)* electricity and *(b)* gas in cash terms in the Yorkshire region[2] for each of the last three years are as follows:

[1] Averages are weighted by customer numbers and based on all companies operating in the region.

[2] Figures are those for the Yorkshire Electricity distribution area and the North East Transco distribution zone.

£

	Payment method		
	Direct debit	*Quarterly credit*	*Prepayment meter*
Electricity[1]			
1997	250	263	289
1998	244	250	281
1999	242	246	281
Gas[2]			
1997	307	329	348
1998	277	315	331
1999	268	304	319

[1] An annual consumption level of 3,300kWh has been assumed. Customers with electric central heating are likely to consume considerably more electricity.

[2] Annual consumption level of 18,000kWh has been assumed.

These figures are published annually in the Department's annual "Digest of UK Energy Statistics" and in the "Energy Report".

Assisted Areas Map

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many regional map applications for assisted area status were rejected by the European Commission on first application by Her Majesty's Government in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999 and *(d)* 2000. [125351]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 9 June 2000]:* No regional map applications for assisted area status were rejected by the European Commission on first application for any of the years in question.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for what reason he withdrew the proposed map conferring assisted area status on North Staffordshire. [125352]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 9 June 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) on 10 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 38W.

Postal Services

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the impact of European Commission proposals to liberalise postal markets on domestic user costs. [125598]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 12 June 2000]:* The Government support greater liberalisation of the postal market however, it is important that the scope and pace of liberalisation does not undermine the universal service. As recommended by the Trade and Industry Committee we have given responsibility to the new Postal Services Commission to bring forward proposals on future liberalisation of the market in the context of its role to ensure the maintenance of the Universal Service.

Synchrotron

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the plans of Her Majesty's Government to co-operate with the French Government on the building of a new synchrotron in France; where it will be built; and what the cost to Her Majesty's Government will be. [124784]

Mr. Byers: Her Majesty's Government have no plans to co-operate with the French Government on the building of a new synchrotron in France.

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when discussions were last held concerning United Kingdom involvement in synchrotron investment in France; who was present at those discussions; and what was their content. [126439]

Mr. Byers: The issue of a possible French synchrotron was raised when my noble Friend the Minister for Science met with the French Minister for Research in Paris on the 5 May 2000. The discussions were of a general nature and in the context of the overall European requirement for large-scale scientific infrastructure. No specific proposals were discussed and no commitment was made concerning UK Government funding.

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when were discussions last held with French representatives concerning French involvement in synchrotron investment in the United Kingdom; who was present at these discussions; and what their content was. [126440]

Mr. Byers: The last discussions concerning French involvement in the New Synchrotron project were held on the 22 May 2000 at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory.

The discussions involved officials representing the three partners in the project and wide representation of the user communities. The discussions covered the detailed management arrangements to be put in place to take the project forward and a range of related technical issues.

US Traffic and Arms Regulations

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the benefits to the UK of being granted special status under the US International Traffic and Arms Regulations; and if he will make a statement. [125382]

Dr. Howells: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence on 15 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 667W-68W.

Limited Liability Partnerships

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what consultations he has had with PricewaterhouseCooper and Ernst & Young about the legislation they prepared for limited liability partnerships in Jersey; and what parts of that legislation he has incorporated in the Limited Liability Partnerships Bill [*Lords*]. [125426]

Dr. Howells: There have been no such consultations; and, while we are aware of the Jersey legislation on limited liability partnerships, this has not provided a model for the Limited Liability Partnerships Bill.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if bankrupts under restriction orders as proposed in his White Paper on bankruptcy will be able to become partners in limited liability partnerships. [126038]

Dr. Howells: Under the proposals referred to, the restrictions currently imposed on bankrupts will apply for the duration of the restriction order. As a consequence those subject to restriction orders will not be able to act in the management of a limited company or as a member of a limited liability partnership.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry by what means persons reported to the Insolvency Agency by insolvency practitioners as unfit will be prevented from participating in limited liability partnerships. [126046]

Dr. Howells: Section 7(3) of the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986 requires insolvency practitioners to report unfit conduct by directors to the Secretary of State. That requirement will exist where insolvency practitioners find misconduct by members of limited liability partnerships.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the assets of an insolvent business will be eligible for re-use by its former management trading on the basis of a limited liability partnership. [126037]

Dr. Howells: Provided an insolvent business enters formal insolvency proceedings, then those assets will fall within the estate of the insolvent business, subject to any security held by creditors over those assets. The office holder has a duty to realise those assets in such a way that returns to creditors are maximised. If the failure of the business is not the directors' fault, there was no misconduct and they pay the best possible price for the assets, then they should not be prevented from running a successor business utilising those assets.

Where assets have been transferred with the intention of putting them out of reach of its creditors then the "claw-back" provisions currently found in the Insolvency Act 1986 will apply.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry by what means he will prevent individuals under the individual voluntary arrangements as envisaged in his White Paper "Bankruptcy: A Fresh Start", from being allowed to become partners in limited liability partnerships. [126039]

Dr. Howells: Undischarged bankrupts are disqualified from acting in the management of a limited company by virtue of section 11 of the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986. It is intended that this disqualification be extended to include acting as a member of a limited liability partnership.

The majority of persons subject to individual voluntary arrangements (IVAs) are not bankrupt and are not therefore subject to this restriction.

The proposals in the White Paper to which the question refers are for the automatic annulment of the bankruptcy on the agreement to the IVA proposal by the creditors. This would then leave the member in the same position as if the bankruptcy order had not been made and they would therefore not be precluded from acting as a member of a limited liability partnership. However, it is likely that there would be a requirement for measures to deal with anyone failing to stick to the terms of his/her IVA. This might include the reinstatement of the bankruptcy order against them.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if Company Voluntary Arrangements as provided for in his Insolvency Bill will apply to limited liability partnerships; and what measures he proposes to stop companies operating under a Company Voluntary Arrangements transferring to limited liability partnership status. [126041]

Dr. Howells: The Insolvency Bill does not specifically refer to limited liability partnerships. However, limited liability partnerships will be able to enter company voluntary arrangements (CVAs).

A company that is subject to a CVA is subject to a court procedure. It is likely that the conversion to a limited liability partnership would require the revocation of the CVA prior to any conversion. In considering this application the court would consider whether the aims of the CVA were best served by the company being able to convert.

Small Businesses

Mr. Pollard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent measures he has taken to increase the ability of small businesses in the United Kingdom to trade competitively in European markets. [126018]

Mr. Byers: The Government have been working closely with our European partners to improve the environment for small businesses within the European Union. The Lisbon Economic Summit in March made significant progress in this area when agreement was reached to:

draw up a European Charter for Small Firms to respond specifically to their needs;

simplify the regulatory environment at both national and community level;

create a Community Patent which is simple and inexpensive to obtain; and

update public procurement rules with the particular aim of making them more accessible to SMEs.

The European Charter for Small Firms is due to be endorsed at the Feira Council this week. It will send out a clear signal that the European Union is serious about bringing about an environment in which small firms and entrepreneurship can flourish. The Charter will pledge action by the Commission and the member states which addresses the specific needs of small business in the above areas, as well as in others such as skills, taxation and finance, and business support.

The DTI continues to focus much of its efforts on helping business, including small business, to access markets in Europe.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the base level is against which his Department's public service target for 2002 of increasing the productivity and profitability of small and medium sized enterprises assisted by the Small Business Service is to be measured. [125921]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 14 June 2000]:* This Public Sector Target states that DTI will increase the productivity and profitability of Small Business Service' assisted small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) relative to all SMEs by 1 per cent. per annum from a base level of 12 per cent. for productivity and 14 per cent. for profitability.

This target relates to businesses assisted by the Business Links and was established on the basis of the findings of the Business Link Value for Money Evaluation (1998).

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what actions his Department is taking to achieve its key priority for 2000–01 of reducing the burden of regulation on small businesses; and what the criteria are for evaluating success. [125911]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 14 June 2000]:* The Small Business Service (SBS) has a particular duty on behalf of small businesses to examine regulatory proposals put forward by Government Departments to ensure that they do not impose an unnecessary or disproportionate burden on small businesses. This will be achieved by promoting the "think small first" principle. The SBS will also ensure that compliance is made easier through the provision of comprehensible and accessible guidance and that the enforcement regime is appropriate.

By 2001, the SBS will establish a Regulation Index of the impact of regulation on small business. This will measure the cumulative burden of regulation on small businesses, will inform priorities for simplification and will determine the future criteria for minimising the burden of red tape.

In addition, my Department will continue to look for opportunities to remove unnecessary burdens in the legislation for which we are responsible. For example we are increasing the statutory audit threshold for companies from £350,000 to £1 million. This will apply to financial periods ending on or after 26 July, and should benefit up to 150,000 companies.

BA-KLM Merger

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he plans to refer the proposed merger between BA and KLM to the competition authorities. [126218]

Dr. Howells: I understand that BA and KLM have announced that they were entering into provisional talks but that they have not yet reached any agreement. Until they do it is not possible to say which competition rules will apply.

Science Base

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the overall international ranking has been of the United Kingdom's science and engineering base in terms of quality, relevance and cost-effectiveness in each of the last four years. [125923]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 14 June 2000]:* Comparisons at an international level are complicated by the different organisational structure within each country corresponding to the UK Science and Engineering Base, and hence rankings have to be treated with some care. We are continuing to refine our data, but the currently available information in terms of the following measures for the G7 countries (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, UK and US) is given in the table for the years 1994 to 1997, the latest year for which information is available for all the countries.

	Quality	*Relevance*	*Cost effectiveness*
1994	2	1	1
1995	2	1	1
1996	2	1	1
1997	2	1	1

Notes:

1. Quality—total number of citations to papers originating from the UK, or having at least one author in the UK.
2. Relevance—Proportion of funds for Higher Education Research and Development (HERD) from non-Government sources.
3. Cost-effectiveness—papers published per £1 million of science base expenditure.

E-commerce

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the sectors in which e-commerce impact studies to help small businesses connect to the digital marketplace are to be carried out in 2000–01. [125969]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 15 June 2000]:* Thirteen studies are under way, (steel; chemicals; aerospace; metal forming and finishing; downstream gas; upstream oil and gas; biotechnology; motor vehicle retailing; clothing supply chain; furniture; exhibitions and events; telecommunication services and electronics manufacturing).

Further studies, in sectors still to be decided, will begin in the second half of the year.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the estimated cost is of the multi-channel marketing campaign to help small businesses connect to the digital marketplace; and when the campaign will be implemented. [125975]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 15 June 2000]:* The budget has been agreed for the multi-channel marketing campaign for this financial year is £1.0 million. A similar amount has been earmarked for the following two financial years. Staff have recently been recruited to implement this campaign and are currently prioritising which channels DTI should be working with. The campaign will start to be delivered over the remaining months of this financial year through different channels as joint plans are agreed.

This activity results from one of 60 recommendations in the 'e-commerce@its.best.uk' report. Progress on these recommendations is published regularly on the e-envoy's website *www.e-envoy.gov.uk* and more detail is given under 'Marketing' on the Information Society Initiative website *www.isi.gov.uk*.

Animal Welfare

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to ensure his European Union partners renegotiate WTO rules in respect of animal welfare; and if he will make a statement. [126515]

Mr. Caborn: The UK fully supports the EU approach, as set out in the conclusions of the General Affairs Council on 25 October 1999, that commits the EU to take forward the issue of farm animal welfare in WTO negotiations. The UK and EU will press for this objective in the work of the WTO, including the agriculture negotiations which have started this year.

Renewable Energy

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will *(a)* raise his target for electricity generated from renewable resources and *(b)* remove waste incineration from the Government's definition of renewable energy. [126275]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government have the target of obtaining 10 per cent. of UK electricity from renewable sources by 2010, against a current figure of just under 3 per cent., subject to the cost of this being acceptable to consumers. The target set is challenging, and the Government have no plan to raise it.

We do not intend to exclude energy from waste incineration from our definition of renewable energy. Wastes produced by households, industry and commerce pose a difficult problem. Our draft national waste strategy provides for waste reduction, materials recycling and energy recovery. Where there is no better alternative, using waste materials to produce energy can reduce environmental problems and at the same time save fossil fuels.

Insolvency

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to introduce *(a)* legislation and *(b)* a code of practice that will prohibit accountants acting as a reporting accountants for banks from acting as receivers and liquidators of the businesses upon which they have reported. [126483]

Dr. Howells: The question of whether reporting or investigating accountants should be permitted to accept subsequent appointment as administrative receivers of the company concerned has been considered by the working group established to undertake a review of company rescue and business reconstruction mechanisms. The report of the working group will be published for further consultation in due course.

A bank does not have any inherent right to appoint a liquidator. Where the company is insolvent, this is usually a matter for the general body of the company's unsecured creditors.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the fees collected by the receivers and liquidators of BCCI. [126491]

Dr. Howells: The liquidators of Bank of Credit and Commerce International SA in England and Wales make an annual report to the Secretary of State pursuant to Regulation 14 of the Insolvency Regulations 1994. The report is made up to the anniversary of the making of the winding up order against the company. The latest report submitted covers the period to 15 January 1999 and shows that the total liquidators' remuneration paid to that date was US$244.5 million. Such remuneration has been approved either by the court or the Liquidation Committee of creditors.

A report for the period to 15 January 2000 is expected to be submitted shortly. Copies of the liquidators' report are available to creditors of the company.

Electrical Safety

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what changes have been made to *(a)* the Plugs and Sockets etc. (Safety) Regulations 1994 and *(b)* the Electrical Equipment (Safety) Regulations 1994 since their implementation; and if he will make a statement. [126023]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 15 June 2000]:* The information is as follows:

(a) The Plugs and Sockets etc. (Safety) Regulations 1994 are national Regulations and no amendments have been made since they came into force. However, the Regulations recognise that British Standards that are referenced in the Regulations may need to be revised or amended from time to time and they therefore make provision for such reference to be construed as a reference to the revised or amended standard where the amendment or revision has been approved by the Secretary of State. Ministerial approval of the revision of a number of British Standards was granted in 1998. The Department will be initiating a review of the Plugs and Sockets etc. (Safety) Regulations 1994 before the end of the year, and will be consulting with industry and other interested parties.

(*b*) The Electrical Equipment (Safety) Regulations 1994 implement into UK law the European Council Directive 73/23/EEC, normally referred to as the Low Voltage Directive. No amendments have been made to the Electrical Equipment (Safety) Regulations 1994 since they came into force, and as the appropriate measures are in place I have no plans to review the Regulations.

Mobile Phones

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he plans to take to inform consumers about technical matters including the absorption rate of radio frequencies on mobile phones, to ensure they can make informed choices regarding mobile phone use; and if he will make a statement. [126274]

Mr. Byers: The Government are committed to providing consumers with sufficient information on mobile phones and health in order that they may make informed choices when purchasing and using a mobile phone.

The Government are supporting the European electrical standard setting body, CENLEC, in developing a standard for measuring the Specific Absorption Rate (SAR) values of mobile phones. (The SAR refers to the rate of absorption by the human body of electromagnetic radiation). The standard will be adopted in the UK once it has been finally approved. The Government believe that the consumer should have access to the SAR values when considering purchasing a mobile phone. The Government will expect SAR measurements to be displayed at all points of sale and with each mobile phone and on the world wide web. The Government consider that the SAR value should be viewed in context, for example, by comparing the SAR value against the recommended exposure limits. We will work with industry to ensure this information is provided.

In addition, we have already started discussions on the provision of information on health aspects of mobile phone technology. This information will be provided in a widely available leaflet and will include details of how the technology works, including a description of what is meant by "Specific Absorption Rate". We will be working with the industry to provide the technology information in easy to understand language.

Young Entrepreneurs

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures he is putting in place to support young entrepreneurs (*a*) nationally and (*b*) in Teeside; and if he will make a statement. [126494]

Mr. Byers: My Department is committed to helping young entrepreneurs throughout the UK. For example, we are supporting Enterprise Insight the business-led campaign, which is informing young people about the challenges and rewards of starting a business as well as developing entrepreneurial skills and helping businesses to grow. Enterprise Insight has set up a Regional Team for the North East which is currently developing a calendar of events.

My Department is also supporting the Young Enterprise Innovation Awards final in July and helping Young Enterprise with the pilot development of Graduate Enterprise into a national programme. Teeside University is taking part in the pilot scheme.

This month the awards ceremony for the European Awards for the Spirit of Enterprise took place, which DTI supported. Young people from every region participated.

Workplace Bullying

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action is being taken by his Department to address the problem of bullying in the workplace, what recent representations he has received on this matter; and if he will make a statement. [126495]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My Department receives occasional representations about workplace bullying, which I strongly deplore. Existing legislation can address it in a number of ways. For instance, the Public Order Act 1986 and the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 provide remedies against harassment, while the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974 places a duty on all employers to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their employees. In addition, we would always encourage employers to put in place disciplinary and grievance procedures which allow employees to raise concerns and employers to address them. The Employment Relations Act 1999 contains a provision giving workers the right to be accompanied at disciplinary and grievance hearings by a fellow worker or trade union official of their choice, and workers who choose to exercise their right will be protected against victimisation by their employer, as will those who accompany or seek to accompany a worker. Our intention is to bring the new right into force on 4 September.

Post Offices

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many (*a*) post offices and (*b*) sub-post offices there were in (i) Great Britain and (ii) each parliamentary constituency in (1) 1999 and (2) 2000; and if he will make a statement. [126293]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand from the Post Office that at end March 1999 there were 600 crown post offices and 18,175 sub-post offices in the United Kingdom and that the corresponding figures for end March 2000 were 598 crown offices and 17,795 sub-post offices.

I also understand that the most recent data on the numbers of post offices in parliamentary constituencies in Great Britain relate to October 1999. These figures for England and Wales were published on 29 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 22W, and for Scotland on 20 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 382W.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many (*a*) post offices and (*b*) sub-post offices there were in (i) Great Britain and (ii) each region in each year since 1987; and if he will make a statement. [126295]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand from the Post Office that the total numbers of Crown post offices and sub-post offices in the United Kingdom at the end of March of each year since 1987 were:

End March	*Crown offices*	*Sub-post offices*
1987	1,503	19,708
1988	1,499	19,572
1989	1,493	19,537

End March	Crown offices	Sub-post offices
1990	1,339	19,532
1991	1,167	19,471
1992	1,019	19,141
1993	917	19,041
1994	799	18,975
1995	699	18,908
1996	653	18,761
1997	606	18,645
1998	601	18,407
1999	600	18,175
2000	598	17,795

I also understand from the Post Office that figures for post offices by Post Office Counters regions are only available from April 1994. I have obtained lists of the figures from that date and have arranged for copies to be placed in the Library of the House.

EU Nickel Directive

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will publish regulations required under the EU Nickel Directive (94/27/EC). [126815]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I plan to sign and lay before Parliament by the end of June the Dangerous Substances and Preparations (Nickel) (Safety) Regulations 2000, which will implement the Nickel Directive (94/27/EC).

Electricity Supply

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the supply obligation on electricity generators; and what plans he has to review the buy-out option available to companies supplying electricity. [126099]

Mrs. Liddell: The Utilities Bill will provide the powers to place an obligation on licensed suppliers of electricity to supply a proportion of their supplies from renewable sources of energy. The new provisions will enable suppliers to buy-out all or part of their obligation as an alternative to supplying renewables electricity as a means of protecting consumers from excessive costs. Later this year, I intend to consult on the level of the obligation, the level of the buy-out price option and the system of allocation by which the proceeds from the buy-out payments will be recycled.

Business Links

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many businesses used Business Links during 1998–99 in each region, counting each business only once. [123534]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 24 May 2000]:* The table shows the total number of businesses assisted in each region by Business Links in each quarter during 1998–99, England figures and averages are also included.

Total number of businesses helped by Business Links—1998–99

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4	Average
England	88,754	93,920	102,267	108,639	98,395
Eastern	10,706	10,999	11,908	11,986	11,400
East Midlands	6,372	6,387	6,800	7,076	6,659
London	8,716	8,851	10,837	11,473	9,969
North East	4,658	4,309	4,389	4,992	4,587
North West	16,959	19,401	19,034	19,531	18,731
South East	14,075	14,684	15,803	16,366	15,232
South West	7,615	8,799	10,915	11,186	9,629
West Midlands	10,714	11,876	12,699	13,887	12,294
Yorks and Humber	8,939	8,614	9,882	12,142	9,894

Part of the SBS performance Information requirement is to count all businesses using Business Link services for non-trivial activity. Only one use per business is recorded during each quarter. The first repeat use by a business of Business Link Services in a later quarter is also recorded. Because a business can appear more than once during the year, figures cannot be totalled across quarters to provide cumulative figures without double counting.

Wind Power

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent studies he has undertaken relating to the extension of small and medium-scale wind power schemes in the UK; and if he will make a statement about the Government's strategy to secure the maximum benefit from such electricity generation schemes. [126077]

Mrs. Liddell: My Department have funded under their New and Renewable Energy Programme several studies on small and medium-scale wind power schemes in the UK. A list of reports is as set out.

As part of its overall strategy on renewable energy, the Government are taking powers in the Utilities Bill to impose an Obligation on licensed electricity suppliers to supply a specified proportion of their electricity from renewable sources. Wind energy is an established technology and is expected to make a substantial contribution.

Title	Contractor	Report number
Social implications of a wind driven generator located in a residential area	Milton Keynes Development Corporation and University of Southampton	ETSU WN 5097-PI
Feasibility of industrial wind energy schemes—final report. 1998	Garrad Hassan and Partners Ltd.	W/25/00488/REP
Geographically distributed wind farms: a feasibility study for developers. 1997	Waltons and Morse	W/32/00442/REP
Wind turbines and load management on weak networks. 1996	Econnect Ltd.	W/33/00421/REP

Title	Contractor	Report number
Appraisal of the world wind turbine market. 1996	Garrad Hassan and Partners Ltd.	W/45/00479/REP/2
The development of community ownership in a wind energy project at Harlock Hill, Cumbria. 1997	The Wind Company Ltd.	K/FR/00117/REP
Financing small renewable energy projects—a review of methods and recent experience	Science Policy Research Unit	K/FR/00053/REP
The development of community ownership in a wind energy project at Harlock Hill, Cumbria	The Wind Company Ltd.	K/FR/00117/REP
The potential contribution of renewable energy schemes to rural diversification—General Review	ECOTEC Research and Consulting Ltd.	K/PL/00107/REP

Note:
Reports available from the DTI New and Renewable Energy Programme Enquiries Bureau, ETSU, Harwell, Oxon OX11 0RA (Telephone 01235 432430)

SOCIAL SECURITY

State Pension

14. **Mr. Crausby:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people he expects will gain from the Government's proposed state second pension. [124959]

24. **Ms Southworth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what action his Department is taking to help low-paid people to provide for their retirement. [124971]

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he is taking to help low-paid people provide for their retirement. [124955]

Mr. Rooker: The State Second Pension will reform SERPS to help around 14 million low and moderate earners to build up much greater pension entitlements. In addition, around four million carers and long-term disabled people with broken work records will be able to build up a second pension for the first time.

21. **Mr. Burns:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the increase in the state retirement pension in April. [124967]

Mr. Rooker: The basic State Retirement Pension has been increased in line with inflation, as is the normal practice.

Our first priority has been to concentrate help on the poorest pensioners, which is why we introduced the minimum income guarantee and increased it in line with earnings. In addition, we have introduced a range of measures to help all pensioners and poorer pensioners in particular.

27. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has received regarding this year's increment in the basic state pension. [124974]

Mr. Rooker: I refer the hon. Member to my written answer of 13 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 609W.

30. **Mr. Corbyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he plans to announce the pension increase for 2001–02. [124977]

Mr. Rooker: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is required to review the levels of benefit each year. The results of my right hon. Friend's review will be announced at the normal time in the normal way.

Lone Parents

15. **Mr. Russell Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has for future development of the New Deal for Lone Parents. [124961]

Angela Eagle: Lone parents will benefit from a raft of measures to be introduced during 2001 through the New Deal for Lone Parents and Working Families Tax Credit. These include a £15 training premium, an increase in the Income Support earnings disregard, and help with funding for child care costs for a lone parent moving into part-time work. And all lone parents working 16 hours a week or more will get at least £155, and £214 if they work 35 hours or more.

20. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what his estimate is of the total savings to date to his Department as a result of the New Deal for Lone Parents. [124966]

Angela Eagle: The independent evaluation of the prototype phase of the New Deal for Lone Parents confirms that the prototype clawed back nearly 90 per cent. of its total costs and, looking at operating costs only, it made a surplus of about £1.8 million.

The programme's national phase is being evaluated separately. It too will include a cost-benefit analysis and will be available in spring 2002.

36. **Siobhain McDonagh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what measures his Department is taking to help lone parents obtain employment. [124984]

Angela Eagle: As part of a comprehensive strategy to help lone parents obtain employment and make work pay we have introduced the New Deal for Lone Parents, the Lone Parents Benefit Run-On and Working Families Tax Credit. In the Budget we announced a guaranteed minimum income of £155 a week from next April for lone parents working 16 hours a week or more; £214 a week for lone parents working 35 hours or more. We also announced an increase in the earnings disregard in Income Support for lone parents from £15 to £20, funding for child care costs for the first year that lone parents move into part-time work and a £15 premium to help lone parents train for work.

Fraud

18. **Miss Kirkbride:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the level of fraud within the social security system. [124964]

Mr. Rooker: Previous estimates have shown that £2 billion a year has definitely been lost through fraud. A further £2 to £3 billion may have been lost in cases where fraud is strongly suspected.

We are now measuring the level of fraud and error, in Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance, the two most vulnerable benefits, on a continuous monthly basis. The last figures published by the Government Statistical Service for the 12 months ending March 1999 show the level of fraud and error in these benefits was £1.37 billion or 8.9 per cent. of the total benefit paid.

We have set a target for reducing this fraud and error by 10 per cent. by 2002 and 30 per cent. by 2007.

23. **Mr. Leigh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on his progress in tackling social security fraud; and which areas are his priorities. [124970]

Mr. Rooker: We are determined to combat fraud and error in the Social Security system.

We have a comprehensive strategy, to safeguard the system from the first to the final payment. For example, we are insisting claimants produce more evidence before Income Support is paid, which will save £1 billion over the Parliament. This comprehensive strategy will help to strengthen public confidence, and thereby encourage their support.

33. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many additional fraud inspectors the Benefits Agency has employed since 1997. [124981]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

Number of staff employed in the Benefit Fraud Investigation Service (BFIS) and in the Benefit Agency Security Investigation Service (BASIS) for the financial years from 1997–98

Year	*Administration*	*Investigation*	*Total*
1997–98	1,069	3,778	4,847
1998–99	1,697	3,776	5,473
1999–2000	1,611	3,699	5,310

All Benefits Agency staff involved in processing and paying benefits have a role in preventing and identifying fraud and abuse.

Child Support Agency

19. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many men have been required by the Child Support Agency to take a second blood test to determine the paternity of a child. [124965]

Angela Eagle: The CSA cannot require non-resident parents to take a blood test. In cases of disputed paternity, the CSA will offer a DNA test as a means of resolving the issue, but the alleged parent is not required to take the test. Under our child support reforms, alleged parents who refuse to take a DNA test will be presumed to be the parent of the child in question and child support action will follow.

Community Orders

22. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what safeguards he will introduce to ensure the welfare of dependants of individuals who have had benefit withdrawn for non-compliance with community orders. [124968]

Angela Eagle: Hardship payments will be available for people in vulnerable groups and others at risk of hardship who have had their Jobseeker's Allowance or Training Allowance withdrawn. Similar arrangements already exist for making hardship payments where Jobseeker's Allowance is withdrawn as a result of employment sanctions. Income Support will not be withdrawn altogether, but will be reduced by 40 per cent. or 20 per cent. of the single person's adult rate, subject to their circumstances; premiums for children, other members of the family, disability etc. are not affected. JSA hardship payments are calculated in a similar manner. All claimants entitled to Housing Benefit when sanctioned would continue to receive it.

Invalid Care Allowance

25. **Mr. McWalter:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proposals he has to up-rate the £50 earnings limit for those who claim Invalid Care Allowance. [124972]

Mr. Bayley: We have no plans to do so. However we understand the need to ensure that financial support for carers remains adequate. Our National Strategy committed us to keeping financial support for carers, including Invalid Care Allowance, under review and we will continue to do that.

Minimum Income Guarantee

26. **Ms Rosie Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the progress of the campaign to increase take-up of the minimum income guarantee. [124973]

Mr. Bayley: Since the launch of the Minimum Income Guarantee Take-Up Campaign was announced at the end of March, there have already been around 50,000 calls to the tele-claim centre and 24,000 Minimum Income Guarantee claim packs have been sent to pensioners.

28. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners are in receipt of the minimum income guarantee in the North-West region. [124975]

Mr. Bayley: There are 226,000 pensioners receiving the minimum income guarantee in the North-West Government Office Region.

34. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the effect of the minimum income guarantee take-up campaign. [124982]

Mr. Bayley: The minimum income guarantee take-up campaign is central to our strategy for tackling pensioner poverty.

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what indicator he will use to judge the success of his Department's efforts to increase take-up of the minimum income guarantee. [124960]

Mr. Bayley: We will carry out a comprehensive evaluation of the minimum income guarantee take-up campaign early next year.

Pensioners Tax Credit

29. **Mr. Hope:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on proposals to develop a pensioners' tax credit. [124976]

Mr. Rooker: We believe that pensioners who have worked hard to provide for their own retirement should be rewarded rather than penalised. We intend to consult later in the year on proposals for a pensioner credit that will reward those who have succeeded in building up modest pensions or other savings.

Child Poverty

31. **Mr. Pond:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he is taking to alleviate poverty among children in lone parent families. [124978]

Angela Eagle: Children of lone parent families are benefiting from the additional £7 billion we are spending on tax and benefit measures to help all families with children.

The best route out of poverty is through work. The New Deal for Lone Parents, combined with other tax and benefit measures to make sure work pays, will mean more children get the best possible start in life. These measures are a major step in achieving the Government's commitment towards eradicating child poverty, and include:

Child Benefit (CHB): 36 per cent. increase in rate for eldest child over the period 1997 to 2000. Further above inflation rise from April 2000—CHB now worth £15 pw for eldest child and £10 for subsequent children.

Income-related benefits: under-11 allowance up by £4.70 from last October, and equalised with allowances for children aged 11–16 from April 2000. Support for children under 11 in the income-related benefits has gone up by over 50 per cent. in two years. From October 2000, the child allowance will rise again by £4.35, helping over 3 million children whose parents are on Income Support or Jobseeker's Allowance (Income Based).

Income Support run-on: to be paid for the first two weeks of work to help lone parents make the transition from benefits to work.

Earnings disregards: April 2001, the amount that lone parents on Income Support can earn before loosing part of their benefit increases from £15 to £20 per week.

Sure Start Maternity Grant: April 2000, payments doubled to £200, and rise again this autumn to £300.

Working Families Tax Credit: under-11 credit increased by £1.10 over and above indexation from April 2000. Credit for all children under 16 will rise by £4.35 from June 2000. Child maintenance is completely disregarded.

Childcare Tax Credit: part of WFTC, 70 per cent. of child care costs up to a maximum of £100 for one child and £150 for two or more.

Child Support Maintenance: reform legislation for child support currently before Parliament. New arrangements will allow lone parents on IS to keep up to £10 a week of any maintenance received.

Child Tax Credit: to be introduced from April 2001, worth up to £442 a year.

In addition, £190 million has been invested in the New Deal for Lone Parents over this Parliament, and from May this year invitation letters will go to lone parents with children aged 3 and 4, as well as those with children aged 5 and upwards.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list for *(a)* Great Britain and *(b)* each region, the number of children who live in households with income below half of the UK average, for each year since 1979. [126327]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is contained in the Department's Household Below Average Income series which is available in the Library.

Winter Fuel Payments

32. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners are eligible for winter fuel allowance. [124980]

Angela Eagle: Last winter around 10 million pensioners received a winter fuel payment. As a result of extending the scheme to eligible households containing someone aged 60 or over, the number of people who can benefit will increase by up to 1.5 million. We will also make backdated payments to up to 1.9 million people from the start of the scheme in the 1997–98 winter.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 13 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 608–09W, for what reason the date of birth of a person as recorded on the NIRS2 computer system is not regarded as sufficient proof of age for purposes of a claim for a winter fuel payment. [126574]

Angela Eagle: The Departmental Central Index (DCI) has information about all people who have a National Insurance number.

The NIRS computer system is not used directly by Benefits Agency (BA) staff for Winter Fuel purposes. Any information held on the NIRS system is, however, automatically transferred to DCI, and so once this transfer has taken place the information available to Benefit Agency staff on DCI will be the same as that held on NIRS.

Where the date of birth held on DCI has been verified, then this is used as proof of age when considering entitlement to a Winter Fuel Payment (WFP).

There are a considerable number of records on DCI where although the date of birth is recorded, it is not verified. In these instances it will be necessary for the Agency to obtain verification of the date of birth from the person applying for a WFP.

Benefits Agency

35. **Dr. Naysmith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he is taking to improve the ways in which the Benefits Agency communicates with the public. [124983]

Angela Eagle: Much has already been done to improve communications—but there remains much more to do.

We are improving the way we notify and explain decisions to people. We have re-designed leaflets around age groups and life events instead of benefits, making them simpler and easier to follow. A similar structure is planned for our website.

Stakeholder Pensions

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what progress his Department is making with its proposals for stakeholder pensions. [124963]

Mr. Rooker: The Stakeholder Pension Schemes Regulations 2000 were laid on 25 May. Work is progressing for stakeholder pensions to be available from April 2001.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will set out the assumptions behind the predicted stakeholder pension pay-outs published by the Financial Services Authority; [126562]

(2) what is the expected monthly stakeholder pension for those contributing *(a)* £30 per month and *(b)* £40 per month consistent with Decision Tree 3 of the stakeholder discussion paper published by the Financial Services Authority. [126561]

Mr. Rooker: The assumptions on which the illustrative pension figures are based are listed on page 14 of the discussion paper "The FSA's approach to the regulation of the conduct of stakeholder pension business" published on 23 May 2000.

The estimated monthly pension figures in decision tree three are proportionate to the level of contributions (subject to rounding). The estimated pension figures for alternative levels of contributions can therefore be calculated from the information given. For example the expected pension outcomes for a 20 year old contributing £30 a month would be £250 for retirement at 65, and £172 for retirement at 60.

Bridging Allowance

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the current level of the Bridging Allowance; and if he will make a statement. [124881]

Mr. Wicks: I have been asked to reply.

The Bridging Allowance was introduced to provide short-term help for young people awaiting a training place. It is a national scheme, payable for up to eight weeks only. It is not a form of social security benefit and was never intended to support young people in any way over a long period of time.

The Department is currently taking forward the recommendations in the Social Exclusion Unit's "Bridging the Gap" report: to consider the rationalisation of financial support for young people. As part of this work we will be looking at the future of all financial support available to young people including the Bridging Allowance.

Social Fund

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the gross discretionary Social Fund budget for 2000–01 will be, broken down by *(a)* the community care grant *(b)* budgeting loans and *(c)* crisis loans. [125287]

Angela Eagle: The gross discretionary Social Fund budget for 2000–01 is £596 million, which will be funded by Annually Managed Expenditure of £138.2 million and loan recoveries of £457.8 million. The community care grant budget is £100 million and the gross loans budget is £494 million. Both budgeting loans and crisis loans are paid from the same budget.

A contingency reserve of £2 million has been retained centrally to provide additional help to any Benefits Agency Districts that face unexpected and unplanned expenditure as a result of a local emergency or disaster.

Details of individual Benefits Agency District budget allocations were placed in the Library on 3 April.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what have been the administrative costs of the Disability Living Allowance in each of the last five years. [124710]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of Disability Living Allowance is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Brian Donohoe, dated 15 June 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what have been the administrative costs of the Disability Living Allowance in each of the last five years.

For the years 1995/1996 through to 1999/2000 the cost of administering the benefit was £104.78 million, £130.99 million, £125.47 million, £125.67 million and £142.5 million respectively. The figures are inclusive of Disability Living Allowance and Attendance Allowance costs. The totals cannot be apportioned into DLA and AA separately.

As you may be aware we have recently introduced new procedures for assessing claims for DLA/AA to try and improve the accuracy of decision-making. We want to get decisions right first time so that fewer cases go to reconsideration or appeal. Inevitably this has led to some delays in processing cases and the Benefits Agency have been taking action to reduce the backlog as soon as possible. This is the reason for the increase in costs for 1999/2000.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what measurements of the time taken to process an application for Disability Living Allowance have been made in each of the last five years. [124709]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of Disability Living Allowance is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Brian Donohoe, dated 15 June 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what measurements of the time taken to process an application for Disability Living Allowance (DLA) have been made in each of the last five years.

For the years 1996/97 through to 1999/2000 the average number of days taken to clear an application for DLA has been 31, 34, 35 and 43 respectively.

As you may be aware we have recently introduced new procedures for assessing claims for DLA/AA to try and improve the accuracy of decision-making. We want to get decisions right first time so that fewer cases go to reconsideration or appeal. Inevitably this has led to some delays in processing cases. These delays will hopefully reduce as staff become accustomed to the new procedures and we are taking action to achieve this as soon as possible.

I hope this is helpful.

Child Benefit

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the level at which a family premium for families with one or more children under the age of five years could be introduced into the Child Benefit system by the expenditure of £600 million *(a)* assuming no changes to levels of mean-tested benefits and *(b)* assuming corresponding changes to levels of mean-tested benefits. [125284]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Weekly value of family premium

	£
No corresponding increase in means-tested benefits	5.70
With corresponding increase in means-tested benefits	4.20

Notes:

1. The figures provided do not make allowance for the additional administrative and system change costs.

2. The proportion of families with a child under the age of five has been estimated from the February 2000 5 per cent. scan of the Child Benefit computer system.

3. Proportions of families on income-related benefits who have a child under the age of five have been estimated from the February 2000 5 per cent. scans of the Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance computer systems and the May 1998 1 per cent. sample of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit claims.

4. The overall case loads underpinning the estimates have been controlled to forecast 2001–02 Child Benefit case loads.

5. Value of family premium rounded to the nearest 10 pence.

Surveys

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much his Department is spending in the current financial year on representative surveys of its customers; how much was spent in *(a)* 1998–99 and *(b)* 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [125534]

Mr. Rooker: Details of representative surveys of customers and other research carried out under the Department's Research Programme can be found in the Research Yearbook published annually. The information includes costs and objectives. The most recent Yearbook was published in December 1999 and includes all projects undertaken in 1998–99. A copy is available in the Library.

New surveys commissioned under the Research Programme are normally subject to a competitive tender procedure. This year's commissioning process is under way and therefore the costs for the current financial year are unavailable. The remaining expenditure on representative surveys under the Research Programme can be provided only at disproportionate cost. This is because, for a number of projects, customer surveys are carried out as part of a wider programme of work and disaggregated figures for the survey costs are not held centrally.

The Department also undertakes representative surveys of customers that are not funded through the Research Programme. Information on their costs is shown in the table.

Spending on representative surveys of customers by DSS agencies, the Appeals Service and Corporate Communications

£000

	1998–99	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Benefits Agency[1]	450	474	480
Child Support Agency[2]	–	20	–
War Pensions Agency[3]	21	7	–
Appeals Service[4]	–	–	–
DSS Corporate Communications[5]	204	94	–

Note:

All amounts are rounded to the nearest thousand and exclude VAT.

Sources:

[1] Benefits Agency (BA) Customer Service Team. Figures include field, computer and data collation costs and, as internal costs, are not liable for VAT. Figures are for national surveys only. BA Directorates may conduct local surveys but costs are not held centrally and could be produced only at disproportionate cost.

[2] Child Support Agency (CSA). The figure represents a customer survey commissioned by CSA Scotland and North East England Business Unit.

[3] War Pensions Agency (WPA). As part of its Business Plan for 2000–01, the WPA will conduct research to identify the services customers require, and will act on the findings. The research has yet to be commissioned.

[4] The Appeals Service (AS). AS will commission a customer survey later this year but costs are not yet available.

[5] DSS Corporate Communications. The total for 1998–99 includes a small element of qualitative research which it has not been possible to itemise separately. In the current financial year some surveys will be commissioned subject to a competitive tender procedure and cost estimates cannot therefore be provided.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost, including the administrative costs, of restoring pre-1997 social security entitlements to asylum seekers instead of the vouchers system, *(a)* per asylum seeker and *(b)* in total annually; if he will set out the assumptions underlying the calculations and the basis for these assumptions; and if he will make a statement. [125701]

Mr. Bayley: It is not possible to provide a reliable estimate of the costs of restoring pre-1996 social security entitlements to asylum seekers. This is because it is not possible reliably to determine what effect the changes made to the support arrangements for asylum seekers in 1996 and those introduced in April 2000 have had in deterring asylum applications.

Bilateral Social Security Agreement

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list for the most recent date for which figures are available the number of people from each of the successor states to the former Yugoslavia who were claiming social security benefits in the United Kingdom under the 1958 bilateral social security agreement. [126538]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested from the Department's records. These are held on a computer system which identifies the country of current residence, but does not identify whether or not a reciprocal agreement has been used to enhance title to UK benefits.

The records do show how many customers we have living in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, but without examination of each individual case we cannot say whether they have benefited from the agreement.

Numbers living in the countries of the former Yugoslavia

	Number
Republic of Slovenia	88
Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina	25
Republic of Croatia	229
The Former Republic of Macedonia	23
The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia	473

Income Support

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost of making income support mortgage interest payments available after a two months' wait to homeowners who had taken out mortgage payment protection insurance but had suffered an uninsurable event. [125298]

Mr. Bayley: It is not possible to say how many people with mortgage protection insurance policies would suffer an uninsurable event.

Waste Recycling

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage of waste produced by his Department was *(a)* re-used and *(b)* recycled in the last year for which figures are available. [126634]

Mr. Bayley: The vast majority of the Department's waste is paper. Of this approximately 70 per cent. is recycled.

Pensioner Incomes

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list for *(a)* Great Britain and *(b)* each region, the number of pensioners who live in households with income below half of the UK average, for each year since 1979. [126326]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is contained in the Department's Household Below Average Income series which is available in the Library.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Kosovan Refugees

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of Kosovan refugees who have returned home from the UK in the last 12 months have gone back to *(a)* their own homes and *(b)* temporary accommodation; and if he will make a statement. [126079]

Mrs. Roche: Up to 15 June, 2,177 Kosovans had returned permanently from the United Kingdom, of whom 1,731 had arrived under the United Nations High Commission for Refugees Humanitarian Evacuation Programme. According to a Refugee Council survey of permanent returnees on the point of departure up to 9 June, 59 per cent. would be staying in their own house, 36 per cent. would be staying with relatives or friends and 5 per cent. did not specify where they were staying.

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the advice he has received from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees concerning her recommendations as regards the return of Kosovan refugees. [126292]

Mrs. Roche: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has recently issued two papers which address the issue of the return of Kosovan refugees: "Kosovo Albanians in Asylum countries: UNHCR Recommendations as regards Return"; and, UNHCR's "Background Note on Ethnic Albanians Who are in Continued Need of International Protection". Both papers were issued in March 2000, and copies have been placed in the Library.

Metropolitan Police

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) when the medical standards required to join the Metropolitan police were last reviewed; and what plans there are to update them; [126200]

(2) how many applicants to join the Metropolitan police have been rejected on medical grounds in each of the last five years. [126199]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The table sets out how many applicants to join the Metropolitan police have been rejected on medical grounds in each of the last five years:

	Number of applicants	*Total number rejected on medical grounds*	*Percentage rejected on medical grounds*
1996	6,402	878	13.7
1997	2,845	443	15.5
1998	6,343	671	10.5
1999	6,115	804	13
2000[1]	2,037	366	18

[1] To 15 June 2000

The Metropolitan police follow the Guidelines on Medical Standards of Entry to Police Forces issued by the Home Office in March 1998.

The Home Office is undertaking a review of the guidelines, which it is hoped will be completed later this year.

Mr. Casale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will make available the formal response by the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis to Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary report, "Winning Consent". [126969]

Mr. Straw: "Winning Consent", the Report of an Inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC), was published on 10 January. I refer to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member

for Enfield, North (Ms Ryan) on 10 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 21W. I have today arranged for a copy of the Commissioner's formal response to the Report, submitted to me in my capacity as Police Authority for the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), to be placed in the Library.

The Inspection was carried out as a direct response to a recommendation of the Report of the Inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence.

It was one of the most detailed and thorough Inspections ever carried out by HMIC into specific aspects of policing in one police force, and examined community and race relations policies, and the handling of murder inquiries, in the MPS.

"Winning Consent" contains 41 recommendations, 29 relate to diversity issues, and 12 are concerned with the content of murder investigations.

I welcome the Commissioner's candid and very positive response. When the Report was published, I said that I expected senior management in the MPS to address the issues in it urgently and with vigour. This response confirms that they have done so. It demonstrates how much has already been achieved by the Metropolitan police in implementing the Report and reflects the Commissioner's total commitment to meet the challenges laid down and to continue the process of improvement.

The Report makes 41 recommendations. The Commissioner has accepted all of them (except one, which concerns a matter of professional, operational judgment, in the allocation of murder investigations within the Metropolitan police). Many of the recommendations are for action to be implemented over time. The Commissioner explains that there is a specific plan of action in place for each such recommendation; and some recommendations have already been implemented in full.

A fuller account of my assessment of the Commissioner's response is being placed together with it, in the Library.

Wrongful Convictions

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress he is making in providing support for people on their release from prison following wrongful conviction. [126168]

Mr. Straw: My officials have initiated discussions with voluntary organisations interested in setting up an advice and counselling service for such people. We expect these discussions to lead to a full scoping study.

Travellers

Mr. Pound: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent reports he has received from police forces about their effectiveness in dealing with the problems caused by travellers. [126203]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have received information on this matter from a number of sources, and I am considering urgently with colleagues what action should be taken.

Road Accidents

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will review the legislation governing how long after a road accident a private prosecution can be made; and if he will make a statement on the present limitation. [126186]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There are no statutory limitations on the period within which proceedings may be instituted for indictable offences (including those triable either way); but under section 127 of the Magistrates' Courts Act 1980, proceedings for summary offences must be commenced within six months of the day when the offence was committed, except where there is specific statutory provision for a different time limit to apply to a particular offence. The summary offences in the Road Traffic Act 1988 which are most commonly charged following a road accident, such as careless driving or driving with excess alcohol (sections 3 and 5 respectively), are covered by the general limit in section 127. The position is the same whether the prosecutor is the Crown Prosecution Service (or other public authority) or a private individual.

The purpose of these time limits is to ensure that summary offences are charged and tried as soon as reasonably possible after their alleged commission, so that the recollection of witnesses is still reasonably clear, and so that there is no unnecessary delay in the disposal by magistrates' courts of the summary offences brought before them.

Data Protection

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what advice he has given to the Data Protection Commissioner about the confidentiality of medical patient records under the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998. [126086]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: None.

The Data Protection Commissioner is fully independent of the Government. In carrying out her functions, she takes advice from no Minister. Rather, it is she who gives advice to the Government on data protection matters.

Individuals' medical records are covered by the Data Protection Act 1998. The requirements of the 1998 Act, including the Data Protection principles, apply to them as to any other personal data. It will be for the Commissioner to give any advice that might be needed about the particular implications of the 1998 Act given the confidential nature of medical records.

Deportations

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were deported from the UK in each of the last three years. [125763]

Mrs. Roche: The numbers of people removed or departing voluntarily from the United Kingdom under port, illegal entry or deportation procedures between 1997 and 1999 are shown in the table. Data for 1999 are provisional.

Passengers refused entry and removed and persons removed or departing voluntarily as a result of illegal entry or deportation action[1], 1997 to 1999

	1997	1998	1999[3]
Passengers refused entry and removed	24,540	27,600	31,300
Removals and voluntary departures under illegal entry procedures[2]	4,540	5,580	5,220
Removals and voluntary departures under deportation procedures[2]	2,070	1,720	[2]1,170
Total	31,140	34,900	[2]37,680

[1] Includes only those voluntary departures taking place after the initiation of such action.
[2] Revised data
[3] 1999 data are provisional
Notes:
Data are rounded to 10.

Performance Indicators

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on how each of the agencies and non-departmental bodies relating to his Department performed against their key performance indicators in *(a)* the last year and *(b)* the previous two years. [125330]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 12 June 2000]:* My Department has four executive agencies and 11 executive non-departmental public bodies which receive public funds. Each of these bodies publishes an annual report and accounts from which more details can be obtained. A summary table showing how each has performed in the years requested has been placed in the Library. Results for 1999–2000 are still subject to final audit.

Penalty Clauses

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 17 May 2000, *Official Report*, columns 168–69W, on penalty clauses, what *(a)* was the financial compensation and *(b)* were the damages which were recovered from the private sector companies listed. [125364]

Mr. Straw: Further to the reply I gave my hon. Friend on 17 May 2000, *Official Report*, columns 168–69W, on the amount of financial compensation and damages recovered from private sector companies previously listed, the information requested is given in the table.

£

Company	Financial compensation	Damages
Rebound ECD	663,240	155,152
Medomsley Training Services Ltd.	10,049	35,579
Premier Monitoring Services Ltd.	199,500	—
GSSC of Europe Ltd.	38,500	—
Securicor Custodial Services Ltd.	84,000	—
Siemens	—	380

Visas (China)

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received concerning relaxing the visa requirements for citizens of the People's Republic of China who wish to holiday in the UK. [125430]

Mrs. Roche: I have received one representation this year concerning relaxation of the visa requirements for citizens of the People's Republic of China who wish to visit the United Kingdom.

Queen's Golden Jubilee

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received regarding a national celebration to mark the Golden Jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen. [126874]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Proposals and suggestions have been received from a number of cultural, sporting and commercial organisations and members of the public. Planning for the celebration of Her Majesty's Golden Jubilee is, however, at a very early stage. A programme of celebrations will be announced in due course.

Sunday Observance Act

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it his policy to seek to disapply the provisions of the Sunday Observance Act 1780 in respect of 31 December 2000. [126803]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Yes. On 17 January this year, we laid before Parliament the draft Deregulation (Sunday Dancing and Licensing) Order 2000 which would remove the prohibition in the Sunday Observance Act 1780 on charging for public dances on Sundays. The Deregulation Committees of both Houses have indicated their readiness, subject to certain changes being made, to recommend approval of the Order. We have considered their comments carefully and have invited further comments from the Committees on changes to the proposals before formally re-laying the Order. We hope that the Order will be in force before 31 December 2000, which is a Sunday.

City Status Applications

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to announce the successful applications for city status to celebrate the Millennium. [126575]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: No date has yet been set for the announcement of the new city. 39 applications have been received for the Millennium grant of city status from towns in the United Kingdom. Each application is being considered on its individual merits and a recommendation will be made to Her Majesty The Queen in due course on which town should be honoured.

Football Hooligans

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what reports he has received on the behaviour of ticketless English fans in Eindhoven. [126664]

Mr. Straw: The behaviour of all England fans visiting Eindhoven for the England v Portugal match was widely praised, not least by the city mayor and local police commander.

Departmental Reviews

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the reviews

undertaken by his Department and the date those reviews were completed since 1997; and if he will make a statement. [126554]

Mr. Straw: Since 1997, the Home Office has undertaken and completed a large number of reviews and reports, details of which are not held centrally and could be collated only at disproportionate cost. However, examples of the range of reviews are; the Prisons-Probation review (August 1998); reviews of financial regulations in the Crown dependencies (November 1998); and, a review of the treatment of vulnerable and intimidated witnesses (June 1998). Copies of these reports have been previously placed in the Library.

A number of reviews have also been carried out by the Police, Prisons, Probation and Fire Services Inspectorates.

Prisons

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 9 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 394W, on prisons, if he will give details of the RESPOND programme including the training required and the amount of training undertaken to date; if he will give details of the targets set for training in this area; and if he will make a statement. [126558]

Mr. Boateng: The RESPOND programme is designed to promote racial equality for staff and prisoners, it consists of five main strategies:

confronting harassment and discrimination;

ensuring fairness in recruitment, appraisal, promotion and selection;

developing and supporting minority ethnic staff;

ensuring equal opportunities for minority ethnic prisoners; and

recruiting minority ethnic staff.

To confront racial harassment and discrimination the RESPOND programme highlights the need for mandatory racial harassment training for all staff. I referred in the reply I gave the hon. Gentleman on 9 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 394W, to the current position against the target set for completion of this training.

To ensure fairness in recruitment, appraisal, promotion and selection the RESPOND programme highlights the need to review training for assessors and promotion board members. Assessors are provided with training at Job Simulation and Assessment Centres at every assessment event. This affords a unique opportunity to update any training they may have previously received. Training is mandatory for staff acting as promotion board members. Training for promotion board members has been reviewed. A new training course entitled Recruitment, Promotion and Selection Interviewing is being piloted. Delivery of the course and its content will be continually evaluated.

To ensure equal opportunities for minority ethnic prisoners, the RESPOND programme highlights the need to review the race relations training provided to Prison Officers including that contained in their basic training. The provision of local race relations training to all staff working in prisons is mandatory. As far as practicable, this training should be repeated every three years. In the period between the 1996–97 and 1998–99 financial years, there was a steady increase in the delivery of this training with 3,594, 4,157 and 5,617 staff trained in each year. A new local race relations training pack was launched earlier this year which will further encourage the delivery of this training. The Prison Service Order 2800 Race Relations was strengthened in February 2000 to require the Governing Governor or Deputy Governor to chair the Race Relations Management Team. To enable this, a training course is being provided in partnership with the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders. These courses will be completed in July 2000. A consultation phase has begun as part of a review of the basic training provided to Prison Officers with a view to introducing a new course. In the 1999–2000 financial year, 1,122 new Prison Officers undertook basic training. It is anticipated that during the 2000–01 financial year 1,400 new Prison Officers will require basic training.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the date each report by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons was *(a)* received by the Home Office and *(b)* published, in each of the last two years; and if he will list those reports which are currently with his Department, but are yet to be published and the date they were received. [126557]

Mr. Boateng: The information is given in the table.

Reports submitted to Home Secretary from 13 June 1998 to 13 June 2000

Establishment	*Received*	*Published*
Establishment Reports		
Gloucester	12 May 1998	17 June 1998
Wellingborough	12 May 1998	18 June 1998
Winchester	22 April 1998	24 June 1998
Shrewsbury	21 April 1998	1 July 1998
The Mount	12 May 1998	10 July 1998
The Verne	2 June 1998	29 July 1998
Long Lartin	5 June 1998	17 August 1998
Bedford	7 July 1998	9 September 1998
Werrington	3 July 1998	23 September 1998
Stafford	16 July 1998	24 November 1998
Everthorpe	30 July 1998	13 October 1998
Belmarsh	31 July 1998	8 October 1998
Eastwood Park	11 August 1998	29 September 1998
Highpoint	12 August 1998	29 September 1998
Woodhill	12 August 1998	2 October 1998
North Sea Camp	29 September 1998	8 January 1999
Birmingham	16 October 1998	13 January 1999
Albany	15 December 1998	12 March 1999
Blakenhurst	10 December 1998	16 February 1999
Chelmsford	18 December 1998	9 March 1999
Aylesbury	11 August 1998	28 October 1998
Haslar	11 September 1998	11 December 1998
Nottingham	13 August 1998	2 December 1998
Sudbury	17 August 1998	16 October 1998
Norwich	28 September 1998	16 December 1998
Thorn Cross	16 October 1998	12 January 1999
Kirkham	7 December 1998	5 March 1999
Askham Grange	16 December 1998	2 March 1999
Feltham	17 December 1998	8 February 2000
The Wolds	9 December 1998	16 April 1999
Doncaster	8 January 1999	30 March 1999
Leicester	30 January 1999	18 March 1999
Brockhill	3 February 1999	28 April 1999
Elmley	14 January 1999	19 March 1999
The Weare	25 January 1999	21 April 1999
Styal	3 February 1999	14 May 1999
Risley	3 February 1999	14 May 1999
Hindley	3 February 1999	29 April 1999
Lincoln	24 February 1999	22 April 1999
Liverpool	19 March 1999	17 June 1999
Wymott	12 April 1999	22 July 1999
New Hall	15 April 1999	16 July 1999

Reports submitted to Home Secretary from 13 June 1998 to 13 June 2000

Establishment	*Received*	*Published*
Highdown	10 May 1999	13 July 1999
Huntercombe	12 May 1999	16 July 1999
Wormwood Scrubs	24 May 1999	28 June 1999
Reading	18 June 1999	8 October 1999
Exeter	29 June 1999	12 August 1999
Bristol	7 June 1999	20 July 1999
Bullwood Hall	16 August 1999	27 October 1999
Preston	16 August 1999	15 October 1999
Parc	30 July 1999	14 October 1999
Swansea	14 September 1999	21 December 1999
Foston Hall	29 September 1999	15 February 2000
Wandsworth	13 October 1999	17 December 1999
Hatfield	14 September 1999	2 December 1999
Wayland	23 September 1999	2 November 1999
Hollesley BC	29 September 1999	8 December 1999
Rochester	27 October 1999	21 January 2000
Onley	27 October 1999	4 February 2000
Guys Marsh	15 October 2000	14 January 2000
Feltham	25 November 2000	8 February 2000
Dorchester	15 November 2000	28 January 2000
Pentonville	6 January 2000	5 April 2000
Portland	11 January 2000	21 March 2000
Altcourse	24 January 2000	19 April 2000
Werrington	6 January 2000	1 March 2000
Ashwell	21 January 2000	5 April 2000
Lowdham Grange	24 January 2000	27 April 2000
Glen Parva	9 February 2000	10 May 2000
Belmarsh	4 February 2000	4 May 2000
Littlehey	4 February 2000	11 April 2000
Brockhill	31 January 2000	15 March 2000
Buckley Hall	9 February 2000	—
CSCs	9 February 2000	22 March 2000
Shepton Mallet	22 March 2000	9 May 2000
Blantyre House	21 March 2000	—
Wormwood Scrubs	14 April 2000	—
Eastwood Park	19 April 2000	—
Lindholme	27 April 2000	—
Lewes	23 May 2000	—
Low Newton	25 May 2000	—
Featherstone	6 June 2000	—
Usk	7 June 2000	—
Channings Wood	8 June 2000	—
Other Reports		
Lifer Thematic	—	6 April 1999
Annual Report 1997–98	23 February 1999	14 April 1999
Suicide Thematic	6 April 1999	19 May 1999
Annual Report 1998–99	7 April 2000	13 June 2000

[1] Submitted prior to 13 June 1998 but published after that date

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) on 8 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 302–05W, on the number of prisoners in work, *(a)* if he will break down the work undertaken by the 162 prisoners at HMP Coldingley engaged in other occupations and the 215 prisoners engaged in prison maintenance work, *(b)* if there are further prisoners engaged in work at HMP Kirklevington and HMP Mount and *(c)* what the reasons are for the figure of 223 prisoners engaged in wing cleaning work at HMP Usk; and if he will make a statement. [126543]

Mr. Boateng: The breakdown of prisoner occupation for Coldingley is set out in the table. Other occupations include offending behaviour programmes, induction and community service.

Kirklevington is a resettlement prison and in addition to the numbers of prisoners employed as shown in my reply to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and the Weald (Miss Widdecombe), on 8 May 2000, *Official Report*, columns 302–05W the remainder either attend college courses or are employed by companies outside the establishment.

At The Mount more up-to-date information shows an additional 40 prisoners employed in the categories shown in my reply to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and the Weald (Miss Widdecombe), on 8 May 2000, *Official Report*, columns 302–05W. The remainder are occupied on offending behaviour programmes, basic and key skills education and physical education courses.

The figures given for Usk in my reply to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and the Weald (Miss Widdecombe), on 8 May 2000, *Official Report*, columns 302–05W cover both Usk and Prescoed. There were 20 prisoners engaged on wing cleaning. The remaining 203 were engaged on craft work, education and offending behaviour programmes and should have been shown under "other occupations".

	Number
Other occupations	142
Orderlies	15
Prison maintenance	5
Total	162
Non-Prison Enterprise Services workshops	7
Prison Enterprise Services workshops	168
Kitchen	17
Wing cleaners	23
Total	215

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), on 8 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 305–07W, on prison workshops, for what reasons HMPs Kirklevington, Usk, Wayland and Weare were not included; and if he will make a statement. [126541]

Mr. Boateng: Kirklevington, Usk and Weare prisons were not included in the answer because there are no industrial workshops at these establishments.

The average length of the working week for Wayland prison is 16 hours.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the prisons, by prison category, which have received additional funding for special projects under funding made available through the Comprehensive Spending Review; if he will give details of the projects; and if he will make a statement. [126553]

Mr. Boateng: Details of prisons, by prison category which have received additional funding through the comprehensive spending review have been placed in the Library.

The tables that have been placed in the Library show allocation of funding through the Comprehensive Spending Review for 1999–2000 and 2000–01 respectively.

Allocations for 1999–2000 are split into categories as follows:

bail information schemes funding to improve prisoners' access to and quality of bail information;

education funding to expand education provision to include delivery of accredited basic skills;

offending behaviour programmes funding to increase the number of accredited offending behaviour programmes delivered;

drugs—funding to implement the prison service Drug Strategy, to provide treatment for drug misusers and measures to reduce the supply of drugs into prisons;

welfare to work—funding to develop schemes to improve offenders' access to employment; and

juvenile estate—funding to provide a distinct under 18 estate, with a regime tailored to the population.

Allocations for 2000–01 are split into allocations for 'drugs' and 'other'.

The information in the tables is set out by prison by current prison category. The prisons are grouped by area and separately for 1999–2000 and for 2000–01 reflecting changes in Prison Service areas.

Police Manpower

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the total number of *(a)* police officers, *(b)* civilian staff and *(c)* special constables, per head of population, in each police force in Great Britain and in total in (i) 1979, (ii) 1987 and (iii) each year since 1992. [126228]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I am responsible only for the police service in England and Wales. The available information on police officers has been placed in the Library, and is in the form of population per police officer. Information on civilian support staffing numbers in 1979 and 1987 is not available in a format that would allow comparisons to be made with population on a force by force basis at reasonable cost. However, the aggregate totals for civilian support staff numbers for 1979 and 1987 show that there was one civilian to 1,441 of the population in March 1979 and one civilian to 1,234 of the population in March 1987. Data on the number of special constables have only been collected with regularity since September 1995.

Research Projects

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the research projects *(a)* being undertaken and *(b)* recently commissioned by his Department; and if he will make statement. [126555]

Mr. Straw: My Department undertakes a wide range of research activities that support the development of information-led policy, including scientific and engineering research, market and opinion research and social research.

My Research, Development and Statistics Directorate conduct social research supporting all seven Home Office aims. I have placed a copy of the Directorate's work programme for this financial year in the Library and it will be made available on the Home Office website later this month.

The Fire Research and Development Group (FRDG) undertake research in support of Home Office aim seven. I have placed a copy of a table showing the current and planned FRDG research projects in the Library.

For the available information on market and opinion research, I refer to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), on 8 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 373–74W. In addition to this my Department is currently undertaking the following research:

"What else works"—for aim four, reducing in reoffending. Research commissioned from the University of York to examine effective psychological models, other than cognitive behavioural methods, for reducing reoffending which, on the basis of academic research have the potential for application with an offender population, and which address the gaps in current practice.

Fire Service efficiency, Control and Communications—An evaluation of issues related to the future provision of fire service control rooms and radio communications.

Two research projects commissioned by the Assessment and Consultancy Unit (ACU) to establish the reliability and validity of its assessment centres for the police Accelerated Promotion scheme.

An assessment of the fairness of the Police Initial Recruit Tests for applicants from ethnic minorities.

Porton Down

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the cost to date of the investigation by Wiltshire Constabulary into the Chemical and Biological Defence establishment at Porton Down; and how many *(a)* police officers and *(b)* civilians are employed on it. [126499]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand from the Wiltshire Constabulary that the cost of the investigation so far is estimated at £335,000; and that 16 police officers (including two Ministry of Defence police officers) and five civilians are currently employed on it.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people *(a)* have voluntarily contacted the police, *(b)* the police have contacted and *(c)* have contacted designated support groups and their helplines in connection with the Wiltshire Constabulary inquiry into events at Porton Down. [126792]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand from the Wiltshire Constabulary that, although the information is not available in precisely the form requested, they are aware of around 700 people who have at one time or another expressed interest or concern in the events which gave rise to the inquiry, and that they have been in touch with about 300 people in connection with the inquiry.

Assets (Civil Forfeiture)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the compatibility of the proposals on civil forfeiture of assets in Chapter 5 of the Performance and Innovation Unit report, Receiving the Proceeds of Crime, with the European Convention on Human Rights; and if he will make a statement. [126597]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have given this issue careful consideration. It is my intention that the proposals for legislation which I bring forward to Parliament on civil forfeiture will be compatible with the Convention.

Detention Centre, Doncaster

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects the new detention centre near Doncaster to open; what its initial and full capacity will be; and if he will make a statement. [126593]

Mrs. Roche: The Immigration Service will start to use the new Immigration Detention Centre within the grounds of Lindholme Prison on 10 July. At full capacity Lindholme Detention Centre will house 112 male detainees aged 21 and over. The allocation of immigration detainees into the establishment will be phased over a four week period with 28 detainees being sent to the Centre each week.

Global Cultural Diversity Congress

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answers of 12 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 518W, and 17 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 376W, if he will place in the Library the text of the review conducted by the Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality into the collapse of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress. [126537]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 17 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 376–77W.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will provide a breakdown of the total cost to public funds of the collapse of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress. [126552]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Until the report of the findings of the liquidator, it is not possible to provide a breakdown of the total cost to public funds.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what *(a)* reports have been received by his Department from and *(b)* discussions have been held with, the liquidator in respect of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. [126560]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: On 28 March we were sent a copy of the "Report to Creditors" which was sent to all known creditors, including potential creditors.

No discussions have been held with the liquidators.

Illegal Entrants

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received from foreign Governments regarding the civil penalty for carrying clandestine illegal entrants under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. [126530]

Mrs. Roche: Since the civil penalty provisions of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, were introduced in Dover and Coquelles on 3 April, we have received four inquiries about them from foreign Embassies in London. These have taken the form of three fax messages, two from the Polish Embassy and one from the Czech Embassy, and a telephone call from the Spanish Embassy. All were asking about procedures, and all four were directed to the Civil Penalty Central Administration Unit (CPCAU) which was set up to administer the civil penalty provisions. No representations or other form of communication on this matter from any foreign government have been received.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* companies have gone into (i) receivership and (ii) liquidation and *(b)* individuals been declared bankrupt as a result of inability or failure to pay the civil penalty for carrying clandestine entrants under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. [126532]

Mrs. Roche: As far as I am aware, the answer to all these questions is none. But the road haulage industry has nothing to fear from the civil penalty provisions of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, provided that the driver of the vehicle checks his load before embarking for the United Kingdom to ensure that there are no clandestine illegal entrants on board.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons have been served with civil penalty notices under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 for carrying clandestine illegal entrants in their vehicles; what type of vehicle was involved in each case; what the level of the penalty was in each case; what the nationality of the person served with the penalty was in each case; how many companies have been served with the penalty *(a)* in addition to and *(b)* instead of persons directly responsible for driving the vehicles; how many appeals have been entered against the penalties; and how many of them have been successful; and if he will make a statement. [126531]

Mrs. Roche: Between 3 April, when the civil penalty provisions of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 were introduced, and 11 June, penalties were imposed in respect of 189 separate incidents where vehicles were found to contain clandestine illegal entrants. The vehicles comprised 177 heavy lorries, four vans and eight private motor cars.

In 56 cases, the driver of the vehicle was British. The 131 other cases involved four drivers who were Austrian, five Belgians, two Bosnians, four Bulgarians, five Czechs, four Dutch, 27 French, 15 Germans, four Hungarians, two Irish, 12 Italians, five Lithuanians, one Luxembourgeois, ten Poles, three Portuguese, one Romanian, five Slovaks, six Slovenians, ten Spaniards, one Tunisian and five Turkish. In two cases, the driver was a stateless person. In all but 26 cases, the nationality of the driver was the same as that of the company which owned the vehicle. Where there were differences they were as follows. Two British drivers were driving Irish-owned vehicles; and in one case each, British drivers were driving vehicles owned in France and Italy. Two Belgian drivers were driving vehicles owned in Italy. Two Lithuanian drivers were driving vehicles owned in Austria. In one case each, French drivers were driving vehicles owned in Belgium, Germany, Spain and Austria. In one case each, Turkish drivers were driving vehicles owned in Germany, Austria and the Netherlands. In one case, each Slovak drivers were driving vehicles owned in Germany and the Czech Republic. One driver from Luxembourg was driving a vehicle owned in Austria; one driver from Croatia was driving a vehicle owned in Italy; one driver from Hungary was driving a vehicle owned in Austria, one driver from Bulgaria was driving a vehicle owned in Germany; one driver from Tunisia was driving a vehicle owned in Italy; one driver from Spain was driving a vehicle owned in

Italy; one driver from Slovenia was driving a vehicle owned in Italy; one Dutch driver was driving a vehicle owned in Germany; and, one German driver was driving a vehicle owned in Austria. The two drivers who were stateless were both driving their own vehicles.

In every case, the driver of the vehicle was served with a penalty notice. In addition, in all but 11 of the cases cited, penalty notices were also served on the owners or hirers of the vehicle. In 26 cases this involved the serving of penalty notices on more than two persons or companies in respect of a single incident.

In each case, the level of the penalty was £2,000 per clandestine illegal entrant detected. The penalties imposed ranged from £2,000 (one illegal entrant detected) to £100,000 (50 illegal entrants detected).

One hundred and one letters of objection have been received, in which the responsible person has sought to show why the penalty should not be levied, and thus far two have been successful.

Passport Agency

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the cost is to public funds of the establishment of the UK Passport Agency's press office; how many press officers are to be employed; what salaries they are to be paid; and if he will make a statement. [126527]

Mrs. Roche: The United Kingdom Passport Agency is establishing a press office. There will be one press officer, working to the Agency's Head of Communications, whose job will also encompass market research, writing information leaflets and liaison with the travel trade. The salary will be in the region of £22,000.

Asylum and Immigration Act 1996

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prosecutions have been brought to date under section 8 of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996. [126528]

Mrs. Roche: One.

Compulsory Voting

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his policy is on the introduction of compulsory voting at *(a)* local and *(b)* national elections. [126539]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government have no plan to introduce compulsory voting at either local or national elections.

Detention Centres

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his planned timetable is for establishing and bringing into operation the detention centres at *(a)* Thurleigh, *(b)* Harmondsworth and *(c)* Aldington. [126594]

Mrs. Roche: We are in the process of selecting private sector suppliers to design, build and operate all three centres. The competition is being run under European Community Procurement Rules. Our timetable is to take delivery of the buildings and to start up operations within approximately 12 months.

Taskforces

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what task forces have been set up by his Department; when each was set up; if he will list their members and the remuneration received in each case; and if he will make a statement. [126526]

Mr. Straw: The Home Office has set up the following task forces, which include or included non-public servants, since May 1997:

Task Force on Youth Justice (established June 1997, reported July 1998);

Human Rights Task Force (established January 1999); and

National Crime Reduction Task Force (established March 2000).

The membership of each of these bodies is contained in the tables. Where appropriate, expenses were paid to some members of these task forces. No other remuneration has been made.

Task Force on Youth Justice

Name	*Job title*	*Organisation or area*
Norman Warner	Senior Policy Adviser	Home Office (Chairman)
William Atkinson	Headmaster	Phoenix High School, Hammersmith and Fulham
Jonathon Black	Clerk to the Justices	Hampshire
Cathryn Bowker	Youth Court Prosecutor	Brighton
Tony Butler	Chief Constable	Gloucestershire Constabulary
Paul Cavadino	—	NACRO and Penal Affairs Consortium
Anne Fuller	Lay Magistrate	Outer London
Cedric Fullwood	Chief Probation Officer	Greater Manchester
Ian Johnston	Assistant Commissioner	Metropolitan police
David Norgrove	—	Marks & Spencer plc
Denise Platt	—	Local Government Association
Teresa Reynolds	—	Victim Support
Joan Webster	Chief Superintendent	Gwent Constabulary
Geoffrey Wicks	Stipendiary Magistrate	Inner London
Andrew Williamson	Director Social Services	Devon

Note:
Plus officials from the Home Office, Department of Health and Lord Chancellor's Department

Human Rights Task Force

Name	*Job title*	*Organisation or area*
Mike O'Brien (chair)	Minister of State	Home Office
Ross Cranston	Solicitor General	—
Jane Kennedy	Parliamentary Secretary	Lord Chancellor's Department
Pam Giddy	—	Charter 88
Lord Harris of Haringey	—	Local Government Association
Ian Holding	—	Association of Chief Police Officers
Francesca Klug	—	Human Rights Incorporation Project

Human Rights Task Force

Name	*Job title*	*Organisation or area*
Anne Owers	—	Justice
Garry Patten	—	Crown Prosecution Service
Sarah Spencer	—	Institute for Public Policy Research
Alison Sutherland	—	Local Government Association
Veena Vasista	—	The 1990 Trust
John Wadham	—	Liberty

Note:
Plus officials from the Cabinet Office, Home Office and Lord Chancellor's Department.

National Crime Reduction Task Force

Name	*Job title*	*Organisation or area*
Charles Clarke (chair)	Minister of State	Home Office
David Phillips (vice-chair)	Chief Constable	Kent Constabulary
David Henshaw (vice-chair)	Chief Executive	City of Liverpool
Michael Barber	Head of Standards & Effectiveness Unit	DfEE
Ron Kerr	Director of Operations	NHS Executive
Keith Povey	—	HMIC
Richard Childs	Chief Constable	Lincolnshire Police
Det. Ch. Supt. Lee Weavers	Head of Crime	Essex Constabulary
Chief Supt. Ron Hope	Divisional Commander	Islington
Steve Mycio	Deputy Chief Executive	Manchester City Council
Jo Williams	Director of Social Services	Cheshire County Council
Ruth Henig	—	Association of Police Authorities
David Walton	Chief Probation Officer	Staffordshire
Neil Wragg	Chief Executive	Youth at Risk
Wendy Thomson	Director of Inspections	Audit Commission

Note:
Plus officials from the Home Office

Television Licences

Mrs. Gordon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women were sent to prison having defaulted on a fine imposed for using a television without a licence in each of the last five years. [126460]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is given in the table. This information is also published in "Prison statistics England and Wales" a copy of which is in the Library.

Receptions of female fine defaulters into prisons in England and Wales for using a television without a licence.

Year	*Number*
1995	235
1996	89
1997	61
1998	41
1999	24

Cycle Parking (London)

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what assessment he has made of the value of the bans on cycle parking in central London for security purposes; and how many cycles have been used in terrorist offences since 1970; [126408]

(2) if he will discuss the ban on chaining cycles to railings outside public buildings in London with the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis with a view to removing it. [126407]

Mr. Straw: Discussions have taken place with the Metropolitan Police and we are satisfied that the wide range of protective security measures taken by the police to improve security of the streets in light of current terrorist threats, have been devised and maintained solely to counter such threats. As the threat diminishes, so too will the need for restrictive security measures.

Bicycles have been used as a terrorist weapon in the United Kingdom on four occasions since 1970:

29 August 1985: Belfast
30 March 1990: Newry
13 August 1994: Bognor Regis
13 August 1994: Brighton

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the total cost to the public departments of dealing with asylum seekers in 2000–01; and what was the total cost in 1999–2000. [126088]

Mrs. Roche: The Home Office and the Department of Health made payments totalling £590 million for supporting asylum seeking adults, families and children in 1999–2000. The costs of asylum support depend on a wide variety of factors and estimates for 2000–01 remain under review. The Home Office has a provisional allocation of £300 million for the support of adults and families in 2000–01.

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if asylum seekers from Zimbabwe are liable to be fast-tracked through the asylum determination process. [125126]

Mrs. Roche: All asylum cases are considered on their individual merits in accordance with the United Kingdom's international obligations. While it is sometimes necessary, in managing the Immigration system as a whole, to prioritise cases or groups of cases on the basis of nationality where there is a compelling reason for doing so, the number of Zimbabwean asylum applications remains low and they are currently not afforded any special priority as a result of their nationality.

CABINET OFFICE

Government Car and Despatch Agency

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office, pursuant to her answer of 13 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 614W, how many cars have been

purchased by the Government Car and Despatch Agency since May 1997 other than through the Government Car Service. [126867]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Since May 1997, the Government Car and Despatch Agency has purchased four cars other than through the Government Car Service.

Staff Secondments

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list the employees from private industry seconded to the Cabinet Office, indicating the names of their employers and the terms and length of their secondment. [124791]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Cabinet Office has a long standing practice of taking a small number of secondees from the private sector. This important activity underpins the Government's commitment to developing a modern, flexible, outward focused Civil Service.

There are currently seven secondees from private industry to the Cabinet Office. There are four two-year secondees, one each from Carillion and PricewaterhouseCoopers, and two from Unilever. There are two one-year secondees, one each from Oracle and British Airways, and one secondee from Microsoft who is with us for eight months.

In all cases agreements are reached with the external organisation to ensure that the salary reimbursed by the Cabinet Office falls within the Civil Service pay range appropriate to the post.

TREASURY

Tax Relief (Small Companies)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for what reason the existing tax relief for small companies investing in research and development excludes *(a)* sole practitioners, *(b)* partnerships and *(c)* companies which are not incorporated under the Companies Acts. [126587]

Mr. Timms: Research and Development (R&D) tax credits are targeted on companies because the vast bulk of R&D activity is carried on by incorporated businesses. This limitation also keeps the scheme simple and straightforward.

Knowledge Economy

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what definition is used in the Review of the Knowledge Economy of the goal of universal access to the internet; and if he will make a statement. [126024]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Prime Minister has set the goal of achieving universal access to the internet for all who want it by 2005. Access is defined as including access in the home through a personal computer or other form of appliance (for example a digital TV or games console), or on the move through a mobile appliance, or at a public access point.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received concerning the cross-departmental review on the Knowledge Economy; and if he will make a statement. [126051]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 15 June 2000]:* Representations were made by a range of external organisations and individuals during the course of the review. The outcome of the review will be announced as part of the Government's new spending plans for 2001–02 to 2003–04.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will answer the written question reference No. 121789 tabled by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead on 9 May. [126563]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Shortly.

NIRS2 Computer System

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of *(a)* the current total cost to the Exchequer and *(b)* the final total cost to the Exchequer of the problems associated with the NIRS2 computer system. [125632]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 13 June 2000]:* The problems associated with the delayed implementation of the NIRS2 system during 1997–98 have resulted in compensation payments being made by the Inland Revenue and DSS to pension providers and benefit recipients. The total paid so far by the Revenue to pension providers is £46.2 million. The total paid by the DSS to benefit recipients is £2.6 million.

It is not possible at this stage to estimate the total amounts that will become payable. All costs relating to the correcting of problems with the NIRS2 system itself have been met by Andersen Consulting.

National Insurance

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the total of *(a)* interest so far accrued by the National Insurance Fund as a result of the late disbursement of the age-related rebates on contracted-out money purchase pension schemes and *(b)* interest so far owing to providers of COMP schemes as compensation for late disbursement of rebates. [125631]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 13 June 2000]:* In relation to 1997–98, additional interest so far paid to pension providers as a result of late national insurance rebates is some £46.2 million. On the assumption of a 6 per cent. rate of return on gilts, an equivalent amount of interest has accrued to the National Insurance Fund. The amount of interest accrued and the compensation to money purchase schemes specifically cannot be calculated.

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the revenue implications of levying employer national insurance contributions on *(a)* private medical insurance offered to employees, *(b)* employee Christmas parties, *(c)* rape alarms for employees, *(d)* sports facilities for employees and *(e)* nursery facilities for employees. [126183]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) on 9 February 2000 *Official Report*, column 216W.

Limited Liability Partnerships

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the reduction in tax paid by a limited company with a revenue of £50 million per year by converting into a limited liability partnership under the Government's Limited Liability Partnerships Bill. [125344]

Dawn Primarolo: The answer to this question will depend on the particular facts, for example the number of members of the limited liability partnership.

Company Taxation

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he proposes to publish his proposals for bringing taxation of partnerships into line with company taxation. [126048]

Dawn Primarolo: There are no proposals to bring the taxation of partnerships into line with company taxation.

Windfall Tax

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much money has been raised by the windfall tax in *(a)* 1999 and *(b)* 2000 to date. [126279]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Windfall tax receipts were £2,610 million in December 1997 and £2,614 million in December 1998. There have been no subsequent receipts.

Taxation (EU)

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which EU tax proposals currently under consideration could be agreed under qualified majority voting if the current draft of the Treaty of Nice is accepted. [126794]

Dawn Primarolo: As the Government's White Paper on the IGC clearly states, the Government are committed to retaining unanimity on tax issues.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what definition the Government use of unfair tax competition in their work in the EU on that issue. [126795]

Dawn Primarolo: The conclusions of the ECOFIN Council meeting on 1 December 1997 concerning taxation policy state that there is a

> need for coordinated action at European level to tackle harmful tax competition in order to help achieve certain objectives such as reducing the continuing distortions in the single market, preventing excessive losses of tax revenue or getting tax structures to develop in a more employment friendly way.

Tax Credits

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has for undertaking publicity campaigns ahead of the introduction of integrated child credit and employment credit; and if he will make a statement. [126182]

Dawn Primarolo: The Integrated Child Credit will bring together the different strands of support for children in the Working Families Tax Credit, Income Support/Jobseeker's Allowance and the Children's Tax Credit, to create a seamless system of financial support for children to be paid to the main carer. The adult credit element of WFTC will, along with the Disabled Person's Tax Credit and the Employment Credit component of the New Deal 50 plus, form the foundation of a new employment tax credit which will extend the principle of WFTC to people without children. Paid through the wage packet the employment tax credit will form a single visible instrument, underpinned by the national minimum wage, to make work pay. The new credits will begin to be introduced from 2003.

The Budget paper "Tackling Poverty and Making Work Pay—Tax Credits for the 21st Century" sets out this next stage of reform in more detail.

Every effort will be made to publicise and raise awareness of the new credits.

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the cost implications to public funds of phasing out the working families tax credit and replacing it with integrated child credit and employment credit. [126181]

Dawn Primarolo: The cost of introducing the new tax credits will depend on the detailed design parameters. These have yet to be finalised. However an illustrative example of the cost of extending an employment tax credit to people without children is set out in paragraph 3.24 of the Treasury paper "Tackling poverty and Making Work Pay—Tax Credits for the 21st Century".

Financial Exclusion

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proposals he has to provide funding to assist less well off people to buy houses under the IDA scheme. [126548]

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to promote savings by people on low incomes. [126406]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government are committed to encouraging people to make provision for financial security throughout their lives. They are seeking to create an environment which promotes savings opportunities for everyone, based on three principles of fairness, flexibility, and confidence and transparency. The Government have already announced measures to extend the savings habit to all, including the introduction of Individual Savings Accounts, stakeholder pensions and all-employee share schemes, as well as working with the financial service providers to tackle financial exclusion.

Welfare to Work and ONE Review

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received concerning the cross-departmental review on Welfare to Work and ONE; and if he will make a statement. [126895]

Mr. Andrew Smith: A number of representations have been received on the cross-departmental review of Welfare to Work and ONE. The review is making excellent progress. In due course details of all aspects of the 2000 Spending Review will be included in a Spending Review White Paper in the normal way.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 20 June 2000

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Driving Standards Agency

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the business plan of the Driving Standards Agency concerning its future policy on test centre closures; if he will list, by region, the test centres targeted for closure; and what the timetable is for such closures. [125588]

Mr. Hill: The Driving Standards Agency's Business Plan for 2000–01 announced targets for the disposal of all vacant space over a five-year period. The target for 2000–01 is a 48 per cent. reduction, which should save fee payers about £145,000 annually. Closures of individual test centres will be considered on their merits and with regard to local circumstances.

The Agency has consulted on the closure of the following driving test centres in the Wales and Western Area:

Pembroke Dock and Haverfordwest—rationalising at Withybush.

Portsmouth—relocating to the north of the city.

Minehead.

Representations are currently being considered.

For the future, proposals for test centre openings and closures will, as far as practicable, be considered across the group of centres serving a locality. When proposals for a locality have been developed, the Agency will consult interested parties. This strategy should provide a network of improved test centres delivering a better quality of customer service, while adapting to changes in the demand for driving tests and test requirements.

RMS St. Helena

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 5 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 59W, on RMS St. Helena, for how long RMS St. Helena was made available for service during the Falklands conflict; and for how many days it was in the war zone. [125592]

Mr. Hill: RMS St. Helena was made available for Royal Navy charter between May and September 1982 but did not leave the UK until 13 June 1982. The ship was in the war zone for 17 days from 26 June 1982 to 12 July 1982 which was the end of the qualifying period.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many civilians served on RMS St. Helena during the Falklands conflict; of these how many were from *(a)* St. Helena, *(b)* the Falklands, *(c)* the United Kingdom and *(d)* elsewhere; and how many have been awarded the South Atlantic Medal. [125593]

Mr. Hill: Approximately 32 civilians served on RMS St. Helena at the time of the Falklands War. Of these, 21 were from St Helena, none from the Falklands, 11 were from the United Kingdom and none from elsewhere. None of these people have been awarded the South Atlantic Medal.

Road Deaths (North Yorkshire)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he has taken to reduce the number of deaths on North Yorkshire's roads. [125872]

Mr. Hill: This Government are committed to further improvements in road safety. We launched a new road safety strategy in March this year, and we are providing substantial extra resources for Local Transport Plans.

In the Local Transport Capital Settlement for 2000–01, North Yorkshire County Council (NYCC) received £8.5m as a block allocation, an increase of 58 per cent. over 1999–2000. This increase will allow NYCC to place additional emphasis on local safety schemes during the current financial year.

We have also in the region commissioned two safety studies which will investigate trunk road safety problems, one between Bramham and Barton on the A1 and the other between Scotch Corner and Penrith on the A66. Details of these studies, together with other planned trunk road safety schemes, are outlined in the letter from the Acting Chief Executive of the Highways Agency to the hon. Member, 29 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 190W-92W.

In North Yorkshire there has been a continuing reduction in the fatal and seriously injured categories, and in 1998 the County met the then national target of a one third reduction by the year 2000 compared with the 1981–85 base.

Road Accidents (A21)

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many accidents involving one or more vehicles occurred on the stretch of the A21 between the intersections with the B2079 and B2099 in each of the last five years, setting out in each case whether personal injury occurred. [125735]

Mr. Hill: The numbers of personal injury accidents on this stretch of road is shown for the last five years for which figures are available.

	Number
1994	6
1995	7
1996	11
1997	7
1998	11

No information is available regarding damage-only accidents.

Campers (Unauthorised Waste)

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his

answer of 8 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 312W, what representations he has received from local authorities and others concerning the effectiveness of powers under section 59(b) of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 in penalising the depositing of waste by unauthorised campers. [125772]

Mr. Mullin: I am not aware of any representations on the effectiveness of these powers.

Housing

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what steps he is taking to evaluate new approaches to allocating social housing, as proposed in the Housing Green Paper; and if he will make a statement; [126013]

(2) what recent guidance he has given to local authorities on dealing with categories of applicants who have not traditionally applied for local authority accommodation; and if he will make a statement. [126017]

Mr. Mullin: In April, we published a Housing Green Paper, "Quality and choice: A Decent Home For All". This included our proposals for modernising policies that affect people's opportunities to access social housing. The Housing Green Paper set out proposals to give applicants for social housing a greater say over where they live. Local authorities will be encouraged to develop lettings systems which provide applicants with much more information about available housing, allowing them to make decisions about their housing options. People who may not have traditionally applied for social housing will be able to apply for vacant properties but we will want to ensure that priority goes to people in the greatest housing need. However, in some areas, local authorities may wish to implement local lettings plans to tackle social problems on particular estates. This may involve giving priority to people who would help to create more sustainable communities or to provide housing for key public sector workers.

Responses to the Housing Green Paper have been invited by 31 July 2000. Following the consultation period, the Government will invite local authorities to pilot customer-focused schemes. This will include the need to test the impact of local lettings plans. All the pilot schemes will be carefully evaluated. The Government will also issue a revised version of the Code of Guidance on lettings and homelessness advising local authorities how they can implement choice-based lettings under the current legislative framework.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the definition of homelessness contained in the Housing Act 1996 will be used in future housing legislation; and if he will make a statement. [126016]

Mr. Mullin: The Housing Green Paper, which was issued for consultation on 4 April, includes proposals for strengthening the protection available to homeless people. The Government intend to take forward these proposals in the light of responses to the Green Paper. There are no present plans to change the statutory definition of homelessness.

Landing Slot Allocations

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review the system of landing slot allocations at major UK airports. [126201]

Mr. Mullin: Slot allocation is governed by EC Regulation 95/93. At airports where demand for slots significantly exceeds supply, they are allocated by an independent slot co-ordinator, using criteria set out in the Regulation, in international guidelines, and in any local rules. There are currently four such airports in the UK: London Heathrow, London Gatwick, London Stansted and Manchester. We are awaiting proposals from the Commission for reform of EC 95/93.

Landfill

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment his Department made, prior to the publication of the Waste Strategy 2000: England and Wales (Command Paper 4693), of the experiences in other countries of landfill mining, with particular reference to Germany; and if he will make a statement. [126633]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* UK landfill practices differ from most other countries. The mixing of hazardous and non-hazardous waste is more common in UK landfill sites, and they contain more moisture due to wet landfill operating systems. There would be significant engineering problems in drying excavated waste, some of which would be hazardous. The Environment Agency has therefore advised that landfill mining has limited potential in the UK.

Ministerial Visits (Overseas)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the *(a)* itinerary, *(b)* cost and *(c)* purpose of his visit to (i) Nigeria and (ii) Sierra Leone in the week beginning 12 June. [126547]

Mr. Prescott *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* I visited Nigeria and Sierra Leone at the request of the Prime Minister from 11–15 June in order to enhance bilateral relations, encourage UK business and thank the service men and women leaving Sierra Leone as well as visiting those who have just arrived.

I visited Abuja, Lagos, Kano and Freetown. In Nigeria I was accompanied by a business team and met the President, Vice-President and other Ministers as well as religious leaders, NGOs and British and Nigerian business leaders.

In Sierra Leone I met the President, Vice-President and Foreign Secretary and the Mayor and other civic leaders of Freetown. I also visited HMS Ocean and met service men and women from the Royal Marines, the Royal Navy, the Royal Naval Reserve and 2 Royal Anglian, who are providing the Short Term Training Team, as well as members of other armed services.

The cost of my visit to Nigeria was approximately £5,500. For security reasons I flew to Sierra Leone with the RAF. The cost was approximately £24,000.

Countryside Access

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate the Government have made of the cost to public funds of implementing their proposals on access to the countryside, including start-up costs and operational costs. [126863]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* Placing monetary values on the cost of the Government's proposals for creating a new statutory right of access to open countryside well in advance of such a right coming into force is inevitably subject to a degree of uncertainty. The Government have undertaken a Regulatory Impact Assessment which suggests the additional annual costs to the public sector, for which monetarised values have been derived, to be in the order of £2 million to £3 million a year, with one-off costs of about £6 million.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what account local authorities are obliged to take of public health concerns when determining planning applications for telecommunications masts. [126986]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Health considerations and public concern can in principle be material considerations in determining applications for planning permission and prior approval. Whether such matters are material in a particular case is ultimately a matter for the courts. It is for the decision-maker (usually the local planning authority) to determine what weight to attach to such considerations in any particular case. In doing so, authorities may have regard to the report of the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones published on 11 May.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with the Scottish Executive on their advice to local authorities with respect to planning applications for telecommunications masts. [126988]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My officials regularly discuss aspects of telecommunications development with officials from the Scottish Executive. They have, in particular, held discussions about the range of actions being taken forward in response to the Stewart report's recommendations on planning.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he has given to local authorities with respect to determining planning applications for telecommunications masts; and if he will make a statement. [126987]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Government planning policy for telecommunications is set out in Planning Policy Guidance note 8 (revised): Telecommunications, and the Department's Circular 4/99, "Planning for Telecommunications". In addition, a letter was sent to all Council leaders on 23 July 1999, providing advice about the health aspects of telecommunications masts.

In its response to the report of the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones, issued on 11 May 2000 and placed in the Libraries of both Houses, the Government said that they were minded to introduce a requirement for an application for full planning permission for all new telecommunications masts, but would need to consult widely before doing so, including on the principle and precise scope of any new arrangements. A copy of the response was sent to all Chief Planning Officers on 11 May.

We aim to issue a consultation document in the summer, with a view to being able to introduce revised procedures and guidance by the end of the year. In the meantime, Local Planning Authorities should continue to deal with planning applications for telecommunications on the basis of the current legislative arrangements and policy guidance.

Recycling

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps the Government are taking to enable local authorities to meet the set-up costs for intensive recycling. [126469]

Mr. Mullin: Funding for local authorities is being considered as part of the current spending review, alongside all the Government's spending pressures. The outcome of the review will be announced by the end of July.

NORTHERN IRELAND

RUC Special Branch

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at what time and on what date the RUC Special Branch's Tasking and Co-ordinating Group was informed by any branch of the security forces or services of security operations associated with incidents in the Forfar Street area of Belfast on 9 September 1987, the Newington Street area of Belfast on 16 May 1988, the Waterville area of Belfast on 23 September 1988 and the Forterllian Drive area of Belfast on 12 February 1989. [114593]

Mr. Ingram: My hon. Friend refers to the following:

The incident that occurred in Forfar Street area on 9 September 1987. I have assumed he is referring to the murder of Patrick Hamill on 8 September 1987. The details of the incident were referred to the Royal Ulster Constabulary's Tasking and Co-ordinating Group at 17.55 hrs on 8 September 1987;

The incident that occurred in the Newington Street area on 16 May 1988. I have assumed he is referring to the murder of Mr. Terence McDade on 10 May 1988. The details of the incident were referred to the Royal Ulster Constabulary's Tasking and Co-ordinating Group at 22.39 hrs on 10 May 1988;

The incident that occurred on 23 September 1988. An exact time of when the incident was referred to the Royal Ulster Constabulary's Tasking and Co-ordinating Group is not available, but police were informed at 04.32 hrs on 23 September 1988;

The incident that occurred in the Forterllian area on 12 February 1989. I have assumed he is referring to the murder of Mr. Patrick Finucane at Fortwilliam Drive. The

details of the incident were referred to the Royal Ulster Constabulary's Tasking and Co-ordinating Group at 19.41 hrs on 12 February 1989.

No-smoking Policy

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on *(a)* the effectiveness of his Department's no-smoking policy and *(b)* the proportion of his Department's offices that do not allow smoking. [125150]

Mr. Mandelson: The NIO has a well established policy on smoking. A complete ban on smoking has operated effectively in the Department since 1995. This policy is supported by participation in the national no-smoking day campaign and a series of health awareness events where staff who smoke are offered practical advice and information on how to stop.

Smoking is not permitted in any NIO offices apart from designated smoking rooms.

Police Authority

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what arrangements have been made for the appointment of a new Police Authority for Northern Ireland to succeed the present Authority whose term of office expires on 28 June. [127323]

Mr. Mandelson: The Police Authority has a vital task to perform in securing the maintenance of an effective and efficient police force. It also has a very important role to play in continuing to enhance the relationship between the police and the public it serves in the period before the planned Policing Board takes over from the Authority.

I have therefore appointed the current Chairman, Vice-Chairman and 16 members of the Police Authority for Northern Ireland to serve from 29 June 2000 for a further three years (as required by statute) or until the Policing Board takes over from them, probably at the end of March 2001. I have also appointed four new members and in making those appointments I have, as required by the Police (NI) Act 1998, consulted the 26 local district councils. In addition, and in accordance with the guidelines issued by Dame Rennie Fritchie, the Commissioner for Public Appointments, applications for appointment were invited from other individuals. As a result, the Authority widely represents the community and will provide a necessary measure of continuity in the period leading to establishment of the Policing Board.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Organic Farming

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much financial assistance will be available to fund organic conversion in the current financial year. [127017]

Mr. Morley: We expect to spend £12 million on aid for conversion under the Organic Farming Scheme in financial year 2000–01.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which European Union countries provide continuous financial support to farmers after the conversion process to organic farming has been completed. [127019]

Mr. Morley: The hon. Member may like to refer to the table of statistics (page 51 of the Minutes of Evidence) on this matter included in the Report of the Inquiry on "Organic Farming and the European Union" undertaken by the House of Lords European Communities Committee (Sub-Committee D) in Session 1998–99 (HL Paper 93).

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what percentage of agricultural land is certified organic and in conversion in *(a)* Austria, *(b)* Denmark, *(c)* Finland, *(d)* France, *(e)* Sweden and *(f)* the United Kingdom. [127016]

Mr. Morley: In respect of organic areas in other EU member states, the hon. Member may like to refer to the table of statistics (page 49 of the Minutes of Evidence) on this matter included in the Report of the Inquiry on "Organic Farming and the European Union" undertaken by the House of Lords European Communities Committee (Sub-Committee D) in Session 1998–99 (HL Paper 93). Currently, around 3 per cent. of agricultural land in the UK is certified organic or in conversion.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to the answer of 11 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 134W, on organic food, what additional financial assistance he will make available to farmers wishing to convert to organic farming, in addition to free conversion advice and on-farms visits by the Organic Conversion Information Service, before the Organic Farming Scheme reopens. [127025]

Mr. Morley: We have no plans to provide funding additional to the £12 million we already plan to spend in 2000–01 under the Organic Farming Scheme. The OFS will reopen to new applications early in 2001 following the review of the scheme, which is currently taking place.

Floods

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress the Environment Agency has made in implementing its action plan in response to the independent report on the Easter 1998 floods; and if he will make a statement on the serious flooding in Todmorden and other areas of northern England in early June. [127295]

Mr. Morley: The Chairman of the Environment Agency has provided me with a report of progress up to the end of April 2000. Copies are being placed in the House Libraries.

I am pleased to note that the major work programme set out in the Action Plan is almost complete.

Key developments since the Agency's last report, which covered the period to end of December 1999, are as follows:

Completion of the first phase of the telemetry works resulting in an additional 109 river level gauges, 16 river flow gauges and 65 rain gauges. These will enable conditions to be monitored during flooding and the calibration of flood models.

A concordat between the Agency and the Meteorological Office has been signed to provide a framework for improved liaison and exchange of data.

The Agency has completed its programme of visual inspections of its flood defences. Local authorities have inspected between 75 per cent. and 90 per cent. of their defences. The remainder are scheduled for completion by September in line with the Ministry's High Level Targets. Defences belonging to third parties have been inspected where identified through discussions with local authorities.

Of the 1.6 million properties within the flood plain, one million addresses have been identified as high risk. This will enable flood risk information and other publicity material to be better targeted within the wider flood plain.

A letter designed to raise awareness of the flood risk to caravan sites has been produced and distributed together with a request for site owners to make visitors aware of such risks and what they should do in the event of a flood.

The Agency is providing guidelines to enable the severity and extent of flooding to be calculated on a consistent basis in order to better inform post event surveys.

Two activities have yet to be fully completed by the Agency. These are the introduction of the new flood warning codes and revised management structures. The new flood warning codes are scheduled to be introduced on 12 September 2000. The introduction of the revised management structures will be phased during April to September 2000 in order to minimise the risk of disruption to services.

The Agency's Easter Floods Project Team has now completed its work and is to be congratulated for its efforts in delivering the Action Plan and meeting the priorities I set out in striving for a seamless and integrated service of flood forecasting, warning and response. The outstanding issues will be taken forward by the Agency's National Flood Warning Centre. Further activity in improving flood defence will be driven by the High Level Targets that the Government set last November.

As regards the flooding earlier this month, I am acutely aware of the suffering experienced by many communities in northern England, and express the Government's sympathy to all those affected. I have asked the Chairman of the Environment Agency to provide a report on the flooding, by 21 July 2000, to include:

the impact of the flooding;

the causes of the flooding, including assessment of the contributory factors suggested by local members of the public;

the effectiveness and timeliness of flood warnings;

to what extent the effects of these floods were mitigated as a result of the measures taken to implement the Independent Report of the Easter 1998 floods; and

what further lessons can be learned from these floods.

SCOTLAND

Employment Service

Ms Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what performance targets have been set in respect of the employment service in Scotland's aims and objectives in 2000–01. [127225]

Dr. Reid: The aim of the Employment Service is to help people without jobs find work and employers to fill their vacancies. The Employment Service in Scotland makes a significant contribution to an efficient and flexible labour market and to meeting the Government's objectives of high and stable employment and growth, opportunity for all and social inclusion. Its main priority is to help people faced with particular difficulties in the labour market move from welfare and economic inactivity into sustainable employment. It is taking forward an ambitious programme of technological change and business improvement and is preparing for the merger with the Benefits Agency in 2001. I am announcing today the targets we have set for the Employment Service in Scotland for 2000–01, which relate to its four key objectives.

Vision and Purpose

The Employment Service in Scotland aims to make a major contribution to an efficient and flexible labour market and to the Government's objectives of high and stable levels of employment and growth, opportunity for all and social inclusion. The Employment Service in Scotland works closely with employers, and with its private, public and voluntary sector partners to provide a quality service for all people without a job and to promote employment opportunities for all who can work. It aims to attract a diverse range of vacancies and to fill those vacancies quickly by matching the right people and skills with the right jobs. Its main priority is to help individuals facing particular difficulty in the labour market to move from welfare and economic inactivity into sustainable employment. It does this through correct application of the JSA regime, delivery of the New Deals and the pilot ONE service, and through the provision of appropriate advice training and support. The Agency has achieved much over the past three years. The challenge and opportunity now facing it is to sustain continuous improvement in its services to jobseekers and employers and to make these services more accessible and relevant to customer needs, through effective use of modern technology and close working with a wide range of partners.

Aim

To help people without jobs find work and employers to fill their vacancies.

Objective A

To help all people without jobs, and particularly those on welfare and at a disadvantage in the labour market, to find and keep work by providing appropriate information, advice, training and support and by encouraging employers to open more opportunities to them.

Targets

1. To help 20,292 participants in the New Deals and the Glasgow Employment Zone, directly or in partnership with others.
2. To help 11,200 people with disabilities into work, directly or in partnership with others.
3. To help 33,335 disadvantaged jobseekers into work, directly or in partnership with others.
4. To help 91,875 people from welfare into work, directly or in partnership with others.
5. To help 169,325 jobless people into work, directly or in partnership with others.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Objective B

To ensure that the rights and relevant labour market responsibilities of people on JSA and other benefits are fulfilled, while helping to combat fraud and abuse of the benefits system.

Target

To ensure that the relevant labour market responsibilities of people on JSA are fulfilled in 94 per cent. of cases checked.

Objective C

To harness new technology, the pursuit of excellence and continuous improvement to deliver effective, efficient and accessible services to all people without jobs and to employers in Jobcentres and increasingly through other locations and means of communications.

Targets

1. To achieve a 91 per cent. customer service level for jobseekers.
2. To introduce the Learning and Work Bank, new Labour Market System, touch screen kiosks and a single national telephone number for employers by March 2001.

Objective D

To deliver services to all ES customers in a way which respects individual differences, helps to overcome disadvantages due to ethnicity, gender, age or disability and achieves the best possible outcome for all.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Capital Modernisation Fund

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the applications made by her Department to the Captial Modernisation Fund, giving the *(a)* intended recipients, *(b)* financial value and *(c)* outcome of each application. [126450]

Clare Short: DFID has made one application to the Capital Modernisation Fund, which was unsuccessful. This was to meet the costs of a proposed project to implement overseas Information Communications Technology centres to serve three African communities. The cost was estimated at £850,000.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list *(a)* the total number of publications issued by her Department each year since 1997, *(b)* how many of each were printed and *(c)* the total cost of each publication. [126448]

Clare Short: As part of our commitment to openness, as well as to raising awareness and understanding of development issues, we now make publicly available all our strategy documents, including all country and institutional strategy papers, as well as all major consultation papers and speeches. Our publishing output has therefore expanded considerably.

Due to the disproportionate cost involved we are not able to provide the full level of details requested. However within the main categories we have produced:

36 × Country Strategy Papers

10 × Institutional Strategy Papers

8 × Consultation Papers

4 × Background briefings

18 × Speech booklets

10 × Issues of Development magazine.

We also produced this year a publications catalogue which lists the majority of departmental publications produced since 1997, together with information on how to obtain copies. A copy of the catalogue has been placed in the House of Commons Library.

Costs and print runs vary from a typical strategy paper (1,500 copies costing approximately £1,500) to Developments magazine (60,000 copies costing approximately £40,000 per issue, including distribution).

Departmental Reports

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list *(a)* the cost and *(b)* number of copies printed of the Departmental report in (i) 1999 (ii) 1998 and (iii) 2000. [126443]

Clare Short: The total cost and number of copies printed of the Departmental Report are as follows:

Year	*Cost (£)*	*Copies printed*
1998	33,672	1,500
1999	65,051	2,500
2000	98,000	3,500

Zimbabwe

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list *(a)* the number of project completion reports received from Zimbabwe since 1 May 1997 and *(b)* each project that has met its objective. [126452]

Clare Short: Since 1 May 1997, 10 Zimbabwe Project Completion Reports have been received. Of these, eight (80 per cent.) were judged to have either fully or largely achieved their objectives. The following table lists the reports received, indicates their overall achievement rating and describes the rating system used.

Zimbabwe project completion reports received since 1 May 1997

Project title	*Overall achievement*
Small-scale Irrigation Using Wells, Pilot Project	Very good
Zimbabwe Forestry Research and Institution Strengthening Project	Satisfactory
ATP Zimbabwe Iron and Steel Company (ZISCO)—completed February 1996	Poor
Insect Pest Management Project	Satisfactory
Wildlife Disease Epidemiology, Phase II Project	Satisfactory
National Measles Immunisation Days 1998 Project	Satisfactory
ATP: Supply of 300 Land Rovers'—completed June 1997	Very good

Zimbabwe project completion reports received since 1 May 1997

Project title	*Overall achievement*
Social Marketing of Mosquito Nets	Satisfactory
Children Under Stress	Satisfactory
Health Management Strengthening	Fair

[1] Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA), Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW), Posts and Telecommunications Corporation, Forestry Commission

Performance Rating

Very good: Fully achieved

Satisfactory: Largely achieved despite a few shortcomings

Fair: Only partially achieved, benefits and shortcomings finely balanced

Poor: Very limited achievement, extensive shortcomings

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if the police project in Zimbabwe funded by her Department will meet its objective as set out in her Department's Public Service Agreement. [126457]

Clare Short: A formal review of the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) Organisational Development Project in October 1999 showed that it was successful in contributing to DFID's objectives as set out in the Public Service Agreement. The review concluded that the project was enabling organisational change to take place in ZRP to the benefit of the people of Zimbabwe, including the poorest.

However, since February the ZRP has not enforced the law or upheld their own charter in relation to the attacks on the opposition and the land invasions. I have therefore decided that we will continue to support police activities which directly relate to confidence building with civil society, community based organisations and human rights groups. I have also suspended the supply of Land Rovers.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) pursuant to her answer of 12 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 442–43W, on land acquisition in Zimbabwe, for what reasons she did not list *(a)* the number, acreage and cost of farms acquired, *(b)* the person to whom the farms were transferred and *(c)* the acreage which remains in production; [127092]

(2) pursuant to her answer of 12 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 442–43W, on Zimbabwe, if she will place in the Library a copy of the *(a)* ODA evaluation conducted in 1988 and *(b)* 1993 study carried out by the Zimbabwean Comptroller and Auditor General . [127153]

Clare Short: As I have made clear, producing the information required would involve disproportionate cost. I am happy to place a copy of the 1988 ODA evaluation report in the House of Commons Library.

The 1993 study on land reform was prepared by the office of the Zimbabwean Comptroller and Auditor General.

Overseas Staff

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many staff and at what grades her Department employs in *(a)* Kazakhstan, *(b)* Uzbekistan, *(c)* Turkmenistan, *(d)* Tajikistan and *(e)* Kyrgyzstan. [126432]

Clare Short: Our programmes in these countries are small or non-existent and administered by Embassy staff, who are appointed by the FCO, and Staff Appointed In Country (SAIC). Details of staff and their grades for each country are as follows:

(a) Kazakhstan

DS9 (also covers programme in Kyrgyzstan)—70 per cent.

DS7 (also covers programme in Kyrgyzstan)—15 per cent.

SAIC Grade III—100 per cent.

(b) Uzbekistan

DS9—15 per cent.

SAIC II—100 per cent.

(c) Turkmenistan

DS9—15 per cent.

SAIC III—100 per cent.

(d) Tajikistan

No staff employed

(e) Kyrgyzstan

SAIC Grade II—100 per cent.

SAIC Grade III—100 per cent.

My Department also employs two Assistant Professional Officers on DFID rural livelihoods activities within a World bank project.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the total numbers of locally employed staff employed by her Department on *(a)* 1 May 1997 and *(b)* 1 May 2000. [126445]

Clare Short: Figures for locally employed staff, now known as Staff Appointed in Country (SAIC), were not collected centrally in 1997. The figure for SAIC employed by the Department on 1 May 2000 was 410.

Job Advertisements

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list *(a)* the total number and *(b)* the total cost of job advertisements placed by her Department since 1 May 1997. [126446]

Clare Short: The total number of advertisements and their associated costs in each of the financial years since 1997 are as follows:

	Number of advertisements	*Costs (£)*
1997–98	[1]313	991,487
1998–99	[1]324	1,025,832
1999–2000	326	1,064,554
2000–01[2]	40	216,435
Total	1,003	3,298,308

[1] Detailed records of the number of advertisements are not held for these years. The figures are estimates based on the actual costs which are held and other known financial information.
[2] To date

Sierra Leone

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proportion of her Department's bilateral country programme aid for Sierra Leone is spent by the Government of Sierra Leone. [126458]

Clare Short: Currently, we are providing £10 million of programme aid to the Government of Sierra Leone for two purposes: to meet the Government's debt service obligations to the international financial institutions (IFIs); and to help pay the salaries of public sector teachers and health workers, and the police. The programme aid grant is administered on behalf of the Government of Sierra Leone by Crown Agents Financial Services Ltd. (CASL). CASL make current debt service payments direct to the IFIs on behalf of the Government of Sierra Leone as they become due. CASL reimburses the Government of Sierra Leone for prior expenditure on public sector salaries, and then carries out independent audit checks on payroll to guard against fraudulent claims.

Ministerial Offices (Refurbishment)

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the total cost of refurbishment and redecoration of her Department's ministerial offices since 1 May 1997. [126444]

Clare Short: Since 1997 our Department has spent the following amounts on the refurbishment of ministerial offices, which included replacement furniture and redecoration:

1997: £7,978
1998: £7,376
1999: Nil.

The figures for 2000 are not available yet.

Know How Fund

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what aid her Department is providing to Eastern European countries under the Know How Fund; and if she will make a statement. [125229]

Clare Short: Over the last five years bilateral programmes of financial and technical assistance to Eastern European countries have totalled around £80 million a year. This assistance is channelled directly to Governments, and also to other institutions including local governments, non-governmental and civil society institutions. In addition the UK provided assistance through its contributions to multilateral institutions including the European Community and World Bank.

HEALTH

Mead Webber Plant

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the nature is of the investigation the Meat Hygiene Service is planning into official veterinary surgeon supervision at the Mead Webber plant since 10 April; and what the timescale is for the investigation. [122042]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 15 May 2000]:* I understand from the Food Standards Agency that it is arranging for Mead Webber Ltd.'s complaints against the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) to be investigated independently. The investigation will be carried out as quickly as possible.

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many Official Veterinary Surgeons have attended the Mead Webber abattoir since the Meat Hygiene Service took over responsibility for supervising it; and when Mr. Yogaratnam was appointed as OVS to the plant. [122056]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 15 May 2000]:* I am advised by the Food Standards Agency that, owing to a fire at a central Government filestore in 1998, the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) is unable to provide a categorical statement as to how many official veterinary surgeons (OVSs) have attended the Mead Webber abattoir since it took over responsibility for supervising these premises.

However, available records show that 19 OVSs have attended the Mead Webber abattoir since the MHS took over responsibility for supervising it. Two of these have acted as the lead OVSs throughout this period, and as such have been responsible for the production of HAS scores for the plant. The other 17 have been used to provide locum cover.

Mr. Yogaratnam was appointed as OVS to the Mead Webber plant in April 1997.

Staff Secondments

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many staff from his Department were seconded to private sector companies in *(a)* May 1997 to April 1998, *(b)* May 1998 to April 1999 and *(c)* May 1999 to April 2000; and if he will list in each case the companies to which staff were sent, the names and ranks of the staff involved and the duration of the secondment. [123424]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 24 May 2000]:* Interchange is a key component of the reform agenda. The Modernising Government White Paper committed us to increasing interchange, in particular by bringing in more people on secondment and sending more of our people out. Secondments and attachments are part of the Interchange Initiative which promotes the exchange of people and good practice between the Civil Service and other organisations. All sectors of the economy are involved: voluntary, education, health, public and private.

Central records are held on the following secondments to the private sector which commenced in the years shown in the table.

Date	Number	Details
May 1997-April 1998	2	Howard Bloom, SCS, to Sema Group for 5 years Mr. W. Flynn, IP4 to Dawn til Dusk Plc for 1 year
May 1998-April 1999	0	No secondments, according to central records
May 1999-April 2000	1	Robert Newton, IP3 to Federal Mogul for 6 months

Accident and Emergency Units (Violence)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had, and with whom, about giving greater support to nursing staff working in accident and emergency units at NHS hospitals in the Greater London area to combat violence towards staff from the general public. [125767]

Ms Stuart: We are determined to ensure that National Health Service staff who spend their lives caring for others are not rewarded with intimidation and violence. Violence to staff is unacceptable and will not be tolerated.

"Working Together", the national human resources strategic framework for the NHS, sets out a number of HR targets and priorities for NHS employers. One of these concerns violence to staff. NHS employers have been asked to put in place systems for the recording and monitoring of violent incidents and to meet targets to reduce these by 20 per cent. by 2001 and 30 per cent. by 2003. Regional offices of the NHS Executive are asked to monitor progress against these targets. The London Regional Office through its performance management processes will be measuring progress against these targets in 2001.

Cosmetic Surgery

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to the answer of 17 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 129W, on cosmetic surgery, what assessment he has made of the operation of regulations pertaining to advertising of cosmetic surgery; and what contact has taken place between his Department and the Department of Trade and Industry on the same. [126320]

Ms Stuart: Our response to the Health Committee's Fifth Report on the regulation of private and other independent healthcare made it clear that we agreed that normal advertising controls alone may not be sufficient in the field of cosmetic surgery to ensure that the information that patients receive is of an acceptable standard. Officials in the Department of Health and the Department of Trade and Industry worked together on this issue. The Care Standards Bill, as drafted, will allow us to introduce regulations covering standards of information given to patients in the independent sector, including promotional material.

Diabetes

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has (1) to improve awareness among health care professionals of the risk factors and symptoms of diabetes; [126513]

(2) to raise awareness of diabetes among the public, with particular reference to those in higher-risk groups. [126512]

Mr. Denham: We recognise the importance of raising awareness about the risk factors and symptoms of diabetes among both the public and health care professionals. Ministers have asked the United Kingdom National Screening Committee, which advises Government on all aspects of screening policy, to consider whether there is a case for the introduction of a targeted screening programme for Type 2 diabetes and, if so, how this could most effectively be achieved. The conclusions of the Committee will inform the work of the Expert Reference Group for the National Service Framework for diabetes in England.

The aims of the diabetes National Service Framework are to improve health outcomes for people with diabetes by raising the quality of services and reducing variations between them. Its scope includes prevention, identification and management of diabetes and its complications.

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what methods his Department will use to identify the estimated one million people living undiagnosed with diabetes; [126427]

(2) what plans he has to move resources within the NHS from treating the complications of diabetes towards prevention and early diagnosis; [126397]

(3) what plans he has to reduce the incidence of diabetic complications through prevention, early diagnosis and intensive management of the condition. [126418]

Mr. Denham: We recognise the importance of detecting diabetes as early as possible. Ministers have asked the United Kingdom National Screening Committee, which advises Government on all aspects of screening policy, to consider whether there is a case for the introduction of a targeted screening programme for Type 2 diabetes and, if so, how this could most effectively be achieved. The conclusions of the Committee will inform the work of the Expert Reference Group for the National Service Framework for Diabetes in England that we announced last year. The scope of the Framework includes prevention, identification and management of diabetes and its complications.

Single Currency

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the costs to his Department of switching from the pound to the euro. [126399]

Ms Stuart: Should the United Kingdom decide to join the euro, the cost of the changeover would depend on the detailed approach taken to a changeover.

Service Costs

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the total cost of the *(a)* adolescent and

child psychiatry service, *(b)* adolescent and child psychology service, *(c)* community psychiatric nursing service, *(d)* cervical cytology screening programme and *(e)* accident and emergency service in (i) 1970, (ii) 1980, (iii) 1990 and (iv) 1999. [126824]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* Information on the costs of the community psychiatric nurses is not collected centrally. Information is not collected separately on the child and adolescent psychology service.

The NHS Cervical Screening Programme began in 1988. The National Audit Office estimated in 1998 that the Programme costs around £132 million per year, around £34 per woman screened

National Audit Office: The Performance of the NHS Cervical Screening Programme in England: Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General: HC678 Session 1997–98: 22 April 1998.

The latest information on the cost of child and adolescent psychiatry service and the accident and emergency service is shown in the table.

£

	Expenditure 1998–99
Adolescent and child psychiatry	123,278,175
Purchase of healthcare by HAs (A&E)	780,245,000

The adolescent and child psychiatry figure includes expenditure for in-patients, outpatients, royal college specialities and day care patients.

Coronary Care Services

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the targets he has set health authorities for coronary care services. [126111]

Yvette Cooper: The National Service Framework for Coronary Heart Disease was published on 6 March. The Framework sets 12 national standards for improved prevention, diagnosis and treatment, and goals to secure fair access to high quality services over the 10-year period. This will include building up capacity, increasing the specialist workforce, improving prevention and creating faster access to services.

Last October we announced a £50 million investment for the expansion of cardiac surgery. Last month we announced a further investment of £50 million, to be used to establish rapid access chest pain clinics, to speed up ambulance response times, to purchase defibrillators and to reduce waiting times for treatment.

Regional offices are working with their health authorities and National Health Service trusts to ensure that these resources are targeted most effectively to increase the use of marginal capacity and to meet the greatest need within their region. A top priority for Dr. Roger Boyle, the National Director for Heart Disease, is to look with regional offices and with cardiac centres at the initial plans to ensure that we make the very best use of all the available skills and capacity.

Correspondence

Sir Michael Spicer: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the hon. Member for West Worcestershire will receive an answer to his letters of 23 March, 5 May and 2 June, relating to the case of his constituent, Ms Wendy Hands of Ashbrooke, Church Walk, Upton-upon-Severn, addressed to the Minister for Public Health. [126982]

Yvette Cooper: I shall let the hon. Member have a reply to his letters as soon as possible.

Adoption

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children were adopted in the UK in 1999. [126267]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Tom Cox dated 20 June 2000:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question about adoption.

The final numbers of adoptions recorded during 1999 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are not yet available; the corresponding number in Scotland was 488.

The number of adoptions recorded in 1998 in the United Kingdom was 4,998.

WALES

Education and Health Funding

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much additional funding will be made available to *(a)* schools and *(b)* the Health Service in Wales as a result of specific measures announced in the Budget. [118188]

Mr. Hanson: There will be an increase of £49.6 million in the Welsh Block as a consequence of the increase in education funding for 2000–01 and of £1,299 million as a consequence of the increase in health funding for 2000–01 to 2003–04, £99 million of which will fall in 2000–01. The allocation of these funds is entirely a matter for the Assembly.

The Assembly Finance Secretary has announced allocations of £20.6 million to schools delegated budgets to raise standards of teaching and learning; £26.8 million for capital investments in schools; £2.2 million for teacher recruitment measures; and £40 million for joint working between NHS, Social Services, voluntary organisations and others to deal with all-year emergency pressures on the NHS and for the NHS to reduce waiting times. She has said that the rest of the increase will be allocated to health; discussions are ongoing on how best to allocate it to other identified priority areas.

Drugs

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the

First Secretary concerning the impact of *(a)* hard and *(b)* soft drugs upon Deeside; and if he will make a statement. [126518]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend and I have regular discussions with the First Secretary and other Assembly Secretaries about a range of topics including drug abuse.

On 25 May, Jane Hutt, the Assembly Secretary for Health and Social Services, launched "Tackling Substance Misuse in Wales: A Partnership Approach", copies of which have been placed in the Library of the House. New developments in North Wales include the appointment by the Community Drug and Alcohol Service of two young people's workers and a specialist midwife.

Rural Bus Services

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary concerning the provision of improved rural bus services; and if he will make a statement. [126973]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular discussions with the First Secretary on a range of topics including rural bus services.

I am pleased that the Assembly has decided to continue the Bus Subsidy Grant scheme in the current financial year. Of the £5 million budget, £3 million is reserved solely for boosting the number and range of services in rural areas. The balance is available for use at local authorities' discretion—which can include yet further support to rural services. These figures are in addition to approximately £10 million a year which authorities already spend on subsidising non-commercial local bus services throughout their areas.

Rural Wales

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary concerning new policies to assist rural Wales; and if he will make a statement. [126972]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular discussions with the First Secretary about a range of matters including the needs of rural Wales.

The Assembly is addressing the specific needs of rural Wales and its communities in the development of several new policies and programmes. These include the Communities First programme; Local Regeneration Fund; Objective 1 Single Programming Document; Objective 2 and Transitional Funding for many parts of the rural East; and the Rural Development Plan for Wales.

DEFENCE

No-smoking Policy

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on *(a)* the effectiveness of his Department's no-smoking policy and *(b)* the proportion of his Department's offices that do not allow smoking. [125158]

Dr. Moonie: My Department's aim, in line with wider Government policy, is to create a non-smoking working environment in so far as this reflects the wishes of staff. Detailed guidance on this policy is promulgated in the "Departmental Health and Safety Handbook, Joint Service Publication 375", a copy of which has been placed in the Library of the House.

The implementation of departmental policy on smoking, in common with other health and safety matters, is a local line management responsibility, and consequently, no central record is held on the proportion of the Department's offices that do not allow smoking. This information could, therefore, be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Armed Forces Exercises

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the *(a)* Army, *(b)* Navy, *(c)* RAF and *(d)* TA exercises cancelled for budgetary reasons in (i) 1999–2000 and (ii) 2000–01. [125707]

Dr. Moonie: The following table sets out the Royal Navy exercises cancelled for budgetary reasons in the specified period.

No Army, RAF or TA exercises have been cancelled for budgetary reasons during 1999–2000.

No Navy, Army, RAF or TA exercises planned to take place during financial year 2000–01 have been cancelled (or are expected to be cancelled) for budgetary reasons.

RN exercises cancelled due to budgetary reasons—FY 1999–2000

Serial/name of exercise	*Dates*
1 FLOTEX (Flotilla Exercise)	November 1999
2 CADENCE BRAKE (Royal Marine winter driving training in Norway (precursor to serial 4))	November 1999
3 ASWEX 2000 (Ship, Submarine, Helicopter Anti-submarine warfare exercise)	January 2000
4 Royal Marine Winter Deployment (Arctic warfare training in Norway)	January 2000

Defence Intelligence and Security Centre

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the current year's budget and staff establishment of the Defence Intelligence and Security Centre. [125201]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 12 June 2000]:* The cash allocation for Financial Year 2000–01 is £18.448 million. The Defence Intelligence and Security Centre's current staff establishment is as follows:

	Number
Army Officers	41
Army Solders	166
Navy Officers	9
Navy Rating	28
RAF Officer	14
RAF Airmen	49
Civilian Non Industrial	122
Civilian Industrial	25
Total	454

BOWMAN Project

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what the cost has been to date of the BOWMAN project; [125783]

(2) what alternatives to the BOWMAN project he has *(a)* considered and *(b)* evaluated; and when he will make a decision on the future of the project. [125784]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Robert Key, dated 20 June 2000:

I am replying to your questions to the Secretary of State for Defence about the BOWMAN communication project. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

As part of the BOWMAN project, we have examined a number of alternative technical options, and have reviewed whether the basic approach to BOWMAN remains valid in the light of rapid developments in the mobile communications field. The analysis demonstrates that BOWMAN can be a robust solution to the military requirement. Our primary effort has been directed to working with Archer Communications Systems Limited (ACSL), the nominated BOWMAN contractor, to establish whether an adequately de-risked solution can be provided on taut contractual terms. In parallel, study contracts were placed earlier this year with Computing Devices Canada and Thomson CSF to ascertain whether suitable alternatives to the current ACSL solution for BOWMAN might be available. These studies have reported and are being evaluated.

A decision on the way ahead for BOWMAN is expected later this Summer. At 31 March 2000, expenditure on BOWMAN which included work that would be relevant to solutions other than that being developed by ACSL, was some £260M at outturn prices.

DERA Public-private Partnership

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the inclusion of DERA West Freugh in the DERA public-private partnership. [125950]

Mr. Hoon: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 17 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 366–67W, to my hon. Friend for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman), which outlined our proposals for the DERA public private partnership. These are described in more detail in the consultation document, a copy of which can be found in the Library of the House and on the internet at www.mod.uk/commercial/ppp/dera/.

Under current proposals, we envisage that the capabilities provided by West Freugh will form part of the NewDERA company. It is, therefore, likely that West Freugh would transfer to the private sector.

Our proposals are designated to secure a long-term future for both NewDERA and those elements to be retained within the Ministry of Defence. The new freedoms proposed for NewDERA will open up a range of commercial opportunities not previously available and help secure jobs in the longer term.

No final decisions on the PPP will be taken until all the inputs received during the consultation exercise, which ended on 9 June, have been fully analysed. We hope to be in a position to make an announcement on the way ahead for DERA before the summer recess.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reasons army doctors during the recent deployment in Sierra Leone and Senegal did not carry sufficient supplies of *(a)* mefloquine and *(b)* savarine; and if he will make a statement. [126055]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 15 June 2000]:* The normal anti-malarial drugs for Sierra Leone are mefloquine, or chloroquine and proguanil tablets for aircrew. Supplies of these drugs were readily available. The reasons why some personnel deployed to Sierra Leone without supplies of mefloquine are being investigated by the Ministry of Defence. The French anti-malarial drug savarine, which is a combination of chloroquine and proguanil, was acquired locally as an interim measure and distributed within 24 hours of personnel arriving in theatre. Personnel who had deployed without supplies of mefloquine were transferred to mefloquine within four days of arrival in theatre.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his policy on medical preparedness of *(a)* the spearhead battalions of the Rapid Reaction Corps and *(b)* other armed forces personnel in all three Services, with particular reference to Sierra Leone; and if he will make a statement. [126056]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 15 June 2000]:* It is the Ministry of Defence's policy that all Service personnel should be up to date with routine vaccinations and that members of the Joint Rapid Reaction Forces should be up to date with certain additional vaccinations, depending on their degree of readiness. Personnel deploying to high risk areas should receive further vaccinations specific to the risks they face. Other aspects of medical preparedness will depend on the role of the deploying forces and the geographical location to which they are deploying.

Service Personnel (Medical Records)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what records are kept *(a)* centrally, *(b)* in theatre and *(c)* on individual service personnel relating to (i) inoculations, (ii) prophylactic drugs and (iii) other medications. [126053]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 15 June 2000]:* Details of inoculations, prescribed prophylactic drugs and other medications are recorded in individuals' personal medical records known as Form F Med 4. These records are normally held by the individuals' parent units. Information may also be held on medical centre computer systems. Any medical treatment administered to personnel in-theatre is recorded for each individual in an operational medical record (Form F Med 965). This information is incorporated into F Med 4s on return. In addition, the Army records the nature and date of vaccinations given to individuals centrally on personnel information systems. A central record has been maintained on vaccinations given to personnel while deployed on Operation Palliser.

Land (Caversfield)

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will enforce the agreement between the Ministry of Defence and Hodge (Eastern) Ltd. on recreational land at Caversfield in Oxfordshire. [126663]

Dr. Moonie: The former Ministry of Defence land at Caversfield, sold to Hodge (Eastern) Limited in December 1996, included two areas of 'bare' land, which the clawback clause in the transfer refers to as

open space either for playing fields or agricultural purposes.

There has been no breach of the agreement between the Ministry of Defence and Hodge (Eastern) Limited in relation to this open land.

RAF Feltwell

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when a Minister from his Department last visited RAF Feltwell. [126648]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* Since 1 May 1997 no Minister of this Department has visited RAF Feltwell.

Advertising

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much has been spent by his Department on advertising in each year since May 1997. [125695]

Dr. Moonie: This information is not required in the requested format, for internal MOD management purposes and, as a result, is not collected centrally. It could, therefore, be provided only at disproportionate cost. However, related cost information is as set out.

£ million

Financial year	*PR Marketing and business support services*	*Expenditure by the Chief of Public Relations*
1997–98	0.502	2.267
1998–99	0.844	2.328
1999–2000	1.114	2.741

Excluding staff salaries or associated costs

Security

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence in respect of DA-Notice No. 4, how many *(a)* sites and *(b)* individuals have been identified where disclosure of locations and addresses would not be in the public interest. [126876]

Mr. Spellar: There are under 10 sites where disclosure of location would not be in the public interest. The locations of other sites covered by DA-Notice No. 4 are not concealed, although their security arrangements are classified.

Each Ministry involved in security and counter-terrorist measures holds its own list of high threat personnel addresses. That for the Ministry of Defence contains those of 22 serving military personnel, 46 retired military personnel, three civil servants and four Ministers.

Munitions Stocks

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what steps have been taken to restore stocks of precision guided and non-precision guided munitions back to pre-operation levels following Operation Allied Force; and if he will make a statement; [124207]

(2) what contracts have been placed to replace *(a)* Paveway II, *(b)* Paveway III, *(c)* RBL 755, *(d)* 1000lb bomb, *(e)* Alarm and *(f)* TLAM expended during operations in Kosovo, listing in each case the (i) company involved, (ii) estimated date of delivery, (iii) value of the contract and (iv) cost per unit; and if he will make a statement. [124221]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 5 June 2000] [pursuant to his reply, 13 June 2000, c. 559–60W]:* The unit price of Paveway II is some £18,000 (VAT exclusive) and not £8,000 as previously stated.

PRIME MINISTER

Correspondence

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister how many *(a)* special advisers and *(b)* officials are authorised to respond to correspondence on his behalf. [126506]

The Prime Minister: The nature and origin of correspondence will determine whether a Minister, official or special adviser replies.

Press Contacts

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will introduce a code for Ministers and special advisers on contacts with the Press. [126502]

The Prime Minister: Guidance for Ministers on contacts with the Press is set out in the "Ministerial Code". Guidance for all civil servants, including special advisers, on contacts with the Press is set out in "Guidance on the Work of the Government Information Service".

Special Advisers

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister what methods are used to resolve conflicts of interest within the terms and conditions of employment in the case of special advisers invested with power to direct civil servants. [126297]

The Prime Minister: Advice on handling conflicts of interests for all civil servants is set out in the "Civil Service Management Code". For Special Advisers, this is supplemented by guidance set out in the "Model Contract for Special Advisers".

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the visits undertaken to the United States by *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* special advisers since 1 May 1997. [126549]

The Prime Minister: Detailed information in the form requested is not held centrally. A list of Cabinet Ministers' visits overseas costing more than £500, and information on spend by all Ministers on travel overseas for the period 2 May 1997 to 31 March 1999 was placed in the Library of the House on 17 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns 196–97W. This included the costs of accompanying special advisers. A similar list and information on spend for the financial year 1999–2000 is currently being assembled and will be published shortly.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Holocaust Survivors

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on progress with his discussions with the banking industry concerning charges levied on holocaust survivors in respect of conversion of pensions from deutschmarks to sterling. [122449]

Mr. Byers: Earlier this year I approached a number of major banks about their charging policy in respect of regular payments made by the German Government to survivors of the Holocaust living in the UK.

I am pleased that all the major banks have agreed to waive their charges relating to holocaust payments in future. The Department of Trade and Industry will seek the help of the German authorities to identify those who might benefit from this arrangement, but in the meantime potential beneficiaries should make themselves known to one of the following banks: Bank of Scotland; Barclays; HSBC; Lloyds TSB and Royal Bank of Scotland/ National Westminster.

These banks have agreed to waive future charges. Because of the large number of other payments the banks process, those who receive Holocaust-related payments from the German Government through a bank account should contact one of these banks to benefit from this new arrangement.

Distance Selling

Mr. McAllion: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the *(a)* organisations and companies consulted in 1998–99 as part of the consultation on the EU directive on distance selling and *(b)* those organisations and companies that responded to this consultation. [125951]

Dr. Howells: Consultations on the implementation of the Directive 97/7/EC on the Protection of Consumers in respect of Distance Contracts (the Distance Selling Directive) were conducted in June 1998 and November 1999. A total of 576 organisations, including consumer and business organisations, individual businesses, and local authority trading standards departments, were consulted. In addition, there have been over 350 downloadings of the second consultation document from the DTI website at www.dti.gov.uk/CACP/ca/distance/

A list of the organisations, businesses and individuals consulted in 1998–99 and those that responded to this consultation has been made available for inspection in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. McAllion: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the organisations and companies consulted in 1998–99 as part of the consultation on the EU directive on distance selling, indicating the organisations and companies that responded to the consultation. [126894]

Dr. Howells: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him today to his question above.

Insolvency

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how he defines the difference between responsible risk takers and culpable bankrupts for the purpose of implementing the recommendations of the Insolvency Working Party; and if he will estimate the proportion of each. [126035]

Dr. Howells: I am satisfied that there is a clear distinction to be drawn between individuals who are dishonest or whose conduct with regard to their creditors is irresponsible and those whose use of credit and treatment of their creditors is conscientious and above board. Examples of irresponsible conduct would be an individual continuing to trade and incur credit at a time when he or she knew themselves to be insolvent; or an individual consumer obtaining credit without any regard to his ability to repay the debts incurred. Information available from Official Receivers indicates that the very great majority of individuals subject to bankruptcy are neither dishonest nor irresponsible.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on what basis he estimates that seven to 12 per cent. of bankrupts are culpable; and what relationship these percentages have to the findings of the Insolvency Service's Study of Business Failures in January and February 1999. [126040]

Dr. Howells: An estimate of the number of bankrupts who may have been guilty of misconduct in relation to their creditors can be made by reference to the number of bankrupts reported by Official Receivers as having, prima facie, committed criminal offences; the number of bankrupts identified by Official Receivers as having committed criminal offences but in respect of whose affairs further investigation or prosecution would not, in the public interest, be warranted; and information obtained from Official Receivers as in their survey of Business Failures.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many *(a)* individuals and *(b)* firms are regulated by each of the bodies responsible for regulating the insolvency industry. [126484]

Dr. Howells: The Insolvency authorising bodies are responsible for the authorisation of individuals as insolvency practitioners. Firms cannot be authorised. The numbers of individuals concerned are:

	Number
The Association of Chartered Certified Accountants	155
Insolvency Practitioners Association	330
The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales	784
The Institute of Chartered Accountants in Ireland	68
The Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland	156
The Law Society	196
The Law Society of Scotland	20
The Secretary of State	125

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action his Department has taken over the report issued by Mr. Justice Ferris and his proposals for setting the fees of insolvency practitioners. [126486]

Dr. Howells: Following receipt of the first report by Mr. Justice Ferris, The Association of Business Recovery Professionals (formerly the Society of Practitioners of

Insolvency) issued preliminary guidance to its members on the possible format of application for fee approval. Further guidance is awaiting publication of the final report of the Ferris Working Party and the issue of a revised Statement of Insolvency Practice on remuneration of office holders. My Department is represented on the Working Party and is continuing to monitor the position.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what inquiries his Department has made into *(a)* receiverships and *(b)* liquidations started more than 10 years ago but still not finalised; and how many liquidators come into this category. [126479]

Dr. Howells: This information could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many complaints about the conduct of the insolvency practitioners have been lodged with each of the bodies responsible for regulating the insolvency industry since 1997. [126485]

Dr. Howells: The number of complaints about insolvency practitioners received between 1 January 1997 and 31 December 1999 for each authorising body is as follows:

	Number
Association of Chartered Certified Accountants	118
Insolvency Practitioners Association	347
Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales	597
Institute of Charted Accountants in Ireland	23
Institute of Charted Accountants in Scotland	115
The Law Society	7
The Law Society of Scotland	0
The Secretary of State	132

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set up an independent investigation into the administration and liquidation of *(a)* J. S. Bass & Co. Limited and *(b)* Exchange Travel. [126476]

Dr. Howells: No. However, as I indicated in my recent letter to my hon. Friend, officials are in touch with the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales concerning the handling of the complaint about the insolvency practitioners in the Bass case.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place the comments received on the Insolvency Working Party's interim and final reports in the Library. [126482]

Dr. Howells: The Insolvency Regulation Working Party was established by the insolvency authorising bodies and comments made to it were a matter for the Working Party and not for Ministers.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the receiverships and liquidations begun more than 20 years ago and still not finalised. [126480]

Dr. Howells: This information could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will introduce legislation under which the receivers and liquidators will be required to owe a duty of care to all the stakeholders affected by their decisions. [126481]

Dr. Howells: I have no plans to do so.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action his Department has taken over the receivership of Heritage plc. [126490]

Dr. Howells: The complaint about the receivers of Heritage plc was a matter for the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, the authorising body of the practitioners concerned. The Institute found there to be no prima facie case of misconduct.

In view of continuing concerns expressed by the complainant, officials have been in touch with the Institute and are in the process of carrying out a review of the handling of the complaint.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the *(a)* Atlantic Computers, *(b)* Coloroll, *(c)* Barlow Clowes and *(d)* Stone Platt receiverships and liquidations began; when they were finalised; what fees have been collected by the insolvency practitioners; and if he will make a statement. [126478]

Dr. Howells: The information requested is not immediately available. I will write to my hon. Friend about this matter and place a copy of that letter in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proposals he has for expanding the supply of insolvency practitioners. [126489]

Dr. Howells: The requirements to be fit and proper and to meet certain criteria as to education, practical training and experience are designed to ensure that authorisation will only be granted to individuals who can demonstrate a high standard of integrity and professionalism.

There are presently 1,834 authorised insolvency practitioners of whom some 1,270 are currently understood to take appointments.

The Insolvency Bill presently before Parliament provides for the Secretary of State to have the additional power to recognise a body so that it may authorise individuals to take appointments but only in the capacity of nominee or supervisor of a voluntary arrangement.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action *(a)* he and *(b)* the Recognised Professional Bodies have taken against the insolvency practitioners whose actions were highlighted in Channel 4's "Dispatches" programme broadcast on 19 June 1996. [126477]

Dr. Howells: The relevant Recognised Professional Bodies were made aware of the programme at the time and I have no reason to doubt that any matters arising which related to the conduct of authorised insolvency practitioners would have been fully and thoroughly investigated by the bodies concerned.

Auditors

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will propose legislation which will prevent auditors acting as consultants for their audit clients. [126487]

Dr. Howells: We have no plans to do so.

It is central to the role of the company auditor that he or she is independent in mind and in appearance. The provision of non-audit services to audit clients can call into question the auditor's independence of the entities being reported on. It will be appropriate for the new Ethics Standards Board, when it is established as part of the new independent Framework of Regulation for the accountancy profession, to look at the ethical rules and guidance in this area.

The law in the UK already requires that the bodies responsible for supervising the work of company auditors have adequate rules to ensure that the auditor does not have an interest likely to conflict with the proper conduct of the audit. The current professional guidance, which forms part of those rules, acknowledges that the provision of non-audit services may give rise to threats to independence. The auditor is required to put in place appropriate safeguards and to be able to demonstrate that he or she has reasonably concluded that those safeguards are adequate. Otherwise the auditor either cannot take on the audit engagement or cannot provide the non-audit service.

Science Enterprise Challenge

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the outcome of the additional round of Science Enterprise Challenge will be announced. [126744]

Mr. Byers: I have today announced that four additional enterprise centres are to be established at the universities of Durham, Oxford, Ulster and Warwick.

These centres will join the existing network of eight centres I announced in September 1999. These centres will foster the commercialisation of research and new ideas, will help stimulate scientific entrepreneurialism and will incorporate the teaching of enterprise into science and engineering curricula in universities.

The quality of the proposals demonstrates the wealth of talent and creativity within our science and engineering community, and the enthusiasm for innovative thinking and entrepreneurialism.

I very much look forward to seeing these centres develop. I am confident that they will make a significant contribution to the enterprise and innovation culture in the UK.

Robert Maxwell

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list *(a)* the date when the inspectors were appointed to investigate the affairs of the business dealings of the late Robert Maxwell, *(b)* the cost of the investigation to date, *(c)* the likely date of publication, *(d)* representations received from any party which objects to the publication of the inspectors' report and *(e)* the reasons for the delay in publishing the report. [126488]

Dr. Howells: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to him on 5 May 1999, *Official Report*, column 416W. The cost to date of the inspection into the affairs and membership of Mirror Group Newspapers is £7,676,952. The inspectors have not yet reported to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. I am not aware that any representations have been received which object to the publication of the inspectors' report.

Personal Care Occupations

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list those occupations which involve grooming and other aspects of personal care which are not regulated. [126415]

Dr. Howells: The grooming and personal care occupations cover a number of different industries, all of which are governed by general legislation on the supply of goods and services. There are no sector specific regulations.

Following publication of the Consumer White Paper "Modern markets: confident consumers", we continue to encourage sectors to develop effective codes of practice. These can raise standards of consumer protection and help inform consumers of the level of service they can expect and of methods of redress should the service not meet their expectations.

Parental Leave Directive

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library the letter of warning from the European Commission regarding the incorrect transposition of the Parental Leave Directive and the response from the Government to this letter. [126286]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Correspondence between the European Commission and the UK Government on the implementation of the Parental Leave Directive is confidential.

ECGD (Sudan)

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many applications have been received from United Kingdom companies for ECGD cover concerned with projects relating to the Sudan oil industry in each of the last three years. [126659]

Mr. Caborn: One application has been received in 1997 but no ECGD cover was provided.

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if Sudan is accepted for ECGD cover. [126660]

Mr. Caborn: No.

Corruption and Bribery

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the British companies which have been banned from World bank contracts because of fraud and corruption in the last five years. [127076]

Mr. Caborn: The companies and individuals debarred by the World bank for infringing its procurement guidelines and which are listed on the World bank's website are as follows:

Pradeep S. Nair of London, United Kingdom

Crown Sakura Ltd. of London, United Kingdom

Chase Berkeley Cavendish Ltd. of London, United Kingdom

Amani B. P. Ltd. of London, United Kingdom

Case Technology Ltd. of Watford, Hertfordshire, United Kingdom

Labh Singh Gill of Warwickshire, United Kingdom

Pradeep Menon of London, United Kingdom

Shivshanker Pre Nair of London, United Kingdom

Agricultural Development Services Ltd. of London, United Kingdom

Ana Exports Ltd. of London, United Kingdom

Consultants for International Development plc of London, United Kingdom

Cord Construction Ltd. of Isle of Man, United Kingdom

Cybertek International of London, United Kingdom

Drill Technologies & Co. of London, United Kingdom

Economic Consulting Group of London, United Kingdom

Emkay Enterprises Ltd. of London, United Kingdom

Engineering Projects International of London, United Kingdom

First Fuji Ltd. of Isle of Man, United Kingdom

Flair Developments Ltd. of Isle of Man, United Kingdom

Infotek & Co. of London, United Kingdom

International Development Projects Services of London, United Kingdom

Inter-Russ Ltd. of Isle of Man, United Kingdom

Labh Universal of Coventry, United Kingdom

Medirite Group Ltd. of Middlesex, United Kingdom

Mirna International of Berkshire, United Kingdom

Norsk-Agro Ltd. of London, United Kingdom

Resource Development Ltd. of Isle of Man, United Kingdom

Ribalco International of Berkshire, United Kingdom

Shivind Ltd. of Isle of Man, United Kingdom

Thrust Technologies & Co. of London, United Kingdom

Times International & Co. of London, United Kingdom

United Basel Ltd. of Isle of Man, United Kingdom

West End Associates Ltd. of Isle of Man, United Kingdom

Agric-Canada of United Kingdom

Overseas Project Services Ltd. of United Kingdom.

It is understood that a number of the companies and individuals dispute the findings which led to the debarments.

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many British companies have been prosecuted in the UK for bribing foreign officials in the last five years. [127077]

Mr. Caborn: Official records do not distinguish between prosecutions of companies or individuals; nor do they distinguish between prosecutions in respect of domestic or foreign officials. The figures for prosecutions in England and Wales under the Prevention of Corruption Acts 1889 to 1916 for the last five years for which figures are currently available are as follows:

Year	*Number*
1993	35
1994	46
1995	60
1996	60
1997	58

Advertising Standards Authority

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Advertising Standards Authority. [126329]

Dr. Howells: As we stated in the White Paper "Modern Markets: Confident Consumers" (Cm 4410 July 1999), the Government strongly support the self-regulatory controls on advertising in the UK run by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA). We remain of the view that the ASA is a good example of effective self-regulation, which has succeeded in maintaining standards in the field of advertising.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many referrals the OFT has received from the Advertising Standards Authority since 1 May 1997. [126330]

Dr. Howells: The Office of Fair Trading report having received three cases referred for consideration under the Control of Misleading Advertisements Regulations 1988 by the Advertising Standards Authority since 1 May 1997.

Coal Industry

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress is being made with the Government's application to the European Commission for approval of financial support to the coal mining industry; and if he will make a statement. [127024]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government are consulting widely among producers and users of coal and other interested parties on the proposed structure of the scheme. My officials are engaged in preliminary discussions with the European Commission and we hope to be in a position to formally notify the Commission soon on our proposals to pay aid.

Advertising

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much has been spent by his Department on advertising in each year since May 1997. [125693]

Mr. Byers: Expenditure on advertising by the DTI, which was all placed through the Central Office of Information, was as follows:

	£
1997–98	[1]2,373,637
1998–99	[1]5,543,938
1999–2000	[1]1,714,573

[1] Excluding VAT

Public Holidays

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to declare a public holiday to commemorate *(a)* in 2002, the 50th anniversary of the accession to the throne of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and *(b)* in 2003, the 50th anniversary of her coronation; and what dates have been selected. [126653]

Mr. Alan Johnson: A bank holiday in 2002 to celebrate the Queen's Golden Jubilee, and the date on which such a holiday might be held, is under consideration and will be the subject of appropriate consultations. I have no plans for any additional bank holidays in 2003.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Equal Treatment Directive

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library copies of the responses which he received from organisations outside Government to his consultation about the proposed EC Directive on implementing the equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin. [126535]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The consultation was conducted at a series of five meetings with organisations outside government which were held between publication of the draft by the Commission in November 1999 and political agreement at Council in June 2000. This was due to negotiations in Brussels being conducted in closed Working Group sessions, and are, therefore, being unable to provide later versions of the text of the Directive outside government in writing.

Drivers (Red Lights)

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many drivers have been *(a)* prosecuted for and *(b)* convicted of driving through a red traffic light in each of the last five years. [126248]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The following table gives the available information:

Numbers of prosecutions and convictions for failing to comply with traffic signals, England and Wales, 1993 to 1997

	Prosecutions	*Convictions*
1993	35,306	30,061
1994	29,152	24,266
1995	29,695	24,480
1996	30,220	25,307
1997	27,915	23,553

Note:
Figures for later years are not yet available

The majority of these offences are dealt with by the issue of fixed penalty notices.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to reply to the letter, dated 25 April, from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Mr. T. Khan. [126289]

Mr. Straw: I wrote to my right hon. Friend on 20 June.

Cycling on Pavements

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what consultations he has had with police forces about the enforcement and value of the prohibition of cycling on pavements. [126409]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Cycling on the pavement is a long-established offence under Section 72 of the Highways Act 1835. The Government's most recent consultation with the police on this subject was on the introduction of a fixed penalty offence for cycling on the pavement. The change was supported by the Association of Chief Police Officers.

The Home Office consultation exercise in 1996 on seven proposed new fixed penalty offences, including cycling on the pavement, revealed substantial public concern about inconsiderate and irresponsible cycling on the pavement in England and Wales, which particularly affected the elderly and disabled. The new fixed penalty offence allows the police to deal more simply and directly with particular local problems as they arise.

Bribery

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to make bribery carried out overseas by UK citizens and companies a criminal offence; and if he will make a statement. [127075]

Mr. Straw: Copies of the discussion paper setting out the Government's proposals for the reform of the law of corruption are now available in the Library and in the Vote Office.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Kosovan refugees in the UK applied for leave to remain in the last 12 months; and what percentage of such applications *(a)* were granted, *(b)* were refused and *(c)* are under consideration. [127088]

Mrs. Roche: Since March 2000, of those who arrived from Kosovo under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Humanitarian Evacuation Programme, 656 principal applicants have sought an extension of exceptional leave to enter, 374 have applied for asylum and 150 have applied for both exceptional leave and asylum. Five per cent. of the applications have been granted, 33 per cent. refused and 62 per cent. are outstanding.

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received in support of allowing Kosovan refugees to remain in the United Kingdom until such time as they feel able to return. [127089]

Mrs. Roche: Ministers and officials have corresponded with and have had regular meetings with various non-Governmental organisations involved with the support of the Kosovan evacuees since they came to the United Kingdom last year.

Kosovan Albanians who were evacuated to the United Kingdom under the Humanitarian Evacuation Programme (HEP) between 25 April and 25 June 1999 were granted 12 months' leave to enter. As agreed with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) at the outset of the evacuation process, protection was afforded on a temporary basis only. It was made clear at the time and subsequently that the leave of the evacuated Kosovans would not be extended and that they would be expected to return to Kosovo as soon as it was safe to do so.

UNHCR judge that it is now safe for the majority of Kosovan Albanians to return to Kosovo and this has been exemplified by the one million Kosovans who have voluntarily chosen to return since July 1999.

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Kosovan refugees were returned to Kosovo on each day between 1 and 16 June. [127087]

Mrs. Roche: All of the 469 Kosovans who arrived in the United Kingdom under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Humanitarian Evacuation Programme and the 69 who arrived in the United Kingdom independently, returned to Kosovo on the permanent voluntary return programme between 1 and 16 June. The table shows the number of Kosovans returning permanently on each flight between 1 and 16 June.

Date	*Humanitarian evacuation programme*	*Independent arrivals*
1 June	120	11
9 June	112	15
15 June	93	31
16 June	144	12
Total	469	69

Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the nature of the representations he has received recently from business interests in respect of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill. [126305]

Mr. Straw: I have received various representations from business interests since the introduction of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill to the House of Commons on 9 February this year. They have supported the broad aims of the Bill. Most have pressed for changes to minimise the uncertainty over the impact of Clause 12 (maintenance of a reasonable intercept capability). The Clause has been amended in response to some of these representations. The Alliance for Electronic Business pressed for affirmative resolution for the order under Clause 12. This was provided by amendment at Commons Report. We have also amended the Bill to require the Secretary of State to meet the marginal costs of interception. Some businesses have also asked for reassurances which have been given as to how we intend the regime to work. Others are pressing us about the costs of maintaining a reasonable intercept capability on the internet.

Business interests have also pressed for some changes to Part III of the Bill in relation to access to encryption keys. Changes have been made to Part III in response to these representations. For example, the Bill has been amended to say that keys can be accessed only "in special circumstances" as a direct response to industry representations. Amendments designed to clarify what should be contained in a decryption notice and to remove the Directors' liability in respect of Part III of the Bill were also a response to industry representations.

Burns Committee

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will establish an investigation into the source of the leak of the findings of the Committee of Inquiry into Hunting with Dogs; and if he will make a statement. [126303]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am not aware of a leak of the findings of the Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Hunting with Dogs in England and Wales.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with Lord Burns following the publication of the report of the Committee of Inquiry into Hunting with Dogs; and if he will make a statement. [126304]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: None.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for licences under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 were *(a)* granted unamended, *(b)* granted in amended form and *(c)* rejected in the last year for which figures are available. [126332]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: This information is not recorded centrally.

I am advised that the vast majority of project licence applications are revised during negotiations with the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Inspectorate or have conditions added to either restrict or qualify the authorities sought. Proposals which are outside the requirements of the law or not good science will rarely become formal applications (and hence rejections) because most potential applicants seek and take the advice of inspectors at an early stage.

Paragraph 13 of Appendix B of the Statistics of Scientific Procedures on Living Animals (Great Britain) 1998 provides figures for the number of project licences granted and revoked during 1998 and how many were in force on 31 December 1998. A total of 1,104 project licences were granted in 1998. This is also shown subdivided into severity bandings.

Appendix C of the 1998 Statistics contains 10 typical examples of the value added to licence applications by the Inspectorate's assessment process.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had with Huntingdon Life Sciences; and if he will make a statement. [126264]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I visited Huntingdon Life Sciences on 8 June 2000 in connection with my responsibilities under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. During my visit I talked to managers and staff about the campaign of harassment they have experienced from animal rights extremists over recent months. This included meeting two women who had their cars set on fire outside their homes. While it is a long-standing tradition in this country that individuals are free to express their views peacefully, people also have a right to carry out their lawful business without fear of intimidation and violence. The Government unreservedly condemn those who use such repellent tactics and wholeheartedly support the police in their continuing efforts to combat those who use them.

Crime Fighting Fund

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of the additional police officers announced as part of the Crime Fighting Fund are *(a)* in service and *(b)* coming into service in each of the next eight quarters (i) nationally and (ii) in Merseyside. [127073]

Mr. Charles Clarke: All forces in England and Wales have been asked to profile their planned recruitment over the 12 months of 2000–01. On the basis of the force profiles, the table shows the number of officers recruited, or planned to be recruited, that will be deemed to be Crime Fighting Fund officers.

The total allocation of Crime Fighting Fund officers for 2000–01 is 3,000. Forces have, so far, profiled the recruitment of 2,672 of the 3,000. Forces will have the opportunity to re-profile their recruitment up to the maximum of 3,000 Crime Fighting Fund officers as the year progresses. The number of deemed Crime Fighting Fund officers may rise or fall if actual recruitment does not match profiled recruitment or if the profile changes.

Forces have not yet been asked to profile recruitment for 2001–02. The table shows the allocation of Crime Fighting Fund officers for 2001–02 as a whole.

	England and Wales	*Merseyside*
1 April to 30 June 2000	679	28
1 July to 30 September 2000	616	26
1 October to 31 December 2000	886	42
1 January to 31 March 2001	491	9
Sub-Total 2001–02	2,672	105
Allocation for 2001–02	2,000	96
Total for 2000–01 and 2001–02	4,672	201

Criminal Records

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what estimate he has made of the cost of exempting volunteers from fees for *(a)* criminal conviction certificates, *(b)* criminal record certificates and *(c)* enhanced criminal record certificates; [126991]

(2) what his latest estimate is of the fee to be charged for *(a)* criminal conviction certificates, *(b)* criminal record certificates and *(c)* enhanced criminal record certificates; [126992]

(3) what plans he has to review his policy on the liability of volunteers for fees for criminal conviction certificates, criminal record certificates and enhanced criminal record certificates; [126993]

(4) what estimate he has made of the number of volunteers each year who will require *(a)* criminal conviction certificates, *(b)* criminal record certificates and *(c)* enhanced criminal record certificates once the Criminal Records Bureau is in operation; [126990]

(5) what estimate he has made of *(a)* the start-up costs and *(b)* the first year's operating costs of the Criminal Records Bureau; and if he will make a statement. [126989]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Criminal Records Bureau is being established within the framework of a Public Private Partnership. The Department has planned provision across the three financial years 1999–2002 for expenditure of around £10 million in connection with the establishment of the Bureau. But the Bureau's full operating costs will not be known until a contract has been awarded to the private sector partner.

It has always been planned that the Bureau's costs should be recovered through the charges that it makes for certificates. Work on the level of fees must await information about the Bureau's operating costs. But we have made clear our determination to keep the cost of certificates as low as possible. Reducing or waiving charges in respect of particular voluntary organisations, or for the voluntary sector as a whole, would raise substantial problems of principle and would either place an added burden on the public purse or lead to an increased level of fee for others seeking certificates from the Bureau, who may be no less deserving than volunteers.

Part V of the Police Act 1997, under which the Bureau is being established, does not require volunteers to apply for certificates. It will generally be for organisations to decide who will require a certificate. Work is continuing on estimating the likely number of applicants for certificates, building on work on demand estimates and market research, and will be subject to consultation before final conclusions are reached.

Before we make Regulations to prescribe various matters including charges for certificates, we shall undertake a Regulatory Impact Assessment, in consultation with representatives of voluntary organisations and others. This will provide a thorough and up-to-date assessment of the implications.

Advertising

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much has been spent by his Department on advertising in each year since May 1997. [125697]

Mr. Straw: The money spent on advertising in each financial year since May 1997 was as follows:

	£ million
1997–98	1.4
1998–99	1.8
1999–2000	5.9

In each year the major Home Office campaigns have been on fire safety, electoral registration and special constables recruitment. The higher expenditure in 1999–2000, was largely accounted for by additional expenditure on fire safety and on publicity to explain the new voting system for the European Parliamentary election.

Corruption Law

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish the Government's proposals for the reform of the law of corruption. [127223]

Mr. Straw: The Government's proposals for the reform of the law of corruption in England and Wales are published today and copies will be placed in the Library.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Television Licence Reminders

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will discuss with the Television Licensing Authority the sending of television licence reminder forms headed Accounts Payable to companies; and if he will make a statement. [125736]

Mr. Chris Smith: Under the provisions of the Broadcasting Act 1990, the BBC has statutory responsibility for the administration of the television licensing system. TV Licensing carries out the day to day administration of the licensing system as agent for the BBC. The wording of TV Licensing's renewal reminder letters is therefore a matter for TV Licensing and the BBC, and not one in which the Government can intervene. The BBC has, however, confirmed that it is not promoting the TV licence as an Account Payable.

Orchestras

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is his estimate of the number of people employed full time as professional musicians working for orchestras in the UK; and if he will make a statement. [126076]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I have asked the Arts Council of England, as the main distributor of public subsidy for the arts in England, to provide this information for England. When it is available, I will write to the right hon. Member, and place a copy in the Library of the House. Figures for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are the responsibility of the devolved administrations.

Independent Television

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will review the legislation that controls independent television in the UK with the aim of ensuring that adequate safeguards exist to protect local programme generation and local management of services. [126075]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Government are reviewing broadcasting legislation as part of our consideration of the future regulation of communications. Our conclusions will be announced in the forthcoming Communications White Paper, which is being prepared jointly by my Department and the Department for Trade and Industry.

Single Currency

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will estimate the cost to his Department of switching from the pound to the euro. [126398]

Mr. Chris Smith: Should the UK decide to join the euro, the cost of a changeover would depend on the detailed approach taken to a changeover.

Television Advertisements

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many television advertisements have been commissioned by his Department since 1 May 1997; and, of these, how many were provided with closed caption subtitling. [126898]

Mr. Chris Smith: None.

Opinion Research

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 8 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 301W, on opinion research, if he will place all the unpublished opinion and market research carried out since January 1999 in the Library. [126984]

Mr. Chris Smith: This material could be provided only at disproportionate cost; as indicated in my answer of 8 June, all non-departmental public bodies sponsored by the Department have been made aware of their obligations under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Advertising

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much has been spent by his Department on advertising in each year since May 1997. [125692]

Mr. Chris Smith: The following table shows the cost of advertising undertaken by my Department. This expenditure was incurred to attract candidates for the many public appointments for which I am responsible.

	£
May 1997-March 1998	0
1998–1999	242,700
1999–2000	139,501
2000–01 to date	0

BBC Public Service Proposals

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he will publish the criteria he uses in assessing new BBC public service proposals. [127227]

Mr. Chris Smith: I intend to publish the criteria tomorrow, and copies will be placed in the Library of the House.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Fiji

13. **Mr. Russell Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action Her Majesty's Government have taken to encourage the restoration of democracy in Fiji. [125216]

Mr. Battle: We have condemned the use of criminal armed force by the kidnappers in Fiji and demanded the release of all the hostages, the restoration of democratic, constitutional government and the arrest of the hostage-takers. In pursuit of these aims, I participated in the meeting of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group on 6 June which agreed to suspend Fiji from Commonwealth Councils and to send a CMAG delegation to Fiji. We are also discussing with our EU partners ways of encouraging the restoration of democracy in Fiji.

Zimbabwe

14. **Mr. Gerald Howarth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the political situation in Zimbabwe. [125217]

Mr. Hain: We hope that the presence of over 300 international observers will help the people of Zimbabwe to overcome their fears, political intimidation and violence and exercise their democratic right to vote.

21. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in Zimbabwe. [125224]

23. **Mr. Hunter:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the UK's relations with Zimbabwe. [125226]

Mr. Hain: The UK and Zimbabwe have a shared history. Our people know each other well. But President Mugabe's actions and rhetoric have made it difficult for us to have the warm and friendly government-to-government relations that we would like.

27. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Zimbabwean high commissioner on land reform. [125232]

Mr. Hain: The Zimbabwe High Commissioner was a member of the delegation that met my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary on 27 April. We have had no further discussions with him on land reform.

29. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received on the rule of law in Zimbabwe; and if he will make a statement. [125234]

Mr. Hain: We have had discussions with people inside and outside of Zimbabwe on the urgent need to restore the rule of law there.

34. **Mr. Soames:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last visited Zimbabwe to discuss the political situation there; and if he will make a statement. [125240]

Mr. Hain: I have not visited Zimbabwe in my capacity as FCO Minister of State.

International Criminal Court

15. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many countries have ratified the statute for an International Criminal Court; and if he will make a statement. [125218]

Mr. Vaz: To date 97 countries have signed and 12 have ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. The Court will come into existence once the Statute has been ratified by 60 states. The UK intends to be one of those 60.

Iran

16. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Iranian authorities on securing a fair trial for the 13 Jews accused of espionage. [125219]

Mr. Hain: This Government and our EU colleagues have raised with the Iranians at every appropriate opportunity our concerns about the trial on espionage charges in Shiráz of 13 Jews and eight Muslims.

The Danube

17. **Mr. Clapham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of when a navigable route will be available along the Danube for the countries economically dependent on it; and if he will make a statement. [125220]

Mr. Vaz: The UK welcomed the proposal on 24 May by the European Commission for an EU contribution of up to 22 million euro to the International Fund for the Clearance of the Danube. This proposal followed a comprehensive examination of the technical issues associated with this project. The target date for the opening of a navigable channel at Novi Sad is spring 2001. Provided this timetable is met, work on the second phase of the project to restore the river-beds and banks would begin in summer 2001. We will work with the EU towards completing this work on time and in accordance with the EU sanctions regime.

Ethical Foreign Policy

18. **Mr. Loughton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress is being made in developing an ethical dimension to his foreign policy; and if he will make a statement. [125221]

Mr. Hain: We consistently promote British interests and pursue British values by supporting democracy and human rights wherever we can, however we can.

Sierra Leone

19. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the current position is in respect of the UN arms embargo on Sierra Leone. [125222]

Mr. Hain: United Nations Security Council resolution 1171 (1998) imposed an embargo on the sale and supply of arms and related material to Sierra Leone other than to the Government of Sierra Leone through named entry points. There are exemptions in that resolution and in resolution 1299 (2000) for supply to the United Nations

and the Military Observer Group of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOMOG) as well as UN member states co-operating with UNAMSIL and the Government of Sierra Leone.

The UK fully supports and rigorously implements the embargo. We are discussing with Security Council colleagues ways to ensure that is implemented more effectively by all states.

Middle East

24. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the middle east peace process. [125227]

25. **Mr. Gerrard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement regarding the situation in the middle east peace process. [125228]

Mr. Hain: The Middle East Peace Process is at a crucial stage. On the Palestinian track, negotiations continue in the US. We continue to work for a conflict-ending agreement this summer.

On the Syrian track, we are watching developments closely following the death of President Asad. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary attended his funeral last week and met his son, Bashar. We believe Syria remains committed to the peace process and look forward to continuing Syrian and Israeli efforts to reach agreement.

We welcome UN confirmation that Israel has withdrawn fully from Lebanon. We shall continue to work hard with the UN and countries in the region to maintain calm and stability in southern Lebanon.

32. **Mr. Clappison:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received about the middle east peace process. [125237]

Mr. Hain: We are in frequent contact with all the parties. Most recently, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary met a number of interlocutors, including Bashar al-Assad, at the condolence ceremony for the late President Assad on 13 June.

Angola

26. **Mr. Borrow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the effect of UN sanctions in Angola on the operational activities of UNITA. [125231]

Mr. Hain: UN sanctions are making it harder for UNITA to continue fighting and put pressure on UNITA to return to the negotiating table. We commend the work of the Expert Panel of the UN Angola Sanctions Committee in investigating violations of the sanctions and developing recommendations on tightening implementation. The UK strongly supported the adoption of UN Security Council resolution 1295 on 18 April. The resolution welcomes the Panel's report, stresses the obligations of all member states to comply with the measures against UNITA and expresses the readiness of the Council to consider action in relation to states it determines to have violated those measures. This shows the determination of the international community to make sanctions bite.

Plan Colombia

28. **Mr. Goggins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of Plan Colombia and the part the United Kingdom can play in its development. [125233]

Mr. Battle: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave earlier in the House today to my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), *Official Report*, columns 150–51.

Burma

30. **Valerie Davey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in Burma. [125235]

Mr. Battle: We are deeply concerned at the lack of any prospects towards democratisation in Burma, as well as at the serious violations of human rights there. We are at the forefront of international action to press the military regime to improve the situation and to enter into dialogue with democratically elected Burmese leaders.

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will introduce investment sanctions against Burma. [126908]

Mr. Battle: There is no consensus within the European Union or the United Nations for investment sanctions at the moment, nor do we have any plans to introduce such measures. But we do discourage trade and investment in Burma by UK companies. In March, I met the Chief Executive of Premier Oil, and made clear to him our deep concern about their investment in Burma and that we would welcome their moving out as soon as and to the fullest extent that they lawfully can. We regularly give business inquiries a statement on the nature of the Burmese regime and the state of the economy.

The European Union has recently adopted a freeze on funds held by members of the Burmese regime. We will continue to press the regime in other fields too: for example the ILO has just agreed to adopt unprecedented measures against the regime in an effort to stop forced labour.

EU Enlargement

31. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what will be on the agenda in respect of enlargement at the forthcoming European Council meeting; and if he will make a statement. [125236]

Mr. Vaz: As the hon. Member may know, the European Council took place yesterday and today. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will be making a statement on the outcome to the House tomorrow.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on British policy on the enlargement of the European Union. [125230]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave earlier in the House today to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, North-East (Mr. Crausby), *Official Report*, column 141.

Ukraine

33. **Ms Squire:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on bilateral relations with Ukraine. [125239]

Mr. Vaz: Bilateral relations between the United Kingdom and Ukraine are very good. We engage with Ukraine in a broad range of activity and maintain close contacts at working and ministerial level. I had three meetings with the Ukrainian Foreign Minister, Borys Tarasyuk, in 1999 and visited Kiev in April this year. I have invited Mr. Tarasyuk to pay an official visit to the United Kingdom in early 2001. The newly established UK-Ukraine Consultative Mechanism provides an additional channel for regular dialogue between 10 Downing Street and the President's Administration.

Diamond Trade (Africa)

35. **Mr. Michael Jabez Foster:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made in stopping trading in diamonds which fuels conflict in Africa. [125241]

Mr. Hain: The Government are committed to curbing the trade in diamonds which fuels conflict in Africa. We fully support UN Security Council resolution 1173 (1998) which prohibits the import from Angola of diamonds not controlled through the Angolan Government's Certificate of Origin regime. We have tabled a draft UN Security Council Resolution which would ban the import of uncertified diamonds from Sierra Leone.

BBC World Service

36. **Mr. Rammell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the effectiveness of the BBC World Service in north America. [125242]

Mr. Hain: The BBC World Service broadcasts to North America as it does to other parts of the world. Its radio audience in Canada is a third of a million. In the USA it is 2.7 million. This figure represents significant growth, and has been achieved mainly through the establishment of local rebroadcasting partnerships. World Service activity world-wide is monitored against targets and is subject to periodic review with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Russia

37. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the UK's bilateral relations with Russia. [125243]

Mr. Vaz: Our relations with Russia are in good shape. We want to do what we can to encourage a democratic and stable Russia. The key is critical engagement. We should not isolate Russia, nor should we shy away from issues on which we disagree, such as Chechnya.

EU (French Presidency)

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent meetings he has had with the Government of France to discuss its presidency of the European Union; and if he will make a statement. [125223]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has regular contact with his French counterpart, M. Vedrine, on a number of issues, including the French Presidency of the European Union. He is next due to discuss the Presidency with M. Vedrine on 21 June. I also met Pierre Moscovici, the French Minister for Europe, in Santa Maria da Feira to discuss the Presidency.

Czech Republic

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about relations between the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic. [125225]

Mr. Vaz: The UK enjoys excellent relations with the Czech Republic. The Czech Defence Minister is in the UK today. And my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will visit Prague in July. We are close NATO allies, and the UK fully supports the Czech application for EU membership.

Wine Expenditure

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 12 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 496W, concerning his Department's spending on champagne and other wine, in which category such expenditure is recorded; what items in addition to *(a)* champagne and *(b)* other wine are recorded in this category; and how much his Department has spent on items in this category in each year since 1 May 1997. [124246]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 5 June 2000]:* The Foreign and Commonwealth Office records this expenditure as official entertainment. The costs also include such items as catering requirements (including food/drink), related hire charges, and other administration costs (such as invitation cards). The Foreign and Commonwealth Office does not maintain a comprehensive central record of these categories of expenditure.

International Traffic and Arms Regulations

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the benefits to the UK of being granted special status under the US International Traffic and Arms Regulations; and if he will make a statement. [125381]

Mr. Hain: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary for Defence on 15 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 667–68W.

Saudi Arabia

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action he is taking on human rights in Saudi Arabia following the Amnesty International report "Saudi Arabia: A Justice System Without Justice"; and if he will make a statement. [126080]

Mr. Hain: Saudi Arabia is an Islamic country in which justice is based on Sharia Law. The British Government respect Islam but have concerns about human rights in the Kingdom, including the discrimination against women and non-Muslims, the restrictions on freedom of expression, movement, assembly and worship, the implementation of UN human rights instruments, and issues relating to the judicial process.

The British Government are firmly committed to constructive engagement on human rights with Saudi Arabia and discuss the issue regularly with the Saudis. The Government take, and will continue to take, every realistic and responsible step to try to improve matters.

Nazi Slave Labour Victims

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement as to the circumstances in which the proposed compensation package for slave labour victims of the Nazis to be met by the German Government have been proposed to be reduced in respect of claimants in the "rest-of-the-world" group, including United Kingdom residents. [126032]

Mr. Vaz: I understand that the sum of money earmarked at one stage of the negotiations for allocation to "rest-of-the-world" claimants was reduced subsequently in discussions between the German and US Governments.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received *(a)* from and *(b)* on behalf of slave labour victims of the Nazis, in respect of the German compensation fund. [126030]

Mr. Vaz: I have received a number of letters from colleagues in the House, on behalf of their constituents.

My officials have spoken regularly with representatives of former Poles and Ukrainians who were former slave/forced labourers.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the original estimate of compensation levels for Nazi slave labour victims under the German compensation scheme *(a)* in total and *(b)* in respect of each category of case; and what is the current estimate under the revised proposals put forward by the German Government as to *(a)* and *(b)*. [126033]

Mr. Vaz: Agreement on a fund totalling DM10 billion was announced in December 1999.

The amount of compensation intended for allocation to former slave labourers has been set at a maximum of DM15,000 per claimant. Former forced labourers may receive a maximum of DM5,000.

Current uncertainty about the availability of funds and the process of disbursement mean it is not possible at this stage to predict the sum which will be available in practice to individual claimants.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has made to the German Government concerning the regulations over the compensation scheme for slave labour victims of the Nazi regime. [126029]

Mr. Vaz: Our Ambassador in Berlin has written recently to the German Government to express concern that UK claimants have free, fair and equal access to the compensation fund. We remain in close touch with the German Government on this.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what estimate he has made as to the number of rest-of-the-world claimants resident in the United Kingdom, who are likely to qualify for compensation from the German fund for slave labour victims of the Nazis. [126031]

Mr. Vaz: We have no exact numbers for the UK, but understand that there may be 2,000 or more potential claimants.

Kosovo

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many Kosovan Albanians have been referred to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia for atrocities committed against Serbs and other non-Albanian people in Kosovo. [126219]

Mr. Hain: The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) is investigating all atrocities committed in Kosovo regardless of the perpetrator's ethnic origin. ICTY has issued indictments against five Serbs for alleged crimes against humanity in Kosovo. No Kosovan Albanians have yet been indicted.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the percentage of UNMIK'S authorised civil administration staff deployed in Kosovo. [126647]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* According to the United Nations Secretariat there are 1,148 approved posts for international staff working for UNMIK, 75 per cent. of which are currently filled. There are a number of staff who have been appointed but have not yet arrived in Kosovo. When they do, 90 per cent. of the approved posts for international staff will be filled.

United Nations

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his *(a)* EU and *(b)* UN counterparts concerning Ambassador Richard Holbrooke's proposal that the United Nations should transform its civilian-run peacekeeping Department into a larger and more effective military-style operation. [126607]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* We strongly support efforts to enhance the operational capacity and effectiveness of the UN's Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO). We are working closely with the UN Secretariat, the United States, and other EU and UN members.

Military officers are already closely involved in the preparation and execution of United Nations peacekeeping missions. But DPKO needs increased intelligence and planning capacity and an enhanced capacity to manage police and other civilian deployments. And, since modern peacekeeping is now rarely wholly military in nature, we want to see better integration of military and civilian resources. I have also explained the concept of a UN rapid reaction capability.

Official Visits (Overseas)

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list his officials who have visited *(a)* Nigeria, *(b)* Liberia, *(c)* Sierra Leone and *(d)* Togo since January 1999. [126610]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* There have been regular visits by a range of officials to these four countries since January 1999.

The provision of a detailed breakdown would incur disproportionate cost.

UN Register of Conventional Arms

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the UK will submit its return covering imports and exports of major types of conventional weapons during 1999 to the UN Register of Conventional Arms; and if he will place copies of the return in the Library. [127224]

Mr. Hain: The Government submitted the UK's return to the UN Register covering conventional arms transfers in calendar year 1999 on 20 June. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Echelon Surveillance System

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he has taken to establish that the Echelon Surveillance System is not used to the economic disbenefit of *(a)* the UK and *(b)* other EU states; and if he will make a statement. [126298]

Mr. Robin Cook: The hon. Member will be well aware of the Government's policy not to comment on alleged surveillance systems.

China

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the human rights record of the Chinese Government in respect of practitioners of Falun Gong; and what steps he is taking to promote human rights in China. [126669]

Mr. Battle: We are deeply concerned about the treatment of Falun Gong adherents, including the passing of severe sentences, by the Chinese authorities since the movement was banned in July 1999. We and EU partners have made this clear to the Chinese Government on a number of occasions and urged them to comply with the provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which China signed in October 1998.

On 20 June I called in the Chinese Ambassador to London and expressed directly my concerns to Mr. Ma on the treatment of dissidents in China, and on the alleged intimidation in China of family members of a Falun Gong practitioner who is a UK citizen.

We are pressing for greater respect for human rights in China through our bilateral human rights dialogue with the Chinese Government. During the last round of the dialogue in February 2000 we agreed to establish a joint expert working group to work towards the ratification and implementation of the International Covenants on Civil and Political, and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. An invitation was also extended to the Foreign Secretary's Death Penalty Panel to visit China to discuss issues relating to abolition of the Death Penalty throughout China.

Execution (Texas)

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make representations to Governor George Bush of Texas about the execution on 22 June of Mr. Gary Graham. [126983]

Mr. Battle: The EU Presidency, on behalf of the UK and other members, made representations to the Governor of Texas on 17 May on behalf of Mr. Graham asking him to commute Mr. Graham's sentence to life imprisonment, or such other penalty as is compatible with international law. Notice of the EU Demarche was given to the State Department.

Advertising

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much has been spent by his Department on advertising in each year since May 1997. [125694]

Mr. Hain: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office does not use advertising to publicise Government policy or programmes.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Social Fund

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the additional administration cost of every *(a)* budgeting loan and *(b)* crisis loan if they were repaid over a period of (i) 78 weeks, (ii) 104 weeks, (iii) 130 weeks and (iv) 156 weeks. [125286]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Social Fund is a mater for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Steve Webb, dated 19 June 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking if he will estimate the additional administration cost of every (a) budgeting loan and (b) crisis loan if they were repaid over a period of (i) 78 weeks, (ii) 104 weeks, (iii) 130 weeks and (iv) 156 weeks.

The integrity of the social fund depends on recycling the loans within a reasonable timescale to make future loans available as soon as possible.

Only a composite figure for the cost of recovering budgeting loans and crisis loans is available. Approximately 95% of Social Fund recovery is taken directly from benefit in payment to the customer. Around 90% of that is taken automatically through a computerised link between the Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance computer systems and the Social Fund system. Staff input is required at the beginning and end of the process, but very little intervention is needed during the course of the recovery. While some recovery from benefit is made by clerical processes, and customers no longer in receipt of benefit are pursued to repay their loans by other means, the proportionate cost of this is small in comparison to the overall cost of recovery.

As a consequence, it is estimated that the administrative cost of the process would not be greatly affected by the duration of the recovery period if the customers who took advantage of the longer

repayment periods remained on benefit throughout. However, the longer the payment period, it is more likely that customers will leave benefit before their loan is repaid. Then the proportion requiring clerical activity would increase and therefore administration costs would rise but we are at present unable to quantify by how much.

I hope this is helpful.

Winter Fuel Payments

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners in the Basildon parliamentary constituency received Winter Fuel Payments in *(a)* 1998–99 and *(b)* 1999–2000; and how much was paid in total in each of those years. [125955]

Angela Eagle: The administration of Winter Fuel Payments is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Angela Smith, dated 19 June 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about how many pensioners in the Basildon parliamentary constituency received winter fuel payments in (a) 1998–99 and (b) 1999–2000; and how much was paid in total in each of those years.

In 1998–99, 13,241 winter fuel payments (WFP) were made in the Basildon constituency; in 1999–2000, 16,098 payments were made.

In 1998–99, the total amount of WFP in the Basildon constituency was £256,940; in 1999–2000, the total was £1,204,050.

WFP exercises before 1998–99 highlighted that over 500,000 customer accounts did not hold a postcode. A correction exercise resulted in more postcodes being allocated. The figures for 1999–2000 in the Basildon constituency increased due to this, and also because of the increase in the WFP from £50 to £100 from 1999–2000.

I hope this is helpful.

Widowed Mother's Allowance

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the Benefits Agency received application for widowed mother's allowance and widows' payment from Mrs. C. M. of Weston Turville, Buckinghamshire (WA 075311C); when his Department will complete its calculation of her benefit; when she will receive payments; and if he will make a statement. [126529]

Angela Eagle: The administration of benefits is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. David Lidington, dated 19 June 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about the widow's benefit claim made by Mrs Caroline Moran, 4 Worlds End Lane, Weston Turville, Aylesbury.

As you will appreciate, individual customers' cases are confidential. I will therefore, write to you privately on this matter.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what his target is for processing applications for widowed mother's allowance; how many applications are being processed within that target time; and if he will make a statement; [126525]

(2) how many applicants are currently awaiting a decision on the calculation of their entitlement to widowed mother's allowance; and how many of those have been waiting for more than *(a)* three months, *(b)* six months and *(c)* 12 months; [126523]

(3) what is his policy on paying interest on late payments of widowed mother's allowance. [126524]

Angela Eagle: The administration of benefits is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. David Lidington, dated 19 June 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your Parliamentary questions asking, what his target is for processing applications for widowed mothers allowance; how many applications are being processed within that target time; and if he will make a statement. Also, how many applicants are currently awaiting a decision on the calculation of their entitlement to widowed mother's allowance; and how many of those have been waiting for more than (a) three months, (b) six months and (c) 12 months, and what is his policy on paying interest on late payments of widowed mother's allowance (WMA).

The Benefits Agency (BA) has targets for the clearance of Widows Benefit claims. The targets are measured from the date of receipt of the claim in the BA to the date the benefit is awarded. Figures for the individual widows benefits, such as Widowed Mothers Allowance are not maintained.

The current clearance target is 85 per cent. in 10 days for Widows payment cases and 85 per cent. in 30 days for Widows benefit.

The latest figures available show that for the year ended March 2000, 90.2 per cent. of claims to Widows Payment and 78.5 per cent. of claims to Widows Benefit were cleared within target.

For the months of April and May 2000 the Widows payment clearance is running at 91.5 per cent. and at 84.5 per cent. for Widows Benefit.

Although individual benefit offices would be able to focus on the state of their uncleared claims for management purposes these details are not fed into any national statistical counters. The information required to answer your question could only therefore be obtained at inappropriate cost and effort.

It is clear from the figures quoted above that the clearance target for Widows Benefit claims was not met for 1999–2000. This has been due for the most part to the difficulties associated with the introduction of the new National Insurance computer system (NIRS2). NIRS2 provides the BA with its benefit calculations including those for entitlements to Retirement Pension and Widows Benefits.

Early figures for 2000–2001 as above show an improving level of clearance for Widows Benefit claims as NIRS2 recovery proceeds.

Failure to process a WMA claim within the published operational targets will not, in itself give rise to a special payment. Each case must be considered on its own merits.

In the majority of cases, it is anticipated that claims will be processed by the Agency within published timescales. However, some cases will legitimately take longer to process than others because of the complex nature of the case and the degree of work involved.

Different rules apply where payment was delayed because of the implementation of the new National Insurance Recording System (NIRS2). Where a customer has suffered unreasonable delay and inconvenience in receiving their full entitlement to WMA which was solely attributable to the problems encountered with the implementation of NIRS2, they automatically receive a £10 flat-rate compensatory payment.

Where payment of WMA has been unreasonably and exceptionally delayed due to official error a special compensatory payment in the form of interest would be considered.

Where the customer feels that the compensation calculated does not adequately compensate for the financial loss actually suffered as a direct result of the delay, a specific claim for further compensation should be made by the customer and full supporting evidence of the loss provided.

I hope this is helpful.

Automatic Credit Transfers

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the payment of benefit by automatic credit transfers involves the notification of the claimant's national insurance number to the receiving bank. [126542]

Mr. Rooker: The administration of benefit payments is a matter for Alexis Cleveland the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Terry Rooney, dated 19 June 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your Parliamentary Question asking if the payment of benefit by automated credit transfer (ACT) involves the notification of the claimant's National Insurance number to the receiving bank.

Payments made by ACT are made through BACS (the UK's major automated clearing house). For BACS to accept a payment file completion of a number of identification fields is mandatory, for example bank/building society account number, sort code and amount.

Another mandatory requirement is for the inclusion of a payment reference. The inclusion of a reference allows each benefit system to track and trace individual payments, facilitating action such as recalling a payment and responding to customer enquiries.

All benefits use the customers' National Insurance number as a payment reference, with the exception of Child Benefit for which the Child Benefit number is used.

This reference is passed over to the receiving bank with all other payment details.

I hope this is helpful.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners there are whose income takes them above the qualifying income for minimum income guarantee but who receive a final income below the minimum income guarantee once council tax rebates and Housing Benefit are deducted. [127074]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available.

State Pension

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost of increasing the basic state pension for persons over *(a)* 75 and *(b)* 80 to the level of the minimum income guarantee. [126673]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Estimated costs of increasing the basic state pension

£ million

2001–02	*75 and over*	*80 and over*
Gross	3,600	2,400
Net of means-tested benefits	2,600	1,600

Notes:

1. It is assumed that the Category A rate of basic Retirement Pension is raised to the level of the Minimum Income Guarantee in 2001–02 (assumed to be £84.80 for those aged 75 to 79, and £90.20 for those aged 80 and over).
2. It is assumed that basic Retirement Pension recipients with entitlement of less than the full Category A rate receive a pro-rata increase, except married women in receipt of the Category BL pension, who receive an increase such that the Category A and Category BL pension together are equivalent to the appropriate couple rate of the Minimum Income Guarantee.
3. These estimates include a saving of £30 million from the removal of the 25p age addition currently paid to those aged 80 and over.
4. Costs are rounded to the nearest £100 million and are in 2000–01 prices.
5. Costs include benefits whose rates are linked by statute to the rate of basic Retirement Pension.
6. Gross costs are estimated by the Government Actuary's Department. Costs net of means-tested benefit savings have been estimated using the Policy Simulation Model.

Radiation Diseases

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the recommendations made by the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council in relation to diseases caused by radiation will be implemented; and if he will make a statement. [127226]

Mr. Bayley: Amendment Regulations to the Social Security (Industrial Injuries) (Prescribed Diseases) Regulations 1985 were laid yesterday implementing the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council's recommendations with effect from 10 July 2000. All the Council's recommendations set out in their report "Diseases induced by Ionising and Non-Ionising Radiation" (Cm 4280) are included in the amending regulations.

The regulations also clarify that the time limits that operate between leaving a prescribed occupation and making a claim for asthma (prescribed disease D7) and deafness (prescribed disease A10) refer to employed earners employment. The regulations also specify the exact lung function formulae that should be used in connection with claims for chronic bronchitis and emphysema rather than making a reference to a textbook.

Fraud

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 13 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 606W, on the Social Security Administration (Fraud) Act 1997, *(a)* how many of those local authorities who have reported the appointment of an inspector have a serving inspector at present and *(b)* how many inspectors are serving at present. [127086]

Angela Eagle: The figures in my Written Answer on 13 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 606W, referred to the number of inspectors currently serving. Since then, the Department has been notified of the appointment of one additional inspector, bringing the total currently serving up to 720 in 209 local authorities.

TREASURY

Census

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will make a statement on the steps he is taking on including a question concerning religious identity in the 2001 Census; [126011]

(2) how many representations he has received from *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* others concerning the inclusion of a question in the 2001 Census concerning religious identity. [126012]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) on 15 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 687W.

Single Currency

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the cost to *(a)* the public sector and *(b)* the private sector of changing from the pound to the euro. [126403]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Should the UK decide to join the euro, the costs of a changeover would depend on the detailed approach taken by organisations to a changeover.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish the Treasury's estimate of the economic and fiscal consequences of joining the first wave of the euro in 1999; and if he will update it. [126791]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Treasury published the paper, "UK Membership of the Single Currency: An Assessment of the Five Economic Tests", in October 1997. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has said we will make another assessment of the five economic tests early in the next Parliament.

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what safeguards he has put in place to ensure that money spent through the National Changeover plan will be neutral in its impact upon public opinion about whether the United Kingdom should join the euro. [126185]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* Government policy on the euro was set out in the Second Outline National Changeover Plan.

The Government are committed to making preparations both to help business deal with the euro following its introduction in the 11 participating member states on 1 January 1999, and also to making preparations for the possibility of the UK joining the single currency.

VAT

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what powers are available to him to offer a VAT rebate on holiday accommodation for visitors in the United Kingdom with particular reference to citizens of other EU states; and if he will make a statement. [126981]

Mr. Timms: There is no mechanism to rebate any of the VAT paid by tourists on the holiday accommodation they stay in while in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will use the powers available to him to vary the rate of VAT on specific services on a regional basis; and if he will make a statement. [126980]

Mr. Timms: The Chancellor has no powers to vary the rate of VAT on specific services on a regional basis.

Opinion Research

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 8 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 384W, on opinion research, how he is intending to make the results of this research publicly available in accordance with Cabinet Office guidelines. [126985]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Cabinet Office guide on Government research into public attitudes and opinions, published on 12 May 2000, says

> It is good practice to publish the results of research, or at least to place them in the House of Commons Library and make them publicly available on request and on the Internet.

We take full account of the Cabinet Office guidelines.

Correspondence

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will reply to the letters of 4 April and 3 May from the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan regarding his constituent Helen Cruickshank. [126675]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I replied to the hon. Member on 8 April. A copy will be forwarded.

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will reply to the letter of 9 May from the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan regarding his constituent Vernon Hope. [126676]

Dawn Primarolo: I replied to the hon. Member on 14 June.

Landfill Tax

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will ring-fence landfill tax for waste recycling and reduction. [126804]

Mr. Timms: I have no plans to do so. However, the recently published Waste Strategy announced that the Government propose to use the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme to help deliver an increase in recycling, particularly of household waste.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Magistrates Courts

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many *(a)* cases were dealt with by (i) stipendiary magistrates and (ii) non-stipendiary magistrates benches and *(b)* each way cases were referred to the Crown court by (1) stipendiary magistrates and (2) non-stipendiary magistrate benches in each magistrates courts committee, for the last five years for which figures are available. [126442]

Jane Kennedy: A breakdown of cases dealt with by stipendiary magistrates and non-stipendiary magistrates benches is not held centrally, and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

CABINET OFFICE

Business Excellence Model

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the progress of Phase three of the Public Sector Benchmarking project relating to the use of the Business Excellence Model. [125940]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Public Sector Benchmarking Project promotes the EFQM Excellence Model (previously the Business Excellence Model) to the public sector. Phase three, which begun in April 1998, includes arrangements for easy access to training and support at reduced rates. Since then, the project has introduced over 1,000 public sector organisations to the Model.

The Model is now used throughout the public sector, including local government, central Government, schools, hospitals, police forces, fire brigades, Agencies and non-departmental public bodies. It is used in support of the Modernising Government agenda, through policies such as Best Value and Better Quality Services.

We are not complacent. We are studying further the impact of the Excellence Model to help us decide how we can improve our efforts to maximise the use of the Excellence Model in the public sector.

The Public Sector Benchmarking Project is now known as the Public Sector Excellence Programme.

Taskforces and Review Groups

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list the *(a)* task forces and *(b)* review groups which have been established since 1 May 1997, indicating which are still in existence; and how many there were on 1 May in (i) 1998, (ii) 1999 and (iii) 2000. [126500]

Mr. Stringer: A full list of Task Forces established between 2 May 1997 and 31 October 1999 was placed in the Library of the House on 9 December 1999. A list of review groups established during the same period was placed in the Library on 1 February 2000. We have given a commitment to update these lists every six months. Updated lists covering the period to the end of April 2000 will be published shortly.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Statistics

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what statistics relating to the responsibilities of his Department are collated by parliamentary constituency, indicating the dates covered in each case. [123846]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 25 May 2000]:* The information requested is shown in the following table:

Table 1—Data relating to DfEE responsibilities which are collated by Parliamentary Constituency.

Subject area	*Availability/frequency of publication/reference period*
Working age employment rates	Annually for 1996, 1997 and 1998. 1999 data due in January 2001. Published by ONS
Working age economic activity rates	As above
ILO unemployment rates	As above but only available for about 80 constituencies due to small samples sizes
Claimant unemployment rates and claimant unemployment levels by age and duration	Monthly from January 1996. Latest available data is for April 2000. Published by ONS
Employee jobs by industry	1995–98 data are available currently. Next update for 1999 due in March 2001. Published by ONS.
Average earnings of full-time employees	Available for 1998 and 1999. Published by ONS.
New Deal for Young People Statistics	Available quarterly and updated quarterly
Proportion of 15 year old pupils in schools achieving 5 or more A*-C GCSE/GNVQs (by parliamentary constituency of the school)	Collated for 1998–99
Proportion of 15 year old pupils in schools with 1 or more A*-G GCSE/GNVQs (by parliamentary constituency of the school)	Collated for 1998–99
Proportion of school pupils achieving level 4 at Key Stage 2 in English and Maths. (by parliamentary constituency of school)	Collated for 1998–99
1997–98 Individual College Results: median college (by parliamentary constituency of college)	Collated for 1997–98
Class sizes (by parliamentary constituency of school)	Collated for January 200
A-level results (by parliamentary constituency of school/college)	Collated for 1998–99
Unauthorised absences—Percentage half days missed due to unauthorised absences (by parliamentary constituency of school)	Collated for 1998–99

Note:
Other information collected in the Annual Schools Census, and school performance data using other measures than those quoted, could not be collated by constituency

New Deal Gateway

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to increase the flexibility of the New Deal Gateway in order to cope with those clients with severe social problems. [123883]

Ms Jowell: There already exists a high degree of flexibility in the Gateway for those with severe social problems, not least through the individually tailored support from the New Deal Personal Adviser. They are able to make use of systematic assessment techniques to identify problems that may be preventing the young person moving into employment. Young people will then, if necessary, be referred by their adviser to a range of provision which can help them with jobsearch, training in basic skills, dealing with issues such as drug or alcohol abuse. This help can be continued beyond the Gateway when the young person is on an option.

Advisers will also be able to defer entry to the new Gateway to Work by a few weeks for those young people who have other issues that need to be resolved and who would not be ready to benefit from the course.

School Lunches

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will place in the Library a list and a summary of responses to consultation on draft regulations and guidance for minimum nutritional standards for school lunches. [124496]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 5 June 2000]:* A list and a summary of responses to our consultation on draft regulations and guidance for minimum nutritional standards for school lunches was published on 19 June, and copies have been placed in the Libraries.

Health and Safety

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the resource implications of the incorporation of health and safety issues into the National Curriculum; and if he will make a statement on developments on this matter. [125714]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 14 June 2000]:* Health and safety issues have always been included in the National Curriculum. The revised curriculum, which will take effect in autumn 2000, contains clearer and fuller statements of the general principles applying to health and safety teaching, including the importance of risk assessment. Subject specific requirements are highlighted in individual subject orders. The only new requirement relates to Information and Communications Technology to reflect the massive increase in the use of computers in schools in recent years.

£6 million is available to schools from the Standards Fund to support the implementation of the revised National Curriculum. In addition, the Health and Safety Executive and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority have produced joint guidance on teaching health and safety issues which is available at www.hse.gov.uk/policy/genteach.htm.

Single Currency

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the costs to his Department of conversion to the euro from the pound. [126402]

Mr. Wills: Should the UK decide to join the euro, the cost of a changeover would depend on the detailed approach taken to a changeover.

Performance-related Pay

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment whether teachers employed to teach in *(a)* institutions for young people maintained by social sciences departments and *(b)* prison institutions for young offenders are eligible for performance-related pay. [126318]

Ms Estelle Morris: Teachers employed to teach in institutions for young people maintained by social services departments and in prison institutions for young offenders are not, as of right, subject to the terms of the School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document and are not eligible to apply for the threshold in the current round of the assessment process. In response to representations received from institutions wishing to mirror the threshold arrangements, we are actively considering how to open up threshold training and the external assessment process to such institutions once the immediate pressures of the current application round have reduced.

School Milk

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent guidance he has issued to *(a)* infant, *(b)* junior and *(c)* primary schools in England and Wales on school milk schemes. [127029]

Jacqui Smith: The Government encourage schools to provide drinking milk, and to make use of either the EU School Milk Subsidy Scheme or the Welfare Food Scheme. These schemes are administered by the Intervention Board, on behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and by the Department of Health, respectively.

Class Sizes

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the average class size was for classes taught by one teacher in *(a)* 1996 and *(b)* 2000 for (i) pupils in Key Stage 1, (ii) pupils in Key Stage 2, (iii) primary schools and (iv) secondary schools in (1) Great Britain and (2) each parliamentary constituency. [126175]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* Class size information covering English parliamentary constituencies for 1996–97 and 1999–2000 has been placed in the Library.

Provisional national estimates of Key Stage 1 classes for January 2000 were recently published in a Statistical First Release "Class sizes in maintained schools in England: January 2000 (15/2000)" on 12 April 2000.

National figures for infant class sizes in September 1999 were published in Statistical First Release "Infant class sizes in England (2/2000)" on 21 January 2000.

The Government are well on target to deliver their pledge to limit infant classes to 30 pupils. At the same time, average class sizes in maintained primary schools went down for the second year running—from 27.5 in January 1999 to 27.1 in January 2000, after rising for the previous 10 years. The average size of junior classes also fell, from 28.4 in January 1999 to 28.3 in January 2000. Maintained secondary classes are already much smaller than primary, with around five fewer pupils on average. The pupil:teacher ratio in secondary schools in January 2000 was 17.1. It is worth bearing in mind that secondary classes rose steadily under the previous Government—in 1998 the figure was 19.9; and that in the Budget, secondary headteachers received between £30,000 and £50,000 each to spend as they choose. If they spent it on teachers, they could reduce the secondary pupil:teacher ratio by 0.4.

For information on class sizes in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, I refer the hon. Member to the Secretaries of State for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Disabled School Children

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what *(a)* resources and *(b)* money targeted at improving access for disabled school children has been made available (i) nationally (ii) in Teesside and (iii) in the constituency of Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East since 1 May 1997; and if he will make a statement. [126496]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* Each year we make resources available through the School Access Initiative, to invest in making mainstream schools accessible to those with disabilities and sensory impairments. The following table sets out the amount allocated each year since 1997–98, nationally, in Teesside, and to Redcar and Cleveland LEA (which covers the constituency of Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East).

This is part of this Government's determination to improve educational standards for all children and work towards a more inclusive approach for children with disabilities. More than 1,900 schools will benefit from this year's £30 million programme. Working closely with LEAs like this offers us the best opportunity to secure a coherent approach to opportunities for disabled children.

Financial year	*England (£ million)*	*Teesside[1] (£)*	*Redcar and Cleveland LEA (£)*
1997–98	3.6	57,860	15,000
1998–99	11	175,000	35,000
1999–2000	20	350,000	100,000
2000–01	30	490,000	140,000

[1] Includes Hartlepool, Stockton on Tees, Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland LEAs

Correspondence

Mr. Peter Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Hexham of 22 February about the reduction in Northumberland school budgets. [126768]

Mr. Wills: A reply will be issued by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister shortly.

New Deal

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for each parliamentary constituency *(a)* the total number of leavers from the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds, *(b)* the total number of leavers who have gone into sustained unsubsidised employment and *(c)* the total number of leavers whose destination is unknown in 1999; and if he will make a statement. [126178]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* The information on young people showing the number of leavers and the number of people moving into sustained unsubsidised employment is already held at constituency level in the Library. Although the number of people leaving for unknown destinations is not published at constituency level, it is available at Unit of Delivery level and is also in the Library. More statistical information is available and more research findings are published on New Deal than any previous Government programme.

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many lone parents in Paisley, South have found employment as a consequence of the New Deal for Lone Parents. [126816]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* Between October 1998 and the end of March 2000, 78 lone parents in Paisley, South had found employment as a consequence of the New Deal for Lone Parents.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the impact of the New Deal for *(a)* young people, *(b)* those aged over 50 years and *(c)* the long-term unemployed in Coventry. [125642]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 13 June 2000]:* Up to the end of March 2000, 3,140 young people and 2,215 long term unemployed adults had benefited from starting the New Deal in Coventry. The New Deal for those aged 50 or over was launched nationally in April this year and it is too soon to provide statistics. New Deal has had a major impact on the employability of those who have taken part in the initiative; already over 1,750 people have found jobs. Many others have gained from the Personal Adviser approach and benefited from training, education and work experience opportunities.

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people on the New Deal for over 25s in *(a)* Edinburgh and *(b)* Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (i) at the end of March and (ii) at the latest available date, (1) were in the advisory interview process, (2) had found unsubsidised jobs through the advisory interview process, (3) had transferred to other provision, (4) were in subsidised employment, (5) had taken education and training opportunities, (6) were in training for work and (7) were in follow through. [125754]

Ms Jowell: The information is contained in the following table.

	Edinburgh	*Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh*
In advisory interview process	499	73
Found unsubsidised jobs through advisory interview process	160	35
Transferred to other provision	119	22
In subsidised employment	32	5
Taken education and training opportunities	61	7
In Training for Work	42	5
In Follow Through	3	0

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people in Edinburgh had *(a)* joined the 18 to 24 New Deal, *(b)* gained subsidised jobs from the 18 to 24 New Deal, *(c)* gained unsubsidised jobs from the 18 to 24 New Deal, *(d)* started on the 18 to 24 New Deal Gateway, *(e)* entered each of the 18 to 24 New Deal Options and *(f)* been on follow-through (i) at the end of March and (ii) at the latest available date. [125822]

Ms Jowell: Latest figures show that to the end of March 2000 in Edinburgh 3,099 people joined the New Deal for Young People, 232 gained subsidised jobs, 1,238 gained unsubsidised jobs, 2,739 started on the New Deal Gateway, 232 started the employment option, 397 started Full Time Education and Training, 239 started the Voluntary Sector option, 194 started the Environment Task Force option and 594 started Follow Through. We are on course to meet our Manifesto commitment of 250,000 jobs.

Governors' Advice Line

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he plans to launch a governors' advice line as recommended by the Education and Employment Committee's Fifth report of Session 1998–99, HC509-I; and when it will be available for school governors to use. [126904]

Jacqui Smith: The Government stated their commitment to providing a single national helpline for school governors in the response my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made last autumn to the Select Committee's Report on the Role of School Governors. Negotiations with national governor organisations' representatives are continuing. Meanwhile, we are funding the three existing governors' helplines provided by the National Governors' Council, the National Association of Governors and Managers and Information for School and College Governors.

We greatly appreciate the work done by governors, as volunteers, and we want them to have access to independent advice from experienced governors.

ICT Access

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what advice has been given to schools about allowing local residents' groups and other organisations access to computers and other facilities outside school hours. [126116]

Jacqui Smith: The Department published "Raising Standards: opening doors: developing links between schools and their communities" in January this year. This document offers wide-ranging advice to schools on allowing greater access to their premises and facilities and on enhancing their links with the local community. It is available free of charge to all schools.

We are also planning to publish later this year a Schools Plus Manual, which will offer schools further practical advice and support on how to develop as a community resource and how to strengthen their relationships with their local community.

In March this year the Schools Plus Policy Action Team, set up by the Social Exclusion Unit following its report on Neighbourhood Renewal, published its report on "Building Learning Communities". The Team considered how schools could be used to engage the community, drawing in greater support and making their facilities available to more people. It made 32 recommendations under two broad headings: extending services offered by schools; and improving school community links. We are considering how to implement the Team's recommendations.

Specialist Schools

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of specialist schools make use of their right to select up to 10 per cent. of their pupils by aptitude. [127072]

Ms Estelle Morris: We do not have figures on the percentage of specialist schools which make use of the 10 per cent. aptitude selection arrangement. Information about this is now being collected within the schools' progress reports. From a questionnaire sent to the first 238 specialist schools we know that 7 per cent. of the 142 schools which responded select some of their pupils by aptitude.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many specialist schools have been set up since 1997; how many have opted to select 10 per cent. of their intake by aptitude; and if he will list each of those schools and their local education authority. [126905]

Ms Estelle Morris: In May 1997, there were 181 specialist schools. A further 222 specialist schools have become operational since then. We do not have figures on the percentage of specialist schools which select 10 per cent. of their intake by aptitude. Information about this is now being collected within the schools' progress reports. From a questionnaire sent to the first 238 specialist schools we know that 7 per cent. of the 142 schools which responded select some of their pupils by aptitude.

Class Sizes (East Sussex)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the average class size was in secondary schools in East Sussex in each year since 1979. [126299]

Ms Estelle Morris: The requested information on class sizes in maintained secondary schools in East Sussex local education authority area is shown in the following table.

In England, maintained secondary classes are already much smaller than primary classes, with around five fewer pupils on average. The average class size in maintained secondary schools in England in January 2000 was 22.0, compared to an average of 27.1 pupils per class in maintained primary schools. It is also worth considering the secondary class size figures published on 12 April in the Statistical First Release "Class sizes in maintained schools in England: January 2000", which showed a rise in class sizes under the previous Government—in 1990 the average class size in maintained secondary schools in England was 20.3.

In the Budget, secondary headteachers received between £30,000 and £50,000 each to spend as they choose. If they spent it on teachers, it is estimated that this would reduce the pupil:teacher[1] ratio in secondary schools by 0.4.

[1] Pupil:teacher ratios (PTRs) within maintained secondary schools relate the overall number of pupils in these schools to the full-time equivalent number of qualified teachers employed in these schools.

Average size of classes taught by one teacher in maintained secondary schools in the local education authority areas of East Sussex and Brighton: 1979 to 2000

Position as at January

	East Sussex[1]	Brighton[1]	East Sussex[2]
2000[3]	22.1	22.3	n/a
1999	22.1	22.0	n/a
1998	21.4	22.3	n/a
1997	n/a	n/a	21.4
1996	n/a	n/a	21.1
1995	n/a	n/a	21.3
1994	n/a	n/a	21.0
1993	n/a	n/a	20.1
1992	n/a	n/a	20.8
1991	n/a	n/a	21.0
1990	n/a	n/a	20.8
1989	n/a	n/a	20.9
1988	n/a	n/a	20.7
1987	n/a	n/a	21.4
1986	n/a	n/a	21.7
1985	n/a	n/a	21.2
1984	n/a	n/a	21.8
1983	n/a	n/a	21.9
1982	n/a	n/a	21.8
1981	n/a	n/a	21.9
1980	n/a	n/a	22.0
1979	n/a	n/a	22.1

[1] After local government reorganisation
[2] Before local government reorganisation
[3] Provisional
Note:
n/a = not applicable

SSAs

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list by LEA in England the amount each local authority spent on education above its education SSA for each of the past five years. [126906]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table shows by LEA the amount in £ million by which each authority budgeted above or below its education SSA for the years 1995–96 to 1999–2000. Budget figures are taken from Local Authority Revenue Account (RA) returns, and include a centrally calculated estimate of the amount of education related capital expenditure from the revenue account (CERA). Figures for 2000–01 are not yet available: in this and future years, budget data which are more precisely comparable to education SSA will be available from the section 52 returns submitted by local education authorities, including their own estimate of CERA.

Difference between budgeted spend and education SSA 1995–96 to 1999–2000

£ million

LEA	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
Camden	0.6	5.2	3.9	3.5	2.3
City of London	2.1	2.3	2.3	1.8	1.1
Greenwich	–2.3	3.7	–0.6	–0.8	0.6
Hackney	8.2	10.6	7.2	2.5	–1.1
Hammersmith and Fulham	5.3	8.4	6.8	6.3	5.0
Islington	2.3	2.5	3.5	2.0	0.3
Kensington and Chelsea	9.5	14.0	16.3	12.3	12.4
Lambeth	3.8	9.8	4.2	2.6	3.6
Lewisham	1.6	3.8	3.3	–0.3	0.0
Southwark	–0.8	3.8	2.0	0.4	3.9
Tower Hamlets	5.5	9.7	1.8	1.5	–0.4
Wandsworth	2.7	5.3	0.5	1.3	–1.0
Westminster	9.0	14.5	9.7	10.6	8.7
Barking and Dagenham	6.3	4.9	2.8	2.3	1.7
Barnet	6.8	9.6	5.4	7.6	6.5
Bexley	–4.5	–3.4	–4.5	–3.3	–3.7
Brent	–10.8	–6.2	–3.2	–3.9	–4.4
Bromley	8.5	2.4	7.6	–2.1	–4.0
Croydon	5.3	10.0	7.3	2.9	0.6
Ealing	0.3	3.5	5.9	2.1	0.3
Enfield	1.0	3.3	0.5	–1.0	–0.2
Haringey	7.8	8.0	1.7	0.3	0.0
Harrow	6.4	7.4	5.0	2.8	2.7
Havering	1.7	–0.3	0.0	2.6	–0.5
Hillingdon	–1.7	–0.4	–1.4	–2.1	–0.9
Hounslow	–0.8	–0.7	–2.9	–2.7	–2.0
Kingston upon Thames	1.4	1.4	0.2	0.4	0.9
Merton	0.1	1.2	–0.1	0.1	–2.4

Difference between budgeted spend and education SSA 1995–96 to 1999–2000

£ million

LEA	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Newham	–8.6	–9.4	–6.2	0.3	–4.5
Redbridge	1.6	0.8	–1.6	–1.2	–3.3
Richmond upon Thames	3.7	3.9	4.0	2.8	0.8
Sutton	0.9	1.3	0.8	1.6	–0.2
Waltham Forest	0.3	2.0	3.1	1.9	–0.7
Bedfordshire	–2.2	–0.3	—	—	—
Bedfordshire 1997	—	—	2.5	0.1	–0.3
Luton 1997	—	—	3.0	3.0	3.4
Berkshire	–2.9	–8.2	–3.9	—	—
West Berkshire (Newbury) 1998	—	—	—	1.6	0.0
Bracknell Forest 1998	—	—	—	–0.2	0.0
Windsor and Maidenhead 1998	—	—	—	0.8	14.8
Reading 1998	—	—	—	4.0	0.6
Slough 1998	—	—	—	–5.0	–1.7
Wokingham 1998	—	—	—	–0.7	1.2
Buckinghamshire	1.4	1.2	—	—	—
Buckinghamshire 1997	—	—	8.8	–1.0	–1.4
Milton Keynes 1997	—	—	–5.3	–3.7	–5.4
Cambridgeshire	17.5	7.7	10.1	—	—
Cambridgeshire 1998	—	—	—	10.8	3.9
Peterborough 1998	—	—	—	–0.8	1.5
Essex	8.1	6.5	7.3	—	—
Essex 1998	—	—	—	5.2	–1.0
Southend on Sea 1998	—	—	—	–0.1	0.8
Thurrock 1998	—	—	—	–1.4	–0.4
Hertfordshire	8.6	10.6	14.0	3.4	–1.4
Kent	–3.6	3.1	–9.2	—	—
Kent 1998	—	—	—	–3.5	–5.0
Medway 1998	—	—	—	–5.2	–1.1
Norfolk	20.7	19.9	13.0	10.9	5.4
Oxfordshire	0.1	2.6	0.5	–6.3	–3.4
Suffolk	13.8	11.8	8.9	7.4	6.9
Surrey	7.4	14.5	6.7	–2.7	–2.8
East Sussex	8.8	10.5	—	—	—
East Sussex 1997	—	—	5.4	1.1	1.6
Brighton and Hove 1997	—	—	8.7	4.5	1.3
West Sussex	15.5	5.9	9.3	11.5	6.5
Avon	40.8	—	—	—	—
Bath and NE Somerset 1996	—	8.0	6.6	6.5	6.0
Bristol 1996	—	20.5	16.7	16.2	16.4
South Gloucestershire 1996	—	9.0	9.1	7.7	5.6
North Somerset 1996	—	7.3	6.8	6.7	3.0
Cornwall	7.4	0.0	–1.3	–0.5	1.8
Devon	1.9	0.2	5.0	—	—
Devon 1998	—	—	—	0.7	–0.9
City of Plymouth 1998	—	—	—	0.0	–0.6
Torbay 1998	—	—	—	–1.5	–0.5
Dorset	15.5	4.5	—	—	—
Dorset 1997	—	—	14.5	2.6	11.0
Bournemouth 1997	—	—	3.6	2.1	1.6
Poole 1997	—	—	1.3	1.7	3.5
Gloucestershire	0.9	1.0	–2.3	–3.6	–3.4
Hampshire	43.0	22.9	—	—	—
Hampshire 1997	—	—	21.9	9.4	6.2
Portsmouth 1997	—	—	—	2.2	1.1
Southampton 1997	—	—	2.5	6.6	3.0
Hereford and Worcester	–2.1	–0.1	5.7	—	—
Herefordshire 1998	—	—	—	0.3	–0.6
Worcestershire 1998	—	—	—	0.0	–2.1
Isles of Scilly	0.1	0.1	0.1	—	—
Isle of Wight	0.6	1.5	0.7	0.5	0.4
Somerset	15.1	7.4	15.3	9.9	10.3
Wiltshire	12.4	9.8	—	—	—
Wiltshire 1997	—	—	7.2	2.5	1.6
Swindon (Thamesdown) 1997	—	—	–1.6	–3.0	–2.1
Birmingham	29.2	26.0	26.0	36.3	40.2
Coventry	14.6	12.5	13.8	9.8	15.6
Derbyshire	20.1	16.1	0.0	—	—
Derbyshire 1997	—	0.0	8.9	8.6	5.4
City of Derby 1997	—	0.0	–0.7	–1.3	–1.2
Dudley	8.7	8.0	10.1	8.4	11.0
Leicestershire	11.6	11.9	—	—	—
Leicestershire 1997	—	—	7.1	10.2	8.2
Leicester City 1997	—	—	–1.8	–2.5	–2.9

Difference between budgeted spend and education SSA 1995–96 to 1999–2000

£ million

LEA	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Rutland 1997	—	0.0	0.6	0.2	1.4
Lincolnshire	21.8	15.9	16.0	5.7	5.0
Northamptonshire	7.0	4.8	1.0	−3.1	1.8
Nottinghamshire	26.8	17.3	20.1	—	—
Nottinghamshire 1998	—	—	—	18.4	24.1
City of Nottingham 1998	—	—	—	−5.9	−3.9
Staffordshire	12.3	9.3	—	—	—
Staffordshire 1997	—	—	0.5	4.1	3.5
Stoke on Trent 1997	—	—	1.2	−0.2	0.1
Warwickshire	8.4	6.7	10.1	11.0	5.8
Sandwell	6.9	10.0	6.1	6.1	4.8
Shropshire	9.5	4.7	5.3	—	—
Shropshire 1998	—	—	—	4.8	3.6
Telford and Wrekin 1998	—	—	—	−3.7	−1.1
Solihull	7.4	6.6	4.2	2.6	−1.0
Walsall	4.3	7.0	3.8	2.3	−0.7
Wolverhampton	5.5	9.3	7.3	5.8	9.2
Barnsley	0.4	−1.0	−3.0	−2.9	−2.7
Bradford	−5.8	−3.9	−6.2	−6.4	−4.9
Calderdale	2.6	1.8	2.1	1.0	0.7
Doncaster	1.6	1.9	4.5	−0.6	−1.4
Kirklees	10.3	12.2	0.6	1.7	2.3
Leeds	42.1	25.0	34.2	18.3	14.2
North Yorkshire 1996	20.3	2.0	—	—	—
North Yorkshire 1997	—	—	15.2	12.9	12.8
York 1996	—	−0.6	4.9	3.1	4.6
Rotherham	0.8	−0.2	−3.5	−4.5	−2.2
Sheffield	9.6	−0.8	1.3	0.1	0.0
Wakefield	6.0	3.5	−0.7	0.7	0.5
Cleveland	3.0	—	—	—	—
Hartlepool 1996	—	−0.1	−1.4	−0.8	0.4
Middlesbrough 1996	—	−0.5	−3.2	−4.3	−3.2
Redcar and Cleveland 1996	—	−1.3	−0.6	−0.2	−0.1
Stockton on Tees 1996	—	−0.6	−0.5	0.8	1.5
Durham	13.3	6.8	—	—	—
Durham 1997	—	0.0	10.5	10.8	11.0
Darlington 1997	—	0.0	−0.5	−0.4	−0.6
Northumberland	6.9	5.4	−0.8	−0.6	0.9
East Riding of Yorkshire 1996	—	11.2	9.2	7.9	7.8
Kingston upon Hull 1996	—	3.4	0.4	1.1	1.2
North Lincolnshire 1996	—	9.2	4.9	2.3	0.8
North East Lincolnshire 1996	—	−1.7	−0.5	0.8	1.9
Gateshead	7.7	7.6	7.4	5.6	3.3
Newcastle upon Tyne	4.1	12.8	18.1	17.1	10.4
North Tyneside	3.6	3.2	4.8	3.7	2.8
South Tyneside	3.6	1.3	−1.1	−1.8	0.5
Sunderland	3.1	−1.3	0.4	−3.0	−0.5
Bolton	6.2	5.0	2.5	1.8	1.6
Bury	7.4	6.7	4.3	1.0	1.5
Cheshire	23.0	20.3	21.6	—	—
Cheshire 1998	—	—	—	23.7	21.1
Halton 1998	—	—	—	0.4	0.4
Warrington 1998	—	—	—	0.6	2.0
Cumbria	11.3	11.5	11.9	10.2	8.1
Knowsley	0.7	−0.3	1.4	0.2	−0.1
Lancashire	36.5	31.3	21.4	—	—
Lancashire 1998	—	—	—	19.6	16.4
Blackburn with Darwen 1998	—	—	—	0.3	0.5
Blackpool 1998	—	—	—	−3.5	−2.1
Liverpool	−2.0	2.3	−9.1	−3.7	−3.5
Manchester	−8.5	−1.4	0.9	−3.3	0.6
Oldham	6.3	6.7	5.0	1.7	3.4
Rochdale	0.4	2.1	0.8	−1.1	1.9
Salford	7.1	8.2	10.9	6.0	4.8
Sefton	7.7	6.2	4.5	3.9	4.0
St. Helens	9.9	7.1	3.8	4.3	4.2
Stockport	9.3	6.6	2.6	4.9	2.6
Tameside	7.9	2.1	1.9	0.7	−1.3
Trafford	6.4	4.3	8.8	8.6	14.0
Wigan	8.3	7.9	7.1	6.7	6.4
Wirral	−0.3	0.5	−2.0	−3.0	−0.3
Total	703.9	699.3	611.3	425.8	387.7

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 21 June 2000

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Corruption and Bribery

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which British companies involved in the Ilisu Dam project are involved in the trial concerning bribery and corruption in Lesotho; and if he will make a statement. [127079]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* As has already been reported in the press, Balfour Beatty, one of the companies involved in a bribery trial in Lesotho, is bidding for work on the proposed Ilisu Dam project in Turkey.

It would be inappropriate to comment on specific allegations against British firms, which are a matter for the appropriate courts.

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what formal procedures are in place in the event of companies in receipt of ECGD support *(a)* being charged with corruption and *(b)* having allegations of corruption made against them. [127082]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* ECGD's audit services would normally investigate any case, in either category, where there are grounds for believing that the Exchequer's interest might be prejudiced as a result of alleged corrupt practices.

ECGD will shortly be introducing new procedures to the OECD Bribery Convention aimed at further deterring corrupt practices.

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action he has taken concerning recent allegations of bribery and corruption on the part of British companies in Lesotho. [127080]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* The Government share international concern at all allegations of corruption. It would, however, be inappropriate to comment on specific allegations against UK firms which are a matter, in this instance, for the Lesotho courts. The Government will, if asked, co-operate fully in any way that it can.

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the directors of UK companies banned from World bank contracts who are directors of companies in receipt of ECGD support; and if he will list the relevant companies. [127085]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* The World bank last updated their list of ineligible firms on 29 February 2000. ECGD has no record of having provided support to any of the firms on that list.

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what staff he has in post to check for corruption relating to ECGD- backed projects. [127083]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* ECGD policy makes it clear that all staff have a part to play in minimising the risks of corruption and malpractice by remaining alert to such possibilities and by developing and maintaining effective controls to reduce these risks. Additionally there is an Internal Audit Department of seven who have responsibility for investigating any suspected cases of corruption relating to ECGD backed projects.

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if guidelines to prevent corruption will be included in the forthcoming recommendations for the ECGD's Mission and Status. [127084]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* The review of ECGD's Mission and Status is ongoing and I cannot comment on the outcome of the review until it is complete. It is looking at what ECGD's future role should be and, as I stressed when I announced the review last July, will consider carefully how ECGD can better help the Government to meet their wider objectives. I expect Ministers to determine necessary changes to ECGD's Mission in the next month or so. A report of the review will be published.

Post Offices (Benefits Agency Business)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what payments were made to post offices in each of the last five years for undertaking Benefits Agency business in *(a)* Scotland, *(b)* Dumfries and Galloway and *(c)* Galloway and Upper Nithsdale parliamentary constituency. [124713]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand from the Post Office that details of payments made to post offices in respect of business undertaken for the Benefits Agency are contractual matters and as such commercially confidential.

Trade Partners UK

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the recent performance of British Trade International; and what are its *(a)* performance criteria and *(b)* annual budget. [126751]

Mr. Caborn: British Trade International's services for trade development and promotion are now delivered under the single brand name of Trade Partners UK. As I announced last month, British Trade International is also the umbrella body for the Invest in Britain Bureau which will work alongside Trade Partners UK.

Trade Partners UK was launched nationally on 31 May 2000, and replaces the various promotional brands that have been used in the past. The services available to firms will be easier to access and more effective. A new electronic gateway provides internet access to all basic information on international markets and business sectors, and an electronic inquiry service. Trade Partners UK will continue to work in partnership with other Government Departments, devolved administrations and regional bodies.

Trade Partners UK's aim is to enhance the competitiveness of Britain's companies through overseas sales and investments. Trade development and promotion objectives have been published in both the Foreign Office's Departmental Report and the Department of Trade and Industry's Government Expenditure Plans.

In the period 1999–2000, these objectives were achieved with, for example, a customer satisfaction rate of 89 per cent. and more businesses (especially SMEs) being encouraged to take an active and professional approach to exporting as a result of assistance provided.

Detailed performance criteria for Trade Partners UK's future activities are in development. These will be in place by April 2001.

British Trade International's annual budget for its Trade Partners UK activities consists of three elements. In round figures these are:

about £67 million for programme expenditure;

about £90 million (net of certain overheads) currently devoted to running costs (staff) in overseas posts;

about £30 million currently devoted to running costs in the UK (the headquarters in London and the English regional operations). About £28 million of the funding is provided by DTI, the balance by the FCO.

These figures exclude funding for the Invest in Britain Bureau.

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what will be the cost of establishing Trade Partners UK. [126753]

Mr. Caborn: It cost £250,000 to develop the Trade Partners UK brand. Further costs of promoting and developing customer awareness of the new brand and the services we offer are being met by redirecting marketing effort that would in any case have been spent on promoting our services.

A3XX

Mr. Peter Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what level of launch aid has been provided by his Department for the Airbus A3XX; to how many sets of components the launch aid applies; and how many jobs he estimates will be created as a result of the launch aid. [127158]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announced on 13 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 9W, that the Government would provide £530 million of launch investment to BAE Systems to help them develop the wings for the A3XX. We estimate this project will create 22,000 new jobs (8,000 in BAE Systems and supply companies, and 14,000 new induced employment) and safeguard a further 62,000 jobs (20,000 on current Airbus programmes and 42,000 in induced employment).

Employment Relations Act 1999

Dr. Desmond Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will use section 23 of the Employment Relations Act 1999 to give ministers of religion the same employment rights as other employees. [126879]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government are committed to carrying out full public consultation before exercising the power in section 23, which allows the Secretary of State to confer existing employment rights on categories of individuals who currently fall outside their coverage. The issue of rights for ministers of religion is one of those on which we intend to seek views in the consultation document.

Foreign-based Commercial Staff

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many commercial staff and at what grades his Department employs in *(a)* Kazakhstan, *(b)* Uzbekistan, *(c)* Turkmenistan, *(d)* Tajikistan and *(e)* Kyrgystan. [R] [126433]

Mr. Battle: I have been asked to reply.

Commercial staff overseas are employed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as part of the unified FCO/DTI British Trade International operation. Staff in British Trade International's UK operation are primarily employed by the Department of Trade and Industry. We have no representation in Tajikistan or Kyrgystan. Details of commercial staffing in the other countries are *(a)* Kazakhstan—the equivalent of 2.68 staff (including a DTI officer on loan), *(b)* Uzbekistan—the equivalent of 2.65 staff and *(c)* Turkmenistan—the equivalent of 1.95 staff. The staff involved in commercial work vary in grades. These totals are a reflection of the total time spent by both UK based and locally engaged staff over a year. They reflect the combined efforts of several staff at each post on commercial work.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Food Imports

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proportion of *(a)* organic foods, *(b)* bottled drinking water, *(c)* parsnips and *(d)* yoghurt consumed in the UK are imported. [126323]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* It is estimated that about *(a)* 70 per cent. of organic foods, *(b)* 35 per cent. of mineral water, and *(d)* 15 per cent. of yoghurt consumed in the UK are imported. Statistics on imports of parsnips are not separately available.

Animal By-products

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to minimise skip lorry movements of animal products for final disposal between farms. [125167]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 8 June 2000]:* None. The transport and disposal of animal by-products are already controlled by the Animal By-Products Order 1999. The Order is enforced by local authorities.

Confectionery Manufacturing

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the impact on British confectionery manufacturing of the

European Commission's decision to suspend the payment of refunds payable on the export of non-Annex 1 products. [124769]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 14 June 2000]:* From 8 May this year the European Commission temporarily suspended the issue of further refund certificates, required for refund payments on the export of non-Annex 1 products. Special provision has been made for small traders to ensure that they are unaffected by the suspension. This suspension reflects the Commission's concern about the value of claims made so far in the current year compared to budgetary limits.

For the British confectionery manufacturing industry this could result in a shortfall in the current budget year of some £4.7 million from the previous year's export refund receipt of £18.5 million, if certificates remain suspended until the end of the budget year in October. The UK confectionery industry exports products worth some £300 million per year to non-EU destinations, and it is these exports that will be affected by suspension.

Discussions with the Commission are continuing at official and at ministerial level to secure a solution that will minimise the impact for all exporting industries affected by the suspension.

Milk

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to promote the consumption of fresh milk in schools. [125790]

Ms Quin: The Government have already taken action via the Intervention Board to draw the attention of schools and local education authorities to the existence of the EU School Milk Subsidy Scheme and to simplify its operations. The Intervention Board has also recently issued a questionnaire to all claimant organisations in England and Wales seeking further suggestions for improvements to the administration of the scheme.

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to assist the promotion of the sale of fresh milk. [125791]

Ms Quin: In response to calls from representatives of dairy farmers the Government widened the remit of the Milk Development Council (MDC) to allow it to engage in the generic promotion of milk. The MDC's first marketing campaign for fresh milk, funded jointly by producers and processors, commenced on 19 June.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the basis and source of data of the Intervention Board calculations of milk production; and what representations he has received as to their accuracy. [125775]

Ms Quin: The monthly, wholesale, butterfat-adjusted, milk production figures calculated by the Intervention Board are based on monthly returns submitted to the Intervention Board by all approved milk purchasers, as required by regulation 28(2) of the Dairy Produce Quotas Regulations 1997, as amended.

The Intervention Board has received a number of representations over time about the accuracy of the milk production figures and, in response to such inquiries, has explained that the figures are subject to amendment and should not be regarded as definitive. It is made clear in the accompanying notes that the figures are issued only as a guide to trends in milk production and for comparison against a calculated milk quota profile. Those using the figures, particularly in reaching commercial decisions relating to milk quota or milk production, are advised to take account of the limitations, which are set out in some detail.

Farm Diversification

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what *(a)* advice and *(b)* financial assistance is available to farmers to help them diversify their work; and if he will make a statement. [125949]

Mr. Morley: We will launch a new Rural Enterprise Scheme which will include grant aid for farm diversification once we receive approval from the European Commission for the England Rural Development Plan.

Under the Action Plan for Farming we will also produce a new booklet on farm diversification and intend to provide free advice on planning to successful applicants to the Rural Enterprise Scheme.

Farm Animal Welfare

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to persuade his European Union partners to give a high priority during negotiations to revise WTO rules ensuring that the EU can maintain and improve its standards of farm animal welfare; and if he will make a statement. [126514]

Ms Quin: The conclusions of the EU Agriculture Council on 27 September 1999 and the General Affairs Council on 25 October 1999 committed the EU to taking forward the issue of farm animal welfare in the WTO negotiations. The UK has been a strong support of this commitment, which was reinforced by the Prime Minister in his Action Plan for Farming, published on 30 March 2000, and we will be seeking to take it forward in the negotiations on agriculture which have now started.

Fisheries Council

Mr. Casale: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the outcome was of the Fisheries Council held in Luxembourg on 16 June; and if he will make a statement. [127182]

Mr. Morley: The Fisheries Council met in Luxembourg on 16 June. I led the UK delegation, accompanied by John Home Robertson, Deputy Minister for Rural Affairs in the Scottish Executive.

The Commission presented its mid-term review of the Multi Annual Guidance Programme (MAGP) IV, which will now go for further study. I made clear that I could not accept the cuts in the UK fleet suggested by the Commission. In particular, effort control must be retained. However, the need to bring capacity into better balance with available stocks remained, and I welcome the Commission's plans for a public consultation this autumn

on successor arrangements to MAGP IV. Stricter MAGP limits should be applied in member states offering construction grants for new vessels.

The Council adopted a report on the integration of environmental concerns into the Common Fisheries Policy for submission to the European Council and agreed on new arrangements for the collection of biological and economic data on the industry. I, together with German and Belgian colleagues, succeeded in insisting that these should not be unnecessarily burdensome. We raised the issue of unregulated international fishing for haddock off Rockall and with support from a number of member states pressed the Commission to seek early action through the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission.

I welcomed a statement from Commissioner Fischler on the need for member states to take action to reduce cetacean bycatches in EU waters. I also welcomed the Commission's report on the pilot stage of Regional Workshops, which helpfully bring together fishermen, scientists and administrators to consider improvements in the management of particular fisheries.

Commissioner Fischler reported on the latest state of play on negotiations on a new EU-Morocco Agreement. The Council had an initial discussion on responsibility for the enforcement of Regional Fisheries Organisation responsibilities. A revised Total Allowable Catch for anchovies was agreed.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Free Votes

Mr. Wigley: To ask the President of the Council if she will make it the Government's policy that in each instance where the majority of the House is in favour of legislation and where the Government are neutral on the issue in question, it will put forward appropriate legislation, provide time for debate and permit a free vote on specific issues. [126084]

Mrs. Beckett: Governments are elected on the basis of their Manifestos, which will always contain a number of commitments requiring legislation. It is right that Manifesto commitments should have priority. Other legislative needs are identified by Government and examined on a case-by-case basis. Although parliamentary time is limited, there have always been occasions when the Government has found time for matters on which it is itself neutral.

Appointments Commission

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council if the Appointments Commission will make it its policy to give unsuccessful applicants for membership of the House of Lords reasons why their applications failed. [126832]

Mrs. Beckett: This is a matter for the Appointments Commission.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council who provides the secretariat supporting the Appointments Commission; and how many persons are employed in it. [126835]

Mrs. Beckett: The Appointments Commission is supported by a Secretariat who are either members of, or on loan to, the Cabinet Office. The Commission has yet to determine its final requirement for staff.

The same staffing arrangement applies to other independent bodies such as the Commissioner for Public Appointments and the Committee on Standards in Public Life.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council if applicants for membership of the House of Lords are to receive a specification from the Appointments Commission setting out the qualities and abilities expected in successful applicants. [126836]

Mrs. Beckett: I understand that it is the Commission's intention to be exceedingly open in its procedures. The issue of a person specification would be consistent with that approach.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council if she will list the scheduled dates of meetings of the Appointments Commission in 2000. [126834]

Mrs. Beckett: This is a matter for the Commission.

I understand, however, that the schedule of meetings has not yet been finalised.

DEFENCE

Boeing C17

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the total cost is over the whole life of the contract for the lease of the four Boeing C17 aircraft; and if it includes maintenance for the aircraft. [125437]

Mr. Hoon: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 21 June 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence in which you asked what the total cost is over the whole life of the contract for the lease for the four C17 aircraft; and if it includes maintenance for the aircraft. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The exact contract price is commercially confidential. In broad terms, however, we expect the overall cost to be in the order of £500M, which costs include maintenance of the aircraft.

Permanent Secretary (Official Visits)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the visits outside the UK made by his Department's Permanent Secretary on official business since 1 January 1999, indicating the date and purpose of the visit in each case. [127135]

Dr. Moonie: The MOD's Permanent Secretary has made the following visits outside the UK on official business since 1 January 1999.

Date	Venue	Purpose
1999		
5–7 February	Munich, Germany	Wehrkunde security conference
25–26 February	Bonn, Germany	Talks on european defence and bilateral issues
24 March-2 April	Pakistan and India	UK/Pakistan Defence Cooperation Forum UK/India Defence Consultative Group
12–13 May	Ploce, Macedonia	Visiting UK forces, and bilateral discussions
3 June	Brussels, Belgium	Discussions at NATO Headquarters
7–8 June	Ankara, Turkey	Talks on European defence and bilateral issues
20 July	Paris, France	Talks on European defence and bilateral issues
2–3 August	Bosnia and Croatia	Visiting UK forces
1–2 September	Copenhagen, Denmark	Conference of Northern Defence Permanent Secretaries
18–19 October	Rome, Italy	Talks on European defence and bilateral issues
1–2 November	Helsinki, Finland	Talks on European defence and bilateral issues
8–9 November	Germany	Visiting UK forces
2000		
24–25 January	Cyprus	Visiting UK forces
4–5 February	Munich, Germany	Wehrkunde security conference
15–16 March	Berlin, Germany	Chairing UK/German seminar
11–12 April	Oslo, Norway	Talks on European defence and bilateral issues
11–12 May	Pristina, Kosovo	Visiting UK forces, and other discussions

MOD Buildings, Whitehall

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his proposals for refurbishing the MOD building in Whitehall, including the total cost of the refurbishment. [126677]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for St. Albans (Mr. Pollard) on 17 May 2000, *Official Report*, columns 162–63W.

Kosovo (Depleted Uranium)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what reports he has evaluated of health problems among service men deployed in Kosovo attributable to contact with depleted uranium. [125934]

Mr. Spellar: I have not received any reports evaluating or suggesting health problems among service personnel deployed in Kosovo attributable to contact with depleted uranium.

Senegal (Chinooks)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the decision was taken to send Chinooks to Senegal in order to assist the deployment of troops; when the Chinooks left the United Kingdom; when they arrived in Senegal; and if he will make a statement. [126998]

Mr. Hoon: The decision to deploy Chinooks to Dakar in Senegal, which was designated as the Forward Mounting Base for the evacuation operation, was taken on Saturday 6 May. The Chinooks left the UK that day and flew to Dakar over the course of that weekend, arriving in the early morning of 8 May.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Hospitals

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to monitor cleanliness of hospital wards and operating theatres. [126918]

Clare Short: Our health programmes in developing countries work to improve the overall quality of health care provided, particularly for the poorest. Good hygiene practice and sterile operating conditions are important indicators of quality in service delivery.

China Western Poverty Reduction Project

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to support the Qinghai component of the China Western Poverty Reduction Project. [126919]

Clare Short: The report by the Independent Inspection Panel into the China Western Poverty Reduction Project, and World Bank management's response to it, will be discussed at a World Bank Board meeting in early July 2000. We will be looking very carefully at the conclusions of the Inspection Panel Report, and management's response to it, in preparing our position for that board meeting.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Flaxmill, Shrewsbury

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the extent of repairs required to the Flaxmill in Shrewsbury. [125943]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I understand the building has been empty since 1987 and has a status of Grade A awarded by English Heritage. The repairs have been estimated to cost some £12.2 million.

Bus Lanes

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will amend the road traffic regulations to enable Class 3 vehicles to use bus lanes; and if he will make a statement. [126187]

Mr. Hill: I have no plans to amend regulations to permit Class 3 vehicles to access bus lanes.

The use of bus lanes by those vehicles, which are limited by Regulation to a maximum speed of 12.8 kph, would impede the flow of buses. That would clearly undermine the purpose of bus lanes which is to afford buses greater priority over other vehicles.

There is also the question of safety. We would be extremely concerned about the safety of Class 3 users travelling in small, slow moving vehicles immediately in front of or behind some of the largest vehicles on our roads.

Where Class 3 users consider that the road conditions are unsuitable for them to travel on the carriageway we would strongly recommend that they continue the journey on the footway where they can legally travel at up to 6.4 kph. We believe that is more appropriate than providing them with access to bus lanes.

Rail Service (London-Liverpool)

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with the Rail Regulator about the delays in boarding Liverpool trains at Euston Station. [126421]

Mr. Hill: The Franchising Director, not the Rail Regulator, is responsible for monitoring delays in the boarding of trains. The Secretary of State has had no discussions with the Franchising Director about delays in boarding Liverpool trains at Euston station.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received on the timekeeping of West Coast Main Line trains between Liverpool and Euston. [126422]

Mr. Hill: The Secretary of State has not received any representations about the timekeeping of West Coast Main Line trains between Liverpool and Euston. All trains on the West Coast Main Line have been subject to some delays due to the West Coast Main Line upgrade, but consequential amendments have been to the timetable and timekeeping has remained constant. The Franchising Director's publication 'On Track' (copies of which are available in the House Libraries) shows that 80.6 per cent. of West Coast Main Line trains arrived at their destination within 10 minutes of the advertised time in the year to 31 March 2000. This was an improvement on the 72.8 per cent. achieved in the previous year.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with the Rail Regulator on the timekeeping of West Coast Main Line services between Liverpool Lime Street and Euston. [126420]

Mr. Hill: The Franchising Director not the Rail Regulator is responsible for monitoring the timekeeping of trains. The Secretary of State has had no discussions with the Franchising Director about the timekeeping of West Coast Main Line services between Liverpool and Euston.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received about delays in boarding Liverpool trains at Euston station. [126511]

Mr. Hill: The Secretary of State has received no representations relating specifically to delays in boarding trains to Liverpool at Euston station. Development work in connection with the West Coast Main Line upgrade has resulted in a number of platforms at Euston being closed between May and September of this year. The consequential shortage of platforms has meant that upon arrival trains unload passengers and are then cleaned and stored out of the immediate station area, returning to the departure platform shortly before departure time. This has resulted in reduced intervals between trains being available for loading and departure times but this is common to all services from Euston.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions took place at the Rail Summit about the timekeeping of West Coast Main Line services between Liverpool Lime Street and Euston. [126782]

Mr. Hill: Timekeeping of West Coast Main Line services between Liverpool Lime Street and Euston was not discussed at the Rail Summit.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it a condition when re-awarding the franchise for the West Coast Main Line that the level of on-board services between Liverpool Lime Street and Euston Station is improved. [126781]

Mr. Hill: The present franchise for the West Coast Main Line is not due to be replaced until 9 March 2012. The franchise, in common with all the other passenger rail franchises, does not contain any provisions stipulating what on-board services must be provided. It is not envisaged that there will be any such provisions in any of the replacement franchises.

Sewage Works

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what monitoring system is in place to ensure that the precautions required by law when parties of school pupils or organised parties of adults visit water treatment or sewage works are taken. [126282]

Mr. Meacher: Employers in the water supply and sewage treatment industry have general duties placed upon them by the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 to ensure that, so far as is reasonably practicable, visitors are not exposed to risks to their health and safety.

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations require employers to carry out a suitable and sufficient assessment of the risks arising from their undertaking to the health and safety of persons not in their employment. This includes members of the public.

Risks to health, including biological risks, are also covered by the more specific requirements of the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 1999. They require the employer to carry out a risk assessment and where necessary to implement suitable measures to reduce the risk. This duty would extend to groups visiting the site.

The Health and Safety Executive is responsible for the inspection of water treatment works and sewage works. Inspections of water treatment companies would include an assessment of their ability to manage and control risks, including, where appropriate, risks to the public.

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of whether washing screens in the screen houses of sewage works with untreated effluent produces a local atmosphere containing biological agents of a hazardous nature. [126269]

Mr. Meacher: HSE has undertaken at least one local intervention to monitor levels of aerosols in a screen house and at visits to water treatment companies over the years has looked into the biological risks arising from the process and the way they are controlled.

There are potentially hazardous micro-organisms in all sewage and a range of reasonably practicable precautions should be taken to control the risk.

HSE made a number of recommendations including improved washing facilities, disposable overalls, respiratory protective equipment and improved ventilation. Although they had initially recommended the use of clean mains water or its equivalent for screen washing, they accepted that this was not reasonably practicable given the very large volumes used and the fact that a new secondary treatment works is being built and that biologically treated effluent will be available for screen washing from September 2000, with the plant being fully commissioned by the end of 2000.

At a national level HSE works with the water industry's national trade body, Water UK, to help identify and resolve health and safety problems in the industry. Work has been carried out at national level on the microbiological risks from sewage, including those encountered at sewage treatment works. HSE produced guidance for employers and workers in 1995.

Screens are usually washed with water which has been through the treatment process ("final effluent") which, while not of drinking-water quality, has fairly low levels of micro-organisms. However, where the treatment facilities are limited, as at Seafield, the water used will have higher levels of micro-organisms. The main risk is from ingestion/swallowing and from splashes on the skin and in the eyes. Aerosols containing micro-organisms are likely to be produced in screen houses from the general flow of sewage and also from the washing down of the screens. These aerosols can pose a risk to health from inhalation, depending on droplet size and the type and amount of micro-organisms present.

Cycles

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many of his Department's buildings display notices prohibiting the chaining of cycles to railings. [126410]

Mr. Hill: Only the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, London, displays such signs. This reflects the high security needs of the centre.

Light and Noise Pollution

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish maps showing tranquil areas in respect of light and noise pollution. [126413]

Mr. Hill: In respect of noise, Birmingham City Council has recently produced an innovative noise map of the City with support from this Department. This has been published as a DETR report ("A report on the production of noise maps of the City of Birmingham"—ISBN 1–851123–59–8). Copies are available in the House Library and on the DETR website (www.environment.detr.gov.uk/noisemaps/birmingham/report/index.htm).

The question of extending this technique throughout the country both in urban areas and relatively quiet areas in the open country is actively being considered by the Government and in European fora. My hon. Friend may wish to be aware that the Council for the Protection of Rural England together with the Countryside Commission has published a "Tranquillity Map", identifying areas of England which are far enough away from visual or noise intrusion to be considered unspoilt by urban influences.

There are no plans at this time to introduce mapping for light pollution.

Dioxin

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) of 24 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 539W, on dioxin, if he will make a statement about the operation of his Department's Hazardous Air Pollutants Programme in East Sussex. [126258]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* The Hazardous Air Pollutants Programme has no measuring station in East Sussex.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) of 24 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 539W, on dioxin, what assessment his Department has made of the geographical comprehensiveness of his Department's Hazardous Air Pollutants Programme; and if he will make a statement. [126257]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* The Hazardous Air Pollutants Programme has made measurements of polyaromatic hydrocarbons (PAH), dioxins, furans and polychlorinated biphenyls in Cardiff, Manchester, London, Stevenage, Hazelrigg in Lancashire, High Muffles in the North Yorkshire Moors and Stoke Ferry in East Anglia in various years since 1991. It is making further measurements of PAH at Ashington, Bolsover, Glasgow, Holyhead, Kinlochleven, Lisburn, Newport (Gwent), Port Talbot and Scunthorpe. The first list of sites gives a good indication of levels of hazardous air pollutants across the UK as a whole, while the second list represents sites where levels might be expected to be higher than average.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) of 24 May 2000, *Official Report*,

column 539W, on dioxin, what steps he has taken to publicise the website displaying the results of programmes which monitor dioxin levels; how many hits that website has received for each of the last 12 months for which figures are available; and what is the web address. [126259]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* The Department's website that contains the results of all the Department's air quality measuring programmes is widely publicised in a variety of media. The number of hits on the pages containing the dioxin measurements were 2,445 in the period 1 June 1999 to 31 May 2000, representing approximately 1,150 users. The website address is http://www.environment.detr.gov.uk/airq/aqinfo.htm, then click on National Air Quality Information Archive and then Monitoring Networks. The dioxin data are collected in the Toxic Organic Micropollutants section.

The Food Standards Agency data are on the website http://www.foodstandards.gov.uk. This site has experienced 612 hits since 3 April 2000 on the pages giving information about dioxins in food.

Houses in Multiple Occupation

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which local authorities operate registration schemes for houses in multiple occupation; how many properties are on the list; and what proportion are estimated to be high risk. [127007]

Mr. Mullin: The latest information my Department has on such schemes, based on local authority returns made in July 1999, indicated that 81 authorities, as listed, had schemes, and had registered approximately 10,000 houses in multiple occupation in the private rented sector. A number of these schemes, notably in London boroughs, are ward-based, although the majority are authority-wide:

Darlington, Gateshead, Middlesbrough, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Stockton-on-Tees, North Tyneside, Barnsley, Calderdale, East Riding of Yorkshire, Harrogate, North East Lincolnshire, North Lincolnshire, Rotherham, Scarborough, York, Derby, Kettering, Mansfield, Newark and Sherwood, South Kesteven, Basildon, Cambridge, Colchester, Kings Lynn and West Norfolk, Luton, Mid Bedfordshire, North Norfolk, Peterborough, South Norfolk, St. Albans, Tendring, Watford, Waveney, Barking and Dagenham, Bromley, Brent, Camden, Croydon, Ealing, Greenwich, Hackney, Hammersmith and Fulham, Haringey, Hillingdon, Kingston-upon-Thames, Lewisham, Newham, Islington, Hounslow, Sutton, Tower Hamlets, Westminster, Chiltern, Dover, Gravesham, Canterbury, Guildford, Portsmouth, Rushmoor, Southampton, Thanet, Bournemouth, Bristol, Cheltenham, Mid Devon, North Somerset, Torbay, West Devon, Weymouth and Portland, Birmingham, Coventry, Redditch, Wyre Forest, Blackpool, Bury, Carlisle, Chester, Lancaster, Preston, Warrington, West Lancashire, Wirral.

Authorities are not required to notify new schemes to my Department, but we are aware of several in the past year, including:

Kingston-upon-Hull, Sheffield, Bexley, Harrow, Lambeth, Southwark, Eastbourne, North Warwickshire, Brighton and Hove, Doncaster, Oxford, Herefordshire.

All the schemes are based upon my Department's 1997 model, which exempts certain lower-risk categories in the private rented sector, including houses occupied by: persons who form only two households; no more than four persons who form more than two households; no more than three persons in addition to the responsible person and any other member of their household.

Speed Cameras

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the results of the schemes that are exploring alternative mechanisms of funding speed cameras. [126966]

Mr. Hill: The camera funding pilots that started in April this year in eight police force areas in England, Wales and Scotland will run for two years to assess the effectiveness of new funding arrangements. It is too soon after the start for any results to be available yet, and we expect some preliminary results after the first year.

Abandoned Vehicles

Mr. Patrick Hall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will review the Refuse Disposal Act 1978 with regard to the seven day notice period applicable to vehicles abandoned on the public highway before they can be removed by local authorities. [126568]

Mr. Hill: The existing regulations are intended to provide owners with safeguards against a local authority prematurely assuming a vehicle is abandoned and having it towed away for scrap. They also ensure that local authorities do not have to go to the unnecessary expense of removing and storing vehicles that may not, in the event, have been abandoned.

We believe that the current legislation provides a good balance between the powers of local authorities to deal with abandoned vehicles and the rights of vehicle owners.

Mr. Patrick Hall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to maintain an official record of the number of motor vehicles abandoned every year in England and Wales. [126566]

Mr. Hill: There are no plans at present to maintain an official record of such cases.

Mr. Patrick Hall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce legislation to amend the Data Protection Act 1998 to allow details of last registered owners of abandoned motor vehicles to be passed to local authorities on request. [126565]

Mr. Hill: The Data Protection Act exempts certain data from its non-disclosure provisions. The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency already has powers to release vehicle keeper details to local authorities to help them deal with abandoned vehicles. The Agency provides the information on request. It is also developing electronic links with authorities to speed up the process.

Mr. Patrick Hall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review the *(a)* legal and *(b)* financial framework for dealing with abandoned motor vehicles. [126567]

Mr. Hill: We will review the existing arrangements as we develop proposals for implementing the proposed European End-of-Life Vehicles Directive in the UK.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the overseas trips on official business he has made since 1 January; and how many days he has spent overseas since 1 January. [126546]

Mr. Prescott *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* Since 1 January 2000 I have made the following overseas visits on official business:

Sunday 12 to Friday 17 March:

Brazil and United States. Meetings with President Cardoso and other Brazilian Ministers. Trade Promotion. Meetings with Carnival and Cunard shipping companies and discussions on aviation with US Secretary of Transportation.

Friday 7 to Tuesday 11 April:

Japan. Attend G8 Environment Ministers Conference. Meetings with Prime Minister Mori and other Japanese Ministers and with Honorary Chairman of Toyota.

Tuesday 25 to Thursday 27 April:

United States. Meetings with Vice President Gore and other members of US Administration. Discussions with Senators on climate change. Attend United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development.

Sunday 4 June:

France. Represent UK Government at 60th Anniversary of Dunkirk.

Sunday 11 to Thursday 15 June:

Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Meeting with President Obasanjo and other Nigerian Ministers. Trade promotion. Meeting with President Kabbah and visit to UK troops in Sierra Leone.

All travel has been undertaken in accordance with the Ministerial Code.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many times *(a)* he, *(b)* the Minister for the Environment, *(c)* the Minister for Local Government and the Regions and *(d)* the Minister for Housing and Planning have come to their office in the last month (i) all or part of the way by official car and (ii) by other means. [126796]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* Ministers travel by car and by public transport on a regular basis on official visits and on journeys to their offices.

Ministers are required under the Ministerial Code always to make efficient and cost-effective travel arrangements.

Housing

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the number of below tolerable standard houses in England and Scotland; and on what criteria this is based. [126544]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* The tolerable standard is a measure of minimum standard housing in Scotland and is the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland. It does not apply in England. Therefore there is no comparable information.

Environment Policy

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will issue his Policy Appraisal and the Environmental Policy Guidance, "Sustainable Development: What it is and What You Can Do", to newly-appointed Ministers and civil servants involved in policy development. [126851]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My Department's document, "Policy Appraisal and the Environment: Policy Guidance", has been made widely available to other Departments since it was published in 1998. It is also now included on the Cabinet Office's website as part of the "Policy Makers Checklist" and all Departments will be adding that checklist to their own intranet sites. A number, including mine, already have. Electronic availability of this guidance is more efficient than the distribution of large numbers of paper copies.

The guide "Sustainable Development: What it is and What You Can Do" is one of four guidance notes issued by the Green Ministers Committee. Again my Department has a stock of paper copies which other Departments can draw from while the guide is also available to them through our website or by addition to their intranets.

Green Ministers regularly consider the procedures by which sustainable development and the environment are integrated into policy-making and act as the focal point for those procedures among their ministerial colleagues in their own Departments.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what further plans he has concerning the development of the targets and policies contained in the sustainable development frameworks produced in each English region; and if he will make a statement. [126850]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The first regional sustainable development framework was launched in the West Midlands in February and the second is due to be launched in the North-West in July; both are promising documents. We expect all the regions to have completed their frameworks by the end of 2000. Frameworks are not Government documents nor are they statutory and they will set their own targets. For frameworks to have a real impact it is vital that their production, including setting priorities and establishing systems for monitoring progress, involves all stakeholders and has support across the region. That is why we have said they should be agreed by the regional chambers. Once published we expect regional decision-makers to "buy in" to the visions set out in frameworks and to act in ways that are consistent with them.

O'Byrne Lawsuit

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he plans to take following the decision in R *v.* Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, ex parte O'Byrne. [126801]

Ms Beverley Hughes: None.

St. Helens Council

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out

the cash and percentage increase in the St Helens Metropolitan Council *(a)* revenue support grant, *(b)* HRA subsidy, *(c)* capital grants and *(d)* partnership grants for (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99 and (iii) 1999–2000. [126638]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The following tables set out the cash and percentage changes in the amounts of grants made by my Department to St. Helens Metropolitan Council in each of the last three financial years.

Cash change on previous year

£ million

Grant	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Revenue support grant[1]	−3.757	6.602	3.274
Housing revenue account subsidy[2]	−1.497	−1.062	−0.313
Capital grants[3]	−1.326	1.052	0.612
Partnership grants[4]	2.450	−0.234	1.103

[1] Data for 1999–2000 takes into account amending report figure of £4,900, adjustment in respect of 1997–98 data.
[2] 1999–2000 Housing Revenue Subsidy is subject to change once final audited figure is received.
[3] Data do not include capital grants paid to Passenger Transport Executives (PTEs) in support of rail service in Merseyside.
[4] Partnership grants comprise Single Regeneration Budget grant paid to the authority as the accountable body for the partnership projects, which include Southern Corridor, Parr Partnership, Newton 21 and Count Me In, and are grants to the partnerships and not specifically to the authority.

Percentage change on previous year

Grant	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Revenue support grant	−5.41	10.05	4.53
Housing revenue account subsidy	−7.26	−5.55	−1.73
Capital grants	−50.86	82.12	26.23
Partnership grants	96.88	−4.70	23.25

UK/US Air Services

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent discussions he has had with US authorities regarding fifth freedoms and cabotage rights in US airspace for UK commercial carriers. [126302]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* UK/US air services talks took place between 13–15 June in London. These talks, which covered a wide range of issues, including traffic rights, will continue in Washington on 5 July.

Rents

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce measures to restrict rent officers raising annual rents above those applied for by landlords. [126670]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* Rent officers are required to set fair rents based on market rents less any element resulting from scarcity in accordance with the Rent Act 1977 and case law. We do not intend to require rent officers to take into account the rent applied for by the landlord. However, the House of Lords has granted the Government provisional leave to appeal the decision of the Court of Appeal to quash the Rent Acts (Maximum Fair Rent) Order which we introduced in February 1999 to cap excessive increases in fair rents.

Incineration

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent epidemiological research the Government have undertaken near incinerators; and what research they intend to undertake in the future. [126333]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* The Small Area Health Statistics Unit (SAHSU) has carried out two Government-funded studies on cancer incidence around the older generation of more polluting incinerators ("Elliott P et al (1996). Cancer incidence near municipal solid waste incinerators in Great Britain. British Journal of Cancer, volume 73, pp 702–710", and "Elliott P et al (2000). Cancer incidence near municipal solid waste incinerators in Great Britain. Part 2: Histopathological and Case-Notes Review of Primary Liver Cancer Cases. British Journal of Cancer, volume 82, pp 1103–6.") These found a small excess of primary liver cancer in people living near to incinerators between 1974 and 1987. The Government have sought advice on these studies from the Committee on the Carcinogenicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COC).

The COC has advised that it is not possible to conclude that this small increase in primary liver cancer is due to emissions of pollutants from incinerators, as it is not possible to rule out completely that it may be related to socio-economic factors. It has also advised that any potential risk of cancer due to living near municipal incinerators (for periods in excess of 10 years) was exceedingly low and probably not measurable by the most modern epidemiological techniques. The COC has recommended that, at the present time, there is no need for any further epidemiological investigations of this subject. The COC's statement can be found on the Department of Health's website at www.doh.gov.uk/munipwst.htm.

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the Government's estimate is of the cost per year of continuous emissions monitoring at incinerators. [126805]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* It is not possible to estimate with precision the cost of continuous emissions monitoring for incinerators, as this will be site-specific, varying according to the nature and circumstances of the plant, and with the manufacturer and supplier of equipment used. The Environment Agency has estimated, however, that the installed cost for continuous monitoring equipment to meet the requirements of the forthcoming waste incineration Directive would be £50–60k per plant. Annual operating costs, including calibration, are estimated to be in the range £12–18k per plant.

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment the Government have made of continuous emissions monitoring at incinerators in Belgium. [126806]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* The Government have made no assessment of continuous monitoring at incinerators in Belgium.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green), of 13 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 543W, on

consultees, for what reason *(a)* Friends of the Earth and *(b)* Greenpeace were not consulted over the EU waste incineration Directive. [127000]

Mr. Hill: Friends of the Earth were included among those to whom copies of the draft Directive and copies of our consultant's cost-benefit analyses were sent for comment. Comments on the proposal were also invited from the National Society for Clean Air and Environmental Protection. Greenpeace were not known to have such an active interest in incineration and related issues (for example, Greenpeace did not respond to the consultation on our waste strategy consultation document A Way With Waste, nor to the earlier consultation on Less Waste More Value).

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the implications of the Government's waste strategy on the need for additional waste incinerators. [126812]

Mr. Mullin: The Government's waste strategy is principally directed at reducing waste and, where waste is produced, at increasing recycling and composting in order to maximise the value recovered from waste and to meet the requirements of the landfill Directive.

The need for additional incinerators will depend on the success of the strategy in achieving waste reduction, and increasing recycling and composting.

Modelling of possible mixes of waste management options is included in the Regulatory Impact Assessment in the Waste Strategy 2000 (Part Two). The mix of facilities will be a matter for local authorities.

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has concerning the location of future incinerators. [126813]

Mr. Mullin: The location of facilities is a matter for local authorities. Suitable sites for new incineration plant will be determined by local planning authorities, in line with the decisions of regional planning bodies. Planning policy guidance on waste management in England is set out in "Planning Policy Guidance Note 10: Planning and waste management".

Jubilee Line

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 14 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 635W, for what reasons the section of the Jubilee line between Charing Cross and Green Park was not retained as a separate branch. [126999]

Mr. Hill: LUL consider that while it is sensible to retain the Green Park—Charing Cross spur for occasional special purposes (e.g. reversing empty trains), it would not be feasible to use it for passenger services. Up to 24 trains per hour serve the Jubilee Line. Dividing these to serve both the extension to Stratford and the spur to Charing Cross would result in an unacceptably sparse service for both routes, significantly reducing the attractiveness of operations on the extended line while providing only a limited service to Charing Cross. In addition, running services in this way would be more complex operationally and could have an adverse impact on reliability.

Diabetic Drivers

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the progress of the review of the driving licensing regime for insulin users. [126582]

Mr. Hill: The following progress has been made:

(i) The Honorary Medical Advisory Panel on Driving and Diabetes has been asked to reconsider their view on what constitutes "very exceptional cases". They have also been asked to compile relevant research data.

(ii) Inquiries have been made with other EU member states about arrangements for the licensing of insulin treated diabetics.

(iii) Preliminary inquiries have been made with the European Commission about the interpretation of Directive 91/439/EEC. Follow up arrangements are in hand.

(iv) Work has begun on developing the specification for two research projects to be initiated in this financial year. Tendering is expected to take place in early Autumn.

Radioactive Discharges

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish a draft of the UK strategy for radioactive discharges. [127623]

Mr. Meacher: A draft of the strategy is being published for consultation today and copies are being placed in the Library.

The strategy demonstrates how the UK is going to achieve substantial and progressive reductions in radioactive discharges in the period to 2020, in order to fulfil the obligation entered into at the 1998 meeting of the OSPAR Commission.

Comments on the draft are invited. After taking accounts of the comments we receive, the Government intend to publish a final version of the strategy towards the end of the year. The Government will shortly publish a draft of guidance they intend to issue to the Environment Agency on the setting of radioactive discharge authorisations. The intention is that the guidance, when it is formally issued with the final version of the strategy, will ensure that discharge authorisations are consistent with the strategy.

The Government are determined to continue the downward pressure of radioactive discharges. This draft strategy marks a further step towards meeting our OSPAR commitments. We owe it to the future generations to get it right.

WALES

Aerospace Industry

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the prospects for the aerospace industry in Wales. [126280]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I acknowledge the significant contribution that a strong aerospace industry has made to the economic life of Wales in recent years, particularly the British Aerospace Systems Airbus facility at Broughton. I hope the Government's announcement of £530 million for the A3XX project will consolidate and enhance this position.

Industrial Development

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary concerning requirements in Deeside for land for industrial development; and if he will make a statement. [126520]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular discussions with the First Secretary about a range of topics including the availability of land for industrial development.

Through its strategic sites programme, the Welsh Development Agency seeks to identify and bring forward sites for development across the whole of Wales. The Agency has reviewed the need for additional land in North Wales, jointly with the North Wales Economic Forum, and concluded that new strategic sites are required to allow for future industrial development.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

New Deal

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what statistics about the New Deal he collects on the participation of, and outcomes for, *(a)* ethnic minorities, *(b)* men, *(c)* women and *(d)* the disabled by (i) unit of delivery and (ii) parliamentary constituency. [126811]

Ms Jowell: Information is collected separately for men and women, people with disabilities and those from ethnic minority groups, on their participation through the New Deal and outcomes from the programme. However, some of the outcome information is limited by what participants are prepared to tell us.

Unit of Delivery tables are placed monthly in the House of Commons Library and give key information by the client's characteristics. Parliamentary constituency tables are placed in the House of Commons Library quarterly. These are intended as summary documents and information is not shown separately by the client's characteristics.

School Repairs

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list by local education authority, for the latest date for which figures are available, the total value of the estimates that schools have made of the sums needed for the repair of school buildings. [126847]

Jacqui Smith: The Department does not have these data. However, local education authorities are currently preparing Asset Management Plans covering all the maintained schools in their areas.

ICT Access

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps his Department is taking to increase access to ICT in deprived communities. [126114]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* We are taking forward a range of measures so that everyone can benefit from the advantages of new technologies. We are providing £252 million to fund the ICT Learning Centres initiative which will give people living in disadvantaged communities in England the opportunity to access the internet and ICT facilities. There will be around 700 Learning Centres which are targeted within the 2,000 most deprived local authority wards and rural areas with significant transport and deprivation problems. They will support disadvantaged client groups with low or no ICT skills.

We are also introducing a £10 million pilot project which will "wire-up" deprived communities around England. The project will provide a window into the future, assessing how home access to the internet and e-mail can transform lives in the most disadvantaged communities.

In addition, the Government are making £15 million available for a pilot scheme—"Computers Within Reach"—to enable those who cannot afford new computers to acquire reconditioned computers for use in the home for the purpose of improving their employment prospects, for lifelong learning, or for their children's homework.

The recently published report of Policy Action Team 15 looked specifically at issues relating to the role of ICT in community renewal. We will continue to work with partners and the private sector to address the issue of closing the digital divide.

Dyslexia

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people suffering from dyslexia are currently receiving *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time support worker time under the Access to Work Scheme. [126579]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. James Paice, dated 21 June 2000:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question regarding how many people with dyslexia are currently receiving (a) full time or (b) part time support worker time under the Access to Work programme. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

I am afraid we do not collect the specific information you have asked for. However, we do collect information on the total number of disabled people needing the help of a support worker, and the total amount spent in providing this support. In 1999–2000 Access to Work helped 4,133 disabled people needing support workers in their jobs at a cost of £5.6 million. Independent research conducted for the ES and published in 1998 indicated that around 3% of people receiving Access to Work help had a specific learning disability, a category which includes people with dyslexia.

I am sorry that I cannot be more helpful.

School Exclusions (Coventry)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pupils were excluded from schools in Coventry in the years 1995 to 2000; and what alternatives to exclusion his Department is developing. [126113]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* The available information on exclusions in maintained schools in Coventry local education authority area is shown in the table.

Exclusions data were collected in the January 2000 Annual Schools Census for the 1998–99 academic year and were published in the Department's Statistical First Release SFR20/2000 "Permanent Exclusions from Schools and Exclusion Appeals, England 1998–99 (provisional)" on 10 May 2000.

We are providing more than £500 million over three years, backed up by new guidance on 'Social Inclusion: Pupil Support', to help tackle behaviour problems in classrooms. This includes increasing the number of on-site Learning Support Units to more than 1,000 within two years to help schools better manage disruptive pupils. The 'Social Inclusion: Pupil Support' (Circular 10–99) also recommended multi-agency Pastoral Support Programmes (PSPs) for pupils at serious risk of permanent exclusion. The Department has provided funding for PSPs.

We announced at the NASUWT Conference (27 April) that there would be a new £2 million innovation fund with the voluntary sector and employers to provide innovative programmes for excluded pupils and those at risk of exclusion. In addition, there would be a new £9 million pupil allowance scheme for secondary schools in Excellence in Cities areas which accept difficult pupils outside the normal admissions round.

Number of pupils who were permanently excluded from maintained primary and secondary schools and special schools[1] in Coventry local education authority area and England for academic years 1994–95 to 1998–99[2]

	1998–99[2]	*1997–98*	*1996–97*	*1995–96*	*1994–95*[3]
Coventry LEA					
Primary	5	20	9	16	[4]—
Secondary	105	101	94	69	[4]—
Special	4	1	4	1	[4]—
Total	114	122	107	86	[4]—
England					
Primary	1,343	1,5391	1,573	1,608	1,365
Secondary	8,622	10,187	10,463	10,344	9,197
Special	439	572	632	524	522
Total	10,404	12,298	12,668	12,476	11,084

[1] Includes maintained and non-maintained Special schools.
[2] Provisional
[3] The number of permanent exclusions was estimated to take account of a small number of schools that did not provide any information on their permanent exclusions.
[4] Not available

Postgraduate Teacher Training

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many applications were received for courses of postgraduate initial teacher training commencing in September; and how many had been received at the same stage last year, broken down into those applying for secondary teaching in *(a)* maths, *(b)* foreign languages, *(c)* science and *(d)* technology. [126317]

Ms Estelle Morris: Latest available figures for applications for postgraduate initial teacher training courses in England and Wales for secondary teaching in maths, modern foreign languages, science and technology, together with comparative figures for the previous year are given in the table.

	3 June 2000	*5 June 1999*
Mathematics	950	1,085
Science	2,167	2,324
Modern Languages	1,757	1,673
Technology	871	928

Note:
The figures are for applications as entered on the GTTR computer system.
Source:
Graduate Teacher Training Register (GTTR)

The Government announced on 30 March that training salaries would be introduced for postgraduate trainees starting initial teacher training courses from September 2000. Since that date, latest available figures show 1,119 (32 per cent.) more applications have been input onto the Graduate Teacher Training Registry computer system than for the equivalent period last year.

The number of trainees recruited onto mathematics postgraduate initial teacher training courses declined between 1994–95 and 1998–99. There was a similar decline in the number of trainees recruited onto science postgraduate initial teacher training courses between 1996–97 and 1998–99. Last year, with the introduction of "golden hellos", recruitment to mathematics and science was up on the previous year.

In recognition of the fierce competition for good graduates in mathematics, science, modern foreign languages, information technology and design and technology, as well as £6,000 training salaries, new style "golden hello" incentives of £4,000 were announced for postgraduate trainees in these subjects who pass their induction year and go on to take up a relevant teaching post. Since the announcement, available figures for all these subjects together show an increase of 379 or 22 per cent.

Class Sizes (East Sussex)

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the average primary school class size in East Sussex was for each year since 1979. [126540]

Ms Estelle Morris: The requested information is shown in the table.

In East Sussex, the number of pupils in key stage 1 classes of 31 or more pupils taught by one teacher was 1,240 compared with 6,439 a year earlier, which represented an 80 per cent. reduction in the number of such pupils. The Government are well on target to deliver their pledge to limit the size of infant classes to 30 pupils. During the same time period, the average size of classes in maintained primary schools for the unitary authorities of East Sussex and Brighton also fell. This was the first year for some time that average primary class sizes in either the new or old authorities of East Sussex had fallen, after class sizes had shown a steady increase since 1987.

East Sussex local education authority area has been allocated £4 million of funding so far to support their efforts in reducing infant class sizes. This funding comprises some £1.1 million of capital funding and £2.8 million of revenue funding.

Size of classes taught by one teacher in maintained primary schools in the local education authority areas of East Sussex and Brighton 1979 to 2000

Position as at January

	Key stage 1						*Key stage 2*			*Overall primary*[1]		
	Average class size			*Pupils in classes of more than 30 pupils*			*Average class size*			*Average class size*		
	East Sussex[2]	*Brighton*[2]	*East Sussex*[3]	*East Sussex*[2]	*Brighton*[2]	*East Sussex*[3]	*East Sussex*[2]	*Brighton*[2]	*East Sussex*[3]	*East Sussex*[2]	*Brighton*[2]	*East Sussex*[3]
2000[4]	26.1	27.3	—[5]	1,240	2,262	—[5]	30.2	29.3	—[5]	28.2	28.2	—[5]
1999	27.5	28.0	—[5]	6,439	2,811	—[5]	29.9	29.2	—[5]	28.7	28.5	—[5]
1998	27.3	28.5	—[5]	6,433	3,422	—[5]	29.4	28.9	—[5]	28.3	28.6	—[5]
1997	—[5]	—[5]	27.9	—[5]	—[5]	10,130	—[5]	—[5]	28.9	—[5]	—[5]	28.2
1996	—[5]	—[5]	27.4	—[5]	—[5]	8,927	—[5]	—[5]	28.2	—[5]	—[5]	27.7
1995	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	27.5
1994	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	27.4
1993	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	27.1
1992	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	26.9
1991	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	26.6
1990	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	26.0
1989	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	25.9
1988	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	25.8
1987	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	25.5
1986	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	26.3
1985	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	25.8
1984	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	24.6
1983	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	24.5
1982	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	24.9
1981	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	25.3
1980	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	25.2
1979	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	—[6]	—[5]	—[5]	25.9

[1] Includes nursery classes and mixed key stage classes
[2] After local government reorganisation
[3] Before local government reorganisation
[4] Provisional
[5] Not applicable
[6] Not available (information not collected by specific key stages)

Special Educational Needs

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the special educational needs and disability in education Bill will be introduced in Parliament. [127380]

Mr. Blunkett: We are totally committed to taking forward the education recommendations of the Disability Rights Task Force (DRTF) and will legislate when parliamentary time allows, alongside our proposals to change the special educational needs framework. Our commitment to legislate on SEN was made in the Queen' Speech and remains in place. However, it has now become clear that it will not be possible to introduce a Bill this parliamentary Session.

The DRTF recommendations—crucial to our plans—were not available until December and required full consultation. Our consultation exercise on how to take forward the education recommendations of the report has revealed strong support for the broad thrust of our proposals, but there are some detailed issues which have required further consultation.

In view of the inevitable delay, and without the option of carryover, we have decided to publish a draft Bill in this parliamentary Session, giving the opportunity for comment and feedback before introduction of the Bill.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Incomes

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the average income in *(a)* cash, *(b)* real terms and *(c)* as a percentage of average earnings in (i) 1979, (ii) 1984, (iii) 1989, (iv) 1994 and (v) each year from 1994 to 2000 for (A) the UK and (B) Scotland of (1) pensioners, (2) pensioners aged over 75 years, (3) students, (4) single parents, (5) the bottom decile, (6) the top decile and (7) the disabled; and if he will make a statement. [126770]

Mr. Bayley: The information requested could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Information on average (mean and median) income of pensioner couples, single pensioners and single parents, and median incomes of the top and bottom deciles are published in the annual publication Households Below Average Income. The latest published edition, which relates to 1997–98, also contained analyses showing the position in the income distribution of pensioners by age, and students. Copies of this volume are in the Library.

Benefit Recipients

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people in *(a)* Yeovil constituency and *(b)* South Somerset have been in receipt of (i) Income

Support, (ii) Disability Living Allowance, (iii) Incapacity Benefit, (iv) Unemployment Benefit, and (v) Housing Benefit in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [126580]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of benefits is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to the right hon. Member.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Paddy Ashdown, dated 20 June 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to respond to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many people in (a) Yeovil constituency and (b) South Somerset have been in receipt of (i) income support, (ii) disability living allowance, (iii) incapacity benefit, (iv) unemployment benefit, and (v) housing benefit in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement.

The data is not available in the requested format, however the information that is available is supplied in the attached tables.

I hope this is helpful.

(i) Income Support

Year	*Yeovil PC*	*South Somerset LA*
August 1998	5,000	—
August 1999	5,000	—
February 2000	4,900	—
February 1993	—	9,900
February 1994	—	10,200
February 1995	—	10,000
February 1996	—	9,800
February 1997	—	6,900
February 1998	—	6,700
February 1999	—	6,700
February 2000	—	6,900

Notes:

1. Claimant figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred.
2. Sample size 5 per cent., therefore subject to sampling error.
3. Figures for parliamentary constituency are not available prior to August 1998.
4. Figures for South Somerset are not readily available prior to February 1993.

Source:

Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, February 1994 to February 2000.

(ii) Disability Living Allowance—recipients of Disability Living Allowance

Year	*Yeovil PC*	*South Somerset LA*
May 1993	1,600	1,900
May 1994	1,700	2,200
May 1995	1,700	2,300
May 1996	2,000	2,700
May 1997	2,200	3,000
May 1998	2,313	3,311
May 1999	2,447	3,494

Notes:

1. Figures relate to 31 May.
2. Figures based on a 5 per cent. data for years up to 1997 and on 100 per cent. data for years 1998 and 1999.
3. Figures prior to 1993 not available. Disability Living Allowance was introduced in April 1992.

Source:

DSS Information Centre

(iii) Incapacity Benefit—Incapacity Benefit recipients in the South Somerset area for May 1996, 1997, 1998 and 1999

	South Somerset
31 May 1996	2,600
31 May 1997	2,700
31 May 1998	2,600
31 May 1999	2,500
30 November 1999	2,700

Notes:

1. These figures are taken from a 5 per cent. sample of the benefit computer system, and exclude a small number of cases held clerically. All the May figures for South Somerset are subject to a rating factor to account for missing postcodes. The figures are rounded to the nearest hundred.
2. Figures for parliamentary constituency are not available. Figures for South Somerset are not readily available prior to May 1996.
3. Incapacity Benefit replaced Sickness Benefit and Invalidity Benefit in April 1995.

Unemployment Benefit

No figures are available for Unemployment Benefit by either Parliamentary Constituency or Local Authority however figures for Jobseekers Allowance are provided in the table below.

Unemployment benefit ceased on 6th October 1996 and Jobseekers Allowance began from 7th October 1996.

(iv) Jobseeker's Allowance

Year	*Yeovil PC*	*South Somerset LA*
August 1998	1,300	—
August 1999	1,000	—
August 2000	1,000	—
August 1997	—	2,100
February 1998	—	1,600
February 1999	—	1,600
February 2000	—	1,500

Notes:

1. Claimant figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred. Sample size 5 per cent., therefore subject to sampling error.
2. Jobseeker's Allowance replaced Income Support for the unemployed in October 1996.
3. Figures are for all claimants including those with nil benefit.

Source:

Jobseeker's Allowance Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, August 1997 to February 2000

(v) Housing Benefit—Housing Benefit recipients in South Somerset: May 1990 to May 1997

	Number of people in receipt of Housing Benefit
May 1990	8,470
May 1991	9,380
May 1992	8,770
May 1993	8,400
May 1994	7,810
May 1995	8,940
May 1996	9,030
May 1997	8,930
May 1998	8,530
May 1999	8,170

Notes:

1. Information refers to the number of benefit units.
2. The figures are rounded to the nearest ten.

The number of people in receipt of Housing Benefit for the years from 1990 to 1999 in the Yeovil constituency is unavailable, as the data are not collected at this level.

Source:

Housing Benefit Management Information System, quarterly 100 per cent. case load stock-counts, taken on the last working day in May 1990 to May 1997 and on the second Thursday of May 1998 and May 1999.

Pension Schemes

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people lost pension entitlements because their company pension schemes were underfunded and were wound up in each year since 1990. [126412]

Mr. Rooker: The Pension Schemes Registry indicates that since April 1997, the first date at which reliable information is available, a total of about 22,500 occupational pension schemes have been recorded as having wound up. However, no information is available as to how many of these schemes are salary-related schemes that were underfunded on wind-up.

Home Responsibility Protection

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if time spent as a foster parent qualifies for state retirement pension under the rules of home responsibility protection. [126913]

Mr. Rooker: Foster parents do not receive Child Benefit in respect of foster children who are deemed to be in the care of the local authority. Consequently, foster parents are not currently eligible for Home Responsibilities Protection in respect of their foster caring role.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security on how many occasions he deposited papers in the Library in response to parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000. [127101]

Mr. Rooker: We have answered 1,815 parliamentary questions between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000. Papers were deposited in the Library in response to 40 parliamentary questions.

TREASURY

Council Tax Exemptions

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will issue guidelines to universities and local authorities on the issuing of exemption certificates for council tax eligibility for intercalating students; and if he will make a statement. [124696]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 15 June 2000]:* I have been asked to reply.

Those undertaking a period of intercalation, who remain enrolled at the educational establishment, may continue to qualify as students for council tax purposes. Guidance was issued to this effect to all local authorities on 29 April 1996. We have no evidence to suggest there is a need to issue further guidance at this time. However, we continue to keep the operation of council tax under review and will issue further guidance should the need arise.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on how many occasions he deposited papers in the Library in response to parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000. [127104]

Mr. Timms: The information is not held in the form requested and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. However, in replying to parliamentary questions Treasury Ministers often place documents in the Library of the House for the information of Members.

Vocational Training

Mr. Willis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to specify the vocational training courses that will qualify for tax relief. [126809]

Mr. Timms: I assume the hon. Member is referring to the new Individual Learning Account framework being introduced shortly by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and in Scotland by the Scottish Ministers. Clause 57 of the Finance Bill provides that employees will not be taxable on any financial contribution which their employers may make towards the cost of an eligible learning course for which a Government grant may be payable. The range of training which can qualify will be a matter for the Department for Education and Employment and devolved administrations, but I can confirm that it will be a very wide range.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the saving to the Exchequer that will result from the removal of tax relief for vocational training costs from students. [126808]

Mr. Timms: As the Chancellor made clear in his 1999 Budget statement, the savings from the removal of Vocational Training Relief (VTR), as set out in Table A2.1 of the FSBR 2000—will help pay for the Government grants and discounts that can be claimed under the coming Individual Learning Account scheme. The Government are making available £150 million in grants and discounts up to April 2002. In addition we are introducing in the Finance Bill a tax exemption for employees on employer contributions towards these learning accounts; the estimated Exchequer cost of this exemption is £10 million in a full year.

Working Families Tax Credit

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps the Government are taking to publicise the working families tax credit in Northern Ireland. [125496]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet (Mr. Burgon) on 9 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 215W.

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many lone parents are benefiting from the working families tax credit. [126866]

Dawn Primarolo: The number of families in receipt of working families tax credit at the end of April 2000 is provisionally estimated at 1,053,000. Of these, it is estimated that 542,000 were headed by lone parents.

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much is spent annually on the working families tax credit; and how much would be spent if the national minimum wage were raised to five pounds per hour. [125111]

Dawn Primarolo: Table C12 in the March 2000 Financial Statement and Budget Report shows estimated and projected expenditure on the working families tax credit (WFTC) and the disabled person's tax credit (DPTC).

It is not possible to estimate accurately the potential impact of raising the minimum wage on the labour market. No reliable estimate of its effect on WFTC expenditure can therefore be provided.

Single Market

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what tax measures are needed to complete the EU single market. [126404]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government assess all EU tax proposals on their merits, including whether they assist the effective functioning of the single market.

Customs and Excise (Liverpool)

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what changes are proposed in the location and operation of Her Majesty's Customs and Excise in Liverpool. [126437]

Dawn Primarolo: It is for the Chairman and the Management Committee of Her Majesty's Customs and Excise to determine where best to place Customs operations in order to discharge its various responsibilities. I understand that there are no major changes currently planned in the location of Customs and Excise in Liverpool, but changing demands and work patterns mean that the management would be failing in its responsibilities if it did not keep the position constantly under review.

Sea Tax Rebates

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on sea tax rebates. [126498]

Dawn Primarolo: I assume that the right hon. Member is referring to the Tonnage Tax. The Government's proposals on tonnage tax are set out in schedule 22 of this year's Finance Bill.

Pesticides Tax

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what *(a)* representations the Treasury has received and *(b)* meetings he has held on the proposed pesticides tax with (i) the British Agrochemicals Association, (ii) UKASTA, (iii) NOAH, (iv) the National Farmers' Union, (v) the Country Landowners' Association and (vi) agrochemical companies, giving the name of each company, including the dates and duration of the meetings. [126900]

Mr. Timms: Ministers and officials have had numerous meetings with representatives of the agrochemicals industry, agriculture and environmental non-Government organisations, and received a number of representations on a possible pesticides tax and on a voluntary package of measures to reduce the environmental impact of pesticides use.

The Government are currently consulting on a formal set of voluntary proposals which have been published by the British Agrochemicals Association. The Government welcome the views of all interested parties on these proposals and their effectiveness in tackling the environmental impacts of pesticide use.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Wormwood Scrubs Prison

Mr. Darvill: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons will publish his report into his follow-up inspection of Her Majesty's Prison Wormwood Scrubs of 7 to 17 February. [127381]

Mr. Straw: Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons' report of his unannounced inspection is being published today. Copies have been made available in the Library and the Vote Office.

I made a statement to the House on 28 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns 21–33, on the report of an unannounced full inspection of Wormwood Scrubs prison that had taken place in March 1999. That report made deeply disturbing reading. Sir David's inspection had taken place against the background of criminal investigations into allegations that a number of members of staff at Wormwood Scrubs had assaulted prisoners. Sir David and his team of inspectors had found the overall treatment of prisoners was profoundly unsatisfactory.

In my statement last year, I said that I had made it absolutely clear to the Director General of the Prison Service that change must be delivered at Wormwood Scrubs. I expected a robust action plan to be put in place quickly, and I expected the majority of Sir David's recommendations to be accepted and implemented. I reported that I had asked Sir David Ramsbotham to carry out a further inspection in six months' time and that I would report the result to the House.

The Chief Inspector returned to Wormwood Scrubs between 7 and 17 February this year, and his report of that inspection is published today. He found Wormwood Scrubs much improved from his previous visit. Change had taken place, and life for prisoners had improved. Prisoners felt safer, and their relationships with staff were better. Health care was radically improved, education had been expanded and, together with employment, could attract most prisoners into purposeful activity.

The extent of the changes required, including substantial cultural change, inevitably takes time. Nevertheless, the chief inspector found that a promising start had been made and real improvements had already been delivered. The report makes 99 recommendations for further improvement, but encouragingly identifies 12 examples of good practice.

I should like to pay tribute to all those who have contributed to this change. Senior managers at Prison Service headquarters have given the establishment both leadership and support. The Governor and his management

team have tackled the problems at Wormwood Scrubs with determination and commitment, and their legitimate authority has been restored. It also gives me great pleasure to commend the staff of Wormwood Scrubs for what has been achieved. This time last year, there were serious concerns as to whether or not the Prison Officers' Association would co-operate fully with what needed to be done. Sir David notes the determination of the vast majority of staff in the prison to see Wormwood Scrubs restored to a place of excellence, known for the high quality of the treatment of and conditions for its prisoners.

Staff at Wormwood Scrubs still face a difficult time. A number of staff are still suspended from duty in connection with the investigations into the allegations of assault. I understand that the first criminal trials are likely to start in the next few weeks, and this will bring further unwelcome attention on everyone connected with the establishment. Nevertheless, today's report shows how much has already been achieved in the face of these sorts of difficulties, and with Sir David Ramsbotham I am optimistic that the programme of improvement will be continued and completed at Wormwood Scrubs. I am still keeping the option of market-testing open, but believe that this report shows the kind of rapid progress I had hoped for.

Correspondence

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde will receive a substantive answer to his letter of 17 May concerning the visit of Mr. Mike Tyson. [126306]

Mr. Straw: The Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche) wrote on 16 June in response to my hon. Friend's letter.

Asylum Seekers

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department to what extent Her Majesty's Government's policy on removals to Zimbabwe of failed asylum seekers has changed in response to the civil unrest and political repression in that country. [125125]

Mrs. Roche: We see no reason at present to change our arrangements for the removal of failed asylum seekers to Zimbabwe. No one has been or will be removed to Zimbabwe unless we are satisfied that they can return without risk. Each case is considered on its individual merits and circumstances. Developments in Zimbabwe are being carefully monitored.

Prison Service Expenditure

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the change was in planned expenditure on *(a)* the Prison Service, *(b)* policing and *(c)* probation (i) in total and (ii) in real terms in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [126556]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* The following tables set out the total expenditure (revenue and capital) on the prison service, policing and probation for the 10 financial years 1991–92 to 2000–01. The figures for the financial years 1991–92 to 1998–99 represent expenditure outturn. The figures for 1999–2000 are estimated outturn while the figures for 2000–01 reflect expenditure plans. The tables also show the change in expenditure from one financial year to the next in both cash and real terms.

Prison Service

Financial year	Total net expenditure (£ million)	Percentage change over previous financial year: Cash terms	Real terms
1991–92	1,462	—	—
1992–93	1,470	0.56	−2.67
1993–94	1,509	2.62	0.00
1994–95	1,598	5.91	4.41
1995–96	1,667	4.32	1.39
1996–97[1]	1,609	−3.50	−6.49
1997–98	1,734	8.10	4.85
1998–99	1,812	4.18	1.17
1999–2000 (estimated)	1,846	1.88	−0.61
2000–01 (plans)[2]	1,780	−3.58	−5.72

[1] Expenditure on capital reduced following completion of major capital works programmes in 1995–96

[2] Reduction in planned expenditure reflects transfer of provision of £118.2 million (from the Prison Service to the Youth Justice Board) in respect of the secure juvenile estate

Police

Financial year	Total net expenditure[1] (£ million)	Percentage change over previous financial year: Cash terms	Real terms
1991–92	5,405	—	—
1992–93	5,897	9.10	5.61
1993–94	6,225	5.56	2.82
1994–95	6,490	4.26	2.79
1995–96	6,735	3.78	0.87
1996–97[1]	6,986	3.73	0.49
1997–98	7,243	3.68	0.86
1998–99	7,450	2.86	−0.41
1999–2000 (estimated)	7,859	5.49	2.92
2000–01 (plans)[2]	8,100	3.07	0.80

[1] Total expenditure includes revenue and capital expenditure by police authorities and expenditure on policing incurred directly by the Home Office

[2] Excludes Capital Modernisation Fund moneys announced in the Budget as this is in respect of a range of projects and the funding can and will be spread over an number of years. The detailed profile of this expenditure is still being established

Probation

Financial year	Total net expenditure[1] (£ million)	Percentage change over previous financial year: Cash terms	Real terms
1991–92	335	—	—
1992–93	365	9.00	5.46
1993–94	393	7.67	4.89
1994–95	406	3.31	1.85
1995–96	416	2.46	−0.41
1996–97	468	12.50	8.99
1997–98	481	2.78	−0.01
1998–99	475	−1.25	−4.39
1999–2000 (estimated)	491	3.37	0.85
2000–01 (plans)	524	6.68	4.37

[1] Total expenditure figures do not include capital expenditure on probation/bail hostels nor direct Home Office central expenditure

WWII Unexploded Bombs

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will establish a national register of unexploded bombs from the Second World War, available for public inspection; and if he will make a statement. [126952]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: During the Second World War local authorities were responsible for maintaining records of the locations of unexploded ordnance. Although some local authorities destroyed the details they held, some information is still available through the Public Record Office.

In 1997 the Home Office collated details of information from a variety of sources including emergency services, local authorities and the military. It had been intended to publish the information, but this was not pursued when it became evident that there were unexplained contradictions in the data and it could not be relied upon as either accurate or comprehensive. Because of this it would not be sensible to establish a national register as proposed.

We do, however, search the information if asked by individuals, local authorities or building contractors.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Security Situation

8. **Mr. Walker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the security situation in Belfast, North. [125483]

Mr. Ingram: During the period 1 January to 13 June this year one death, 36 shootings and two bombings were recorded by the Royal Ulster Constabulary's D Division which takes in North Belfast and includes Antrim and Carrickfergus. There were 54 casualties (31 shootings and 23 assaults) as a result of paramilitary style attacks.

15. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what recent progress has been made on creating a more normal security environment. [125490]

Mr. Ingram: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave earlier today to my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter), *Official Report*, column 329.

Decommissioning

9. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what recent representations he has received on decommissioning in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [125484]

Mr. Ingram: The Government continue to meet representatives of all the political parties to discuss all aspects of the Good Friday Agreement. The Decommissioning Commission continues its discussions with representatives of the various groups. All sides must honour all the commitments they have made.

10. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment he has made of when the decommissioning section of the Belfast agreement will be implemented. [125485]

Mr. Ingram: It is more important to get the process under way than to set a deadline for its end. We now have a firm commitment from the IRA to put arms beyond use, and a process of confidence-building measures with independent verification.

This is only the start. But it is better to start than to worry so much about when it will finish, lest you never start.

16. **Mr. William Ross:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made towards the surrender and destruction of terrorist weapons in Northern Ireland. [125491]

24. **Mr. Brady:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on progress towards decommissioning of terrorist weapons. [125501]

Mr. Ingram: Now for the first time, the IRA have put in place a commitment to put their arms completely and verifiably beyond use, and have volunteered a confidence-building measure, to demonstrate that their arms remain silent and secure. We expect Mr. Ramaphosa and Mr. Ahtisaari to begin their work soon.

22. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many illegally held weapons have been inspected. [125498]

Mr. Ingram: The inspection of illegally-held weaponry is a matter for the independent inspectors and IICD.

Police Ombudsman

11. **Mr. Dismore:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he last met the police ombudsman to discuss complaints. [125486]

Mr. Ingram: The ombudsman has not met directly with the Secretary of State to discuss complaints.

Paramilitary Violence

12. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what recent discussions he has had with the IRA and Sinn Fein concerning the use of violence against Northern Ireland citizens. [125487]

Mr. Ingram: Ministers meet regularly with representatives of all the political parties in Northern Ireland where a range of issues including paramilitary assaults are discussed. We have consistently called upon those with influence over the paramilitary groups to call a complete cessation to these barbaric acts.

13. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment he has made of the extent of *(a)* punishment beatings and *(b)* other terrorist activities by Republican paramilitaries since 22 May. [125488]

Mr. Ingram: From 22 May to 11 June this year there were two deaths, two bombings and 12 shooting incidents. In addition there were seven casualties as a result of paramilitary style attacks (three by Loyalists and four by Republicans).

23. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many punishment beatings have taken place in the last month. [125500]

Mr. Ingram: During the month of May the number of casualties as a result of paramilitary style attacks were 14 shootings (nine by Loyalists and five by Republicans) and 14 assaults (six by Loyalists and eight by Republicans).

Job Creation

14. **Mr. Savidge:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many jobs have been created in the last six months in Northern Ireland. [125489]

25. **Mr. Michael J. Foster:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many jobs have been created in the last six months in Northern Ireland. [125502]

Mr. Mandelson: Responsibility for this subject has been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and is therefore no longer a matter for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Civic Forum

17. **Mr. Pound:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when a civic forum is to be established in Northern Ireland. [125492]

Mr. Mandelson: Responsibility for this subject has been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and is therefore no longer a matter for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Military Structures and Installations

18. **Dr. Godman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what recent representations he has received concerning the dismantling of military and related structures and installations. [125493]

Mr. Ingram: The Government have received one recent written representation concerning the dismantling of military structures, which are the operational responsibility of the Chief Constable. All decisions with regard to normalisation of security are taken by the Chief Constable in the light of the current threat level.

Young Offenders

19. **Mr. Hoyle:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the range of schemes available to deal with young offenders. [125494]

Mr. Ingram: The Criminal Justice Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 was introduced in January 1999 and brought in a new juvenile justice centre order of between six months and two years, half of which is spent in custody and half under close supervision in the community. The community element of the sentence is delivered by the Probation Board for Northern Ireland.

A range of programmes for young people, both in custody and in the community have been developed. Programmes such as cognitive behaviour training to tackle offending and the associated causes and problems such as drugs and alcohol misuse, car crime, aggressive behaviour and sex offending, have been developed on a multi-agency basis.

Peace Process

20. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the peace process. [125495]

Mr. Mandelson: The last few weeks have seen significant progress in the peace progress. On 27 May I signed an order restoring devolution to Northern Ireland with effect from midnight on 29 May. Northern Ireland now has a second opportunity for locally accountable government to take responsibility for building stability and prosperity for all the people of Northern Ireland.

Election Fraud and Malpractice

21. **Mr. Thompson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps he is taking, with what time scale, to prevent fraud and malpractice in elections in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [125497]

Mr. George Howarth: The Government have already introduced legislation to extend the time available to the Chief Electoral Officer to scrutinise absent vote applications, one of the main areas where it is thought that abuse of the system takes place. The provisions of the Representation of the People Act 2000 which makes provision for rolling registration will also be extended to Northern Ireland and hence will make the electoral register more accurate. The staffing and other resources of the Chief Electoral Officer are also kept under constant review to ensure they meet changing needs and circumstances. In addition, the Government intend to bring forward other measures which will require legislation by Bill. As already confirmed elsewhere, we hope to find parliamentary time for this before the General Election but the timing will of course depend on the timing of that election.

Police Service

26. **Mr. Woodward:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the future of the police service in Northern Ireland. [125503]

Mr. Ingram: The Police (Northern Ireland) Bill lays the foundations for a new beginning for policing in Northern Ireland including a widely acceptable, effective and representative police service.

British-Irish Council

27. **Mr. McFall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the progress being made on the British-Irish Council. [125504]

Mr. George Howarth: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave earlier today to my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe) and for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn), *Official Report*, column 327.

Criminal Justice

28. **Mr. McDonnell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the progress that has been made with the consultation phase of the review of the criminal justice system. [125505]

Mr. Ingram: We have received 60 written responses to the report of the review of the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland from members of the public. A number of seminars have been organised by the Government Department to facilitate consultation and we are aware that a number of other organisations plan to hold conferences to consider the report's recommendations before the consultation period ends on 29 September 2000.

Downpatrick Police Station

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made on the removal of the security fortifications at the Police Station in Downpatrick; and if he will make a statement. [125499]

Mr. Ingram: The security levels which exist at Downpatrick Royal Ulster Constabulary station are currently under review and any action recommended will be taken after this review is completed.

CABINET OFFICE

Pesticides Tax

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what *(a)* representations her office has received and *(b)* meetings she has held on the topic of the proposed pesticides tax with (i) the British Agrochemicals Association, (ii) UKASTA, (iii) NOAH, (iv) the National Farmers' Union, (v) the Country Landowners' Association and (vi) agrochemical companies, giving the name of each company, including the dates and duration of the meetings. [126899]

Mr. Timms: I have been asked to reply.

Ministers and officials have had numerous meetings with representatives of the agrochemicals industry, agriculture and environmental non-governmental organisations, and received a number of representations on a possible pesticides tax and on a voluntary package of measures to reduce the environmental impact of pesticides use.

The Government are currently consulting on a formal set of voluntary proposals which have been published by the British Agrochemicals Association. The Government welcome the views of all interested parties on these proposals and their effectiveness in tackling the environmental impacts of pesticide use.

HEALTH

Mead Webber Plant

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reason a Regulation 10 (Prohibition) Notice was served ordering Mead Webber immediately to cease slaughter operations. [122065]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 15 May 2000]:* I am advised by the Food Standards Agency that the Fresh Meat (Hygiene and Inspection) Regulations 1995 (as amended) oblige the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) to appoint one or more official veterinary surgeons (OVSs) at every licensed fresh meat slaughterhouse in Great Britain to be responsible for the ante-mortem and post-mortem inspection and other health inspection duties.

Following an alleged assault on an OVS by a member of Mead Webber plant management and ejection of the OVS from the premises on 21 April 2000, a notice was served on the plant occupier under regulation 10 of the regulations at 7.44pm the same day. Regulation 10(1)(b) of the regulations empowers the OVS to serve a notice on the occupier when it appears to the OVS that adequate health inspection in accordance with the regulations is being hampered. The notice was served to prevent operation of the plant in the absence of the OVS until such time as unobstructed access to the plant by the OVS was permitted by the occupier.

Council Grants

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the specific grants made by his Department, and the amounts allocated through each grant to *(a)* Westminster and *(b)* Kensington and Chelsea boroughs for each year since 1997–98. [125422]

Mr. Hutton: The table lists the specific and special grants available to councils since 1997–98 and the amount of grant paid to the London Borough of Westminster.

£

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
AIDS Support Grant	800,000	770,000	810,000
Drugs and Alcohol Specific Grant	61,744	27,421	0
Drugs and Alcohol Special Grant[1]	—	—	0
Guardians Ad Litem and Reporting Officer Services[2]	28,784	—	—
Mental Health Grant	942,203	927,401	1,159,163
Training Support Programme	215,091	198,259	196,791
Secure Accommodation (Capital)	0	0	0
Community Care Special Transitional Grant[3]	2,304,652	2,170,586	—
Asylum-Seekers' Accommodation Grant[4]	3,846,920	[7]5,306,235	—
Persons from Abroad Children's Grant[4]	2,835,433	3,753,040	—
Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children's Grant	41,163	879,200	2,769,000
Promoting Independence: Partnership Grant[5]	—	—	1,754,966
Promoting Independence: Prevention Grant[5]	—	—	146,487
Promoting Independence: Carers' Grant[5]	—	—	137,108
Children's Social Services Grant[6]	—	32,500	755,373

[1] This grant was available in 1999–2000 only
[2] This grant ended in March 1998
[3] This grant ended in March 1999
[4] These grants were transferred to the Home Office from 1999–2000
[5] These grants began in 1999–2000
[6] This grant began in 1998–99
[7] This is the total actually paid. However, auditors have certified that £5,074,621 was the correct amount due. The Department is recovering £231,614.

The table lists the specific and special grants available to Councils since 1997–98 and the amount of grant paid to the London Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

£

	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
AIDS Support Grant	890,000	760,000	780,000
Drugs and Alcohol Specific Grant	68,378	53,222	690,000[7]
Drugs and Alcohol Special Grant[1]	—	—	60,000[7]
Guardians Ad Litem and Reporting Officer Services[2]	20,520	—	—
Mental Health Grant	730,177	813,609	937,814
Training Support Programme	162,939	160,877	171,851
Secure Accommodation (Capital)	0	0	0
Community Care Special Transitional Grant[3]	1,509,005	1,413,818	—
Asylum-Seekers' Accommodation Grant[4]	2,326,374	4,603,767	—
Persons from Abroad Children's Grant[4]	1,276,670	1,549,540	—
Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children's Grant	151,731	646,924	1,496,800
Promoting Independence: Partnership Grant[5]	—	—	1,161,961
Promoting Independence: Prevention Grant[5]	—	—	103,047
Promoting Independence: Carers Grant[5]	—	—	95,156
Children's Social Services Grant[6]	—	32,500	560,122

[1] This grant was available in 1999–2000 only
[2] This grant ended in March 1998
[3] This grant ended in March 1999
[4] These grants were transferred to the Home Office from 1999–2000
[5] These grants began in 1999–2000
[6] This grant began in 1998–99
[7] This grant was paid to Kensington and Chelsea to spend on the provision of Pan London services

Meat Inspection

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which EU countries charge for meat inspection on a headage basis. [R] [126197]

Ms Stuart: According to information collected by British Embassies in other member states at the end of 1998, and by the Meat and Livestock Commission in May 1999, it is understood that the following countries charge for meat inspections either partly or wholly on a headage basis:

Austria
Belgium
Denmark
France
Germany
Italy
Luxembourg
Portugal
Republic or Ireland
Spain
Sweden.

Patient Rights

Mr. Patrick Hall: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what work his Department is undertaking to examine the role of patient advocates, with particular regard to supporting complainants through the NHS complaints procedure; and what plans he has to consult community health councils about their role in assisting complainants; [126244]

(2) when he will respond to the report, "A New Life for Health", prepared by the Commission on Representing the Public Interest in the Health Service; [126245]

(3) what plans he has to consult on a new NHS Charter. [126246]

Ms Stuart: The Patient Care (Empowerment) Modernisation Action Team is considering the future roles for patient advocates and community health councils in assisting complainants, together with the format and content of a new National Health Service Charter.

Following publication of the national plan in July, the Department will begin work on implementing the recommendations of the modernisation action teams.

NHS Patients

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 13 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 586W, on NHS patients, if he will list by clinical specialism the number of patients treated and the amounts spent by the NHS on health care in the independent sector in each of the last three years. [126994]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* A breakdown by clinical specialty is not collected centrally. A breakdown of expenditure and activity by type has been placed in the Library in response to the hon. Member's question of 13 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 586W.

Dentists (Reciprocal Arrangements)

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what reciprocal arrangements exist to enable dentists trained in the UK to practise in India and dentists trained in India to practise in the UK. [126912]

Mr. Hutton: There are no reciprocal arrangements. Dentists registered in the United Kingdom who wish to practise in India have to satisfy the statutory authority that their qualifications, training and experience meet its requirements. Like other dentists from abroad, Indian dentists wishing to practise here may apply to the General Dental Council (GDC) to take its statutory examination. Those dentists who wish to undertake postgraduate training in the United Kingdom in a hospital post may

apply to the GDC for temporary registration on the basis of evidence of acceptance for employment in that post. Temporary registration is granted for periods not exceeding 12 months up to an aggregate of four years.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 have not received substantive answers on the grounds of *(a)* commercial and *(b)* other confidentiality. [127100]

Ms Stuart: There have been two Parliamentary Questions that have not been fully answered on the grounds of commercial confidentiality within the dates specified.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he will make a substantive reply to the question from the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead tabled on 18 April relating to Zimbabwe (ref 120086). [125671]

Mr. Hain: The question was answered by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development on 19 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 20–21W.

International Investment Disputes

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if it is the policy of Her Majesty's Government to assist British companies to enforce judgments made against other Governments by the International Centre for the Settlement of Investment Disputes. [125037]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 12 June 2000]:* We cannot comment on cases which are the subject of legal proceedings at the International Centre for the Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID). Her Majesty's Government expects any State with whom we have a Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement to take seriously its treaty obligations and, where such a State is involved in a dispute covered by that treaty, to co-operate fully with any international arbitration procedures and rulings.

Mitrovica

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what assessment he has made of the progress made in re-establishing a joint city administration in Mitrovica; [126644]

(2) what representations he has made to UNMIK regarding *(a)* establishment of local power-sharing arrangements for the Serbs in Mitrovica; and *(b)* re-establishing blocked trade ties between the southern and the northern parts of Mitrovica; [126645]

(3) what recent representations he has received from Mitrovica's regional administrator regarding additional human, financial and security resources for this town; [126643]

(4) what estimate he made of progress made by the Joint Interim Administrative Council for Mitrovica. [126646]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* Measures to improve public order and to counter extremist activities in Mitrovica have continued to be a key focus of both UNMIK and KFOR. Working with the Joint Interim Administration Council (JIAC) they have implemented a strategy to stabilise the situation and to build confidence between the communities. UNMIK police and KFOR are taking steps to enhance joint security operations. The zone of confidence in central Mitrovica has been implemented.

Additional KFOR and UNMIK police and personnel have been deployed. Village employment and rehabilitation projects, funded by the EU, are being implemented around Mitrovica. New protected train and bus services have started allowing Serbs to commute to Mitrovica.

Bosnia-Herzegovina

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what percentage of the funds budgeted by the EU for 1999 has been spent on reconstruction in Bosnia-Herzegovina. [126642]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* In 1999, the EU allocated 93.17 million euros to Bosnia and Herzegovina through its Obnova Programme, which is the main mechanism for reconstruction assistance in the Western Balkans. In 1999 the total Obnova budget was 284.39 million euros and Bosnia and Herzegovina received 32.8 per cent. of the total. The Obnova Programme is funded through the Community Budget.

Kosovo

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the progress made in establishing the criminal justice system in Kosovo. [126603]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* Establishment of an impartial and effective judicial and penal system is a priority for the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). 400 judges, prosecutors and lay judges have been appointed and the capacity of the court system has been increased. However, as the UN Secretary-General's latest report noted, ethnic bias and the risk of intimidation continue to hamper the administration of justice. In order to strengthen the effectiveness and integrity of the justice system, the UN is recruiting international judges and prosecutors to work with their local counterparts, in particular to try war and ethnically related crimes. The UK has provided UNMIK with over 40 candidates for international prosecutors and UNMIK staff interviewed candidates in London last week. We also hope soon to be able to provide candidates for international judges and judicial support staff.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the progress made in establishing provisional institutions for democratic self-Government in Kosovo. [126604]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* UNSCR 1244, which established the international presences in Kosovo, gave the international civil presence responsibility for development of provisional institutions for democratic and

autonomous self-government. The UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) is preparing a draft Regulation on establishment of municipal authorities in Kosovo, for discussion in the Joint Interim Administrative Structures (JIAS). UNMIK intends to hold elections for these authorities later this year.

The Contact Group is currently developing guidance for UNMIK on the possible structure and content of Kosovo-wide institutions for provisional self-government, taking into account the Rambouillet Accords. UNMIK's proposals for such institutions would also be for discussion in the JIAS. This is unlikely to start in earnest until after the municipal elections.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received from the US Government regarding the form that the provisional self-Government in Kosovo will take and its relationship to UNMIK and KFOR. [126605]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* The US Government is working closely with the UK and our partners in the Contact Group in developing guidance for the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) on the possible form and content of provisional institutions for self-government in Kosovo. As required by UNSCR 1244, the development of these institutions will take account of the Rambouillet Accords, of which US officials were the principal architects. Under any proposals for provisional institutions UNMIK and KFOR would retain their overall responsibilities as set out in UNSCR 1244.

Generation Europe

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much funding the Generation Europe organisation has received from the *(a)* British Government and *(b)* European Union. [126596]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* The Foreign and Commonwealth Office gave Generation Europe a one-time support of £10,000 to help fund the publication in 1999 of the Generation Europe student diary, 1999–2000. Generation Europe also received funding from the Community budget in 1999–2000 totalling 217,000 euro (£137,000).

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for how long the Generation Europe organisation has received funding from his Department. [126595]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has made only one allocation of funds to Generation Europe. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office gave Generation Europe a one-time support of £10,000 to help fund the publication in 1999 of the Generation Europe student diary, 1999–2000.

Small Businesses (EU Legislation)

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the examples he provided, in response to the request from the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) on 15 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 1208, of improvements in legislation made to assist small businesses as a result of the Lisbon Special European Council. [127199]

Mr. Vaz: The right hon. Member for Horsham challenged me at 6.50pm on 15 June, to identify three improvements that the Lisbon Special European Council had introduced for business. I responded immediately that I would supply a list of 25 examples before 10 o'clock. I provided a list of no fewer than 35 examples, as follows, and it was faxed to the right hon. Member's office by 9.45 pm.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister told the House of Commons in his statement on 27 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 21–23, Lisbon marked a sea change in European economic thinking. It pointed Europe in a new direction, towards a new approach based on enterprise, innovation and competition. A work programme is now in hand across the entire breadth of EU economic and social policy, to deliver the improvements that Lisbon called for. The list sets out examples of how much is being done, and the Feira European Council will mark a further step in the delivery of this agenda.

Economic Benefits for Enterprise from Lisbon

1. Charter for small firms already agreed, to be confirmed at Feira.
2. Clear set of principles to ensure small enterprise promoted as main driver for innovation, employment and social integration.
3. Concrete follow-up action e.g. national bankruptcy laws to be assessed, new regulations screened to assess impact on small business.
4. Progress to be monitored annually.
5. Work on structural indicators in hand to promote economic reform in order to benefit enterprise and SMEs, to be endorsed at Nice.
6. Agreement on improvements to the Broad Economic Policy Guidelines, in line with the Lisbon conclusions, to be endorsed at Feira.
7. Adoption of EU legal framework for electronic commerce reached in April 2000.
8. E-Europe action plan agreed, to be endorsed at Feira.
9. Focus on cheaper internet access, accelerating e-commerce and bolstering ICT skills.
10. Generalised electronic access to main basic public services by 2003.
11. All schools to have access to the Internet by 2001.
12. Teachers skilled in use of Internet and multimedia resources by 2002.
13. European diploma for basic IT skills.
14. Fully integrated and liberalised telecommunications markets by the end of 2001.
15. Competition in local loop to reduce substantial costs of using the Internet for business and consumers alike.
16. Single market strategy agreed (May).
17. Faster liberalisation of energy and transport. New targets will be established next year following a report from the Commission. Bodes well for forthcoming Gas Directive.
18. State aids to be reduced further.
19. EU strategy to remove barriers to services in hand, to be agreed at Nice.
20. New EU integrated regulation and simplification initiative in hand, to be agreed by June 2001.
21. Resolution on European Research Area agreed in June 2000. Boost to links between firms and research centres.
22. Increased mobility of researchers.

23. Proposal for regulation on community wide patent (June), to be agreed by 2001. To make patent protection in the EU as simple, inexpensive and comprehensive in scope as the protection granted by key competitors.

24. Interim review of Employment Guidelines—to include recognition that policies like welfare to work and lifelong learning have a key part to play to fight social exclusion and to ensure that the benefits of the knowledge-based economy will be for all.

25. Europe-wide database on jobs and learning opportunities, based on a UK idea.

26. Schools and training centres to be turned into multipurpose local learning centres accessible to all.

27. European award for firms committed to developing staff potential—a European "Investors in People".

28. Lisbon agreed to raise employment rate from average of 61 per cent. today to as close as possible to 70 per cent. by 2010.

29. Target to halve by 2010 the numbers of 18 to 24 year olds with only lower-secondary level education without further education and training.

30. High Level Group on social protection which was called for by Lisbon is now established. Working to modernise and re-orient EU social policy, away from a narrow focus on employee rights towards: active welfare state, not passive dependency; new focus on employability and life long learning; ensuring that work pays and that welfare systems are sustainable. Agreement to increase investment in human resources.

31. Political agreement on directive to counter racial discrimination.

To promote integrated European capital market.

32. EU action now in hand to lead to common international accounting standards.

33. Financial Services Action Plan in hand to be implemented in full by 2005.

34. EIB to make another billion euro available for venture capital for SMEs over the next three years. Tax policies, venture capital and EIB support for private research investments, R&D partnerships and hi-tech start-ups.

35. Work in hand on rapid adoption of new streamlined rules in the public procurement legislative package for June 2001. Procurement on line by 2003; procurement rules modernised and simplified by 2002. The system will be more accessible to SMEs.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Belgian Government on the regulation of the diamond industry in connection with Sierra Leone; and if he will make a statement. [126679]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I have each raised the issue of conflict diamonds with the Belgian Foreign Minister, stressing the need for early international action to prevent revenue from illicit diamond trading fuelling conflict. Officials met with representatives of the Belgian Government and the Diamond High Council of Antwerp this month to discuss a draft United Nations Security Council resolution, proposed by the UK, which would ban trade in diamonds from Sierra Leone which were not certified as legitimate by the Government of Sierra Leone.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the strength and composition of the United Nations peacekeeping forces in Sierra Leone. [126681]

Mr. Hain: The strength of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) now exceeds 12,500. Principal troop contributors currently include Bangladesh, Ghana, Guinea, India, Jordan, Kenya, Nigeria and Zambia. Her Majesty's Government continue to provide direct headquarters, intelligence and logistic support to UNAMSIL.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what estimate he has made of the number of paramilitary activists in Sierra Leone who have voluntarily disarmed and entered into rehabilitation programmes. [126680]

Mr. Hain: Of the estimated total of 45,000 combatants in Sierra Leone, by the end of April, some 24,000 had entered the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programme under the Lomé Peace Agreement.

One of the key priorities now is to establish a revised programme for those combatants willing genuinely to disarm.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Dome

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 5 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 93W, on the Dome sale, in what proportions the proceeds of the sale of the Dome will be split between the New Millennium Experience Company and English Partnerships. [125449]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 12 June 2000]:* The proportion of the proceeds that will be split between the New Millennium Experience Company and English Partnerships is still under consideration. Any such decision depends, among other issues, on the precise content of any winning bid for the Dome's legacy.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what legal technical and practical impediments exist to selling the Dome prior to 31 December. [125448]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 12 June 2000]:* The handover of the Dome to the preferred bidder will take place on 1 January 2001. There are no plans to bring forward the competition timetable. While there are no legal reasons why the Dome could not be sold prior to 1 January, time constraints and issues surrounding planning permission could make handover prior to 1 January difficult for either of the two final shortlisted bidders.

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what bids he has received to site biotechnology industry in the Dome following its sale. [126044]

Mr. Chris Smith: No bids to site biotechnology industry in the Dome have been received by the Competition team. However, the final shortlisted bid by Legacy plc, which proposes a high technology industrial campus, could be capable of accommodating biotechnology industry occupiers.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) by what criteria the performance of Pierre-Yves Gerbeau will be judged for the purpose of bonus payment calculations; [125932]

(2) pursuant to the answer of 9 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 397W, regarding the Millennium Dome, if the target for visitor numbers which will be one of a range of measures used in any decision to award a bonus payment to the Chief Executive of the New Millennium Experience Company will be the stated target when P-Y. Gerbeau was appointed; and if he will make a statement. [126290]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him on 4 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 771W, by my hon. Friend the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport by what criteria the success of the Millennium Dome will be judged. [125933]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* The 2.7 million people that have visited the Millennium Dome have already judged the project to be a success. More than 85 per cent. of visitors come away from the Dome satisfied with their day and almost 80 per cent. say they will recommend a visit to family and friends. This is a higher satisfaction rating than for any other pay-to-visit attraction in Europe.

Lottery Grants

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr. Campbell) of 15 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 580W, on Lottery grants, what steps are proposed to increase the amount of Lottery money going to the constituency of Wirral South. [126955]

Kate Hoey: Following the publication on 5 June of a report on the impact of the National Lottery on coalfield and other areas of low take-up, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has set up an action team, involving representatives of both Government and Lottery distributors. The team will look into ways of ensuring that areas of low take-up such as Wirral South receive greater benefit from National Lottery money. Measures to be developed by the team include actively encouraging applications, reducing partnership funding requirements, making decision-making more transparent and a scheme where successful bidders teach other would-be applicants how to apply.

New Millennium Experience Company

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he will publish, on a case by case basis, the amounts disbursed to date by the New Millennium Experience Company in relation to litigation; [126464]

(2) what contingency exists in the budget of the New Millennium Experience Company to meet the cost of litigation; [126462]

(3) what assessment he made of the value of the New Millennium Experience Company's current and contingent liabilities in relation to litigation. [126463]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* The New Millennium Experience Company considers that publication of details of issues relating to litigation runs the risk of adversely impacting on its relationships with those organisations and companies it has entered into contract with and, therefore, on its ability to operate in an effective and commercial manner.

Hawksworth Hall

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received concerning Hawksworth Hall, near Leeds; and if he will make a statement. [126871]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* One such representation has been received by my Department and has been transferred to the Government Office for Yorkshire and Humberside.

I am aware that there are proposals to redevelop Hawksworth Hall. The issues currently being considered are a planning and listed building consent application. It would not be right therefore for me to comment on the case, since to do so could prejudice the position of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in the event of the case being called in by him or becoming the subject of an appeal. However, arrangements are in place for this Department to be consulted where appropriate.

PRIME MINISTER

Special Advisers

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister what steps he takes to ensure that the work of special advisers does not compromise the political neutrality of civil servants. [127095]

The Prime Minister: The Ministerial Code and the Civil Service Code are clear that public resources must not be used for party political purposes and that the political impartiality of the Civil Service must be upheld.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will set a maximum limit of two special advisers per department. [127094]

The Prime Minister: Under the terms of the Ministerial Code, Cabinet Ministers may each appoint up to two special advisers. Where Ministers appoint two part-time special advisers this will normally be counted as one full-time equivalent. All appointments require my approval. Departures from the rule of two special advisers per Cabinet Minister are exceptional. These decisions are taken on the merits of the individual case.

Engagements

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 21 June. [126581]

The Prime Minister: This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House I will have further such meetings later today.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 22 June 2000

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Chemical Weapons Act 1996

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement about the operation of the Chemical Weapons Act 1996. [127693]

Dr. Howells: In accordance with the Act, I have today laid a copy of the report on its implementation during 1999 before both Houses.

Corruption and Bribery (Lesotho)

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the loans underwritten by Her Majesty's Government to companies implicated in the current criminal trial concerning bribery and corruption in Lesotho. [127078]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* Charges have been laid against various consortiums involved in the Lesotho Highlands Water Project. Kier International, Stirling International, Balfour Beatty, and Kvaerner Boving are UK members of consortiums involved in the project. All deny having been involved in any malpractice.

From records readily available the following loans have been underwritten by Her Majesty's Government through, ECGD, to these companies:

Company/market	*Date of loan*	*Loan value (million)*	*Lender*	*Borrower*
Stirling International Civil Engineering Ltd.				
Lesotho	18 November 1991	£49.3	Hill Samuel Bank[1]	Lesotho Highlands Development Authority
Lesotho	14 December 1994	£9.7	Hill Samuel Bank[1]	Lesotho Highlands Development Authority
Kier International Ltd.				
Lesotho	18 November 1991	£49.3	Hill Samuel Bank	Lesotho Highlands Development Authority
Lesotho	14 December 1994	£9.7	Hill Samuel Bank	Lesotho Highlands Development Authority
Romania	14 March 2000	euro 88.3	Deutsche Bank	Ministry of Public Works and Territorial Planning
Egypt	12 November 1981	£32.0	HSBC	Ministry of Development
Kvaerner Boving Ltd.[2]				
Lesotho	17 February 1994	£4.7	West Merchant Bank	Lesotho Highlands Development Authority
India	2 November 1989	£31.8	West Merchant Bank	National Hydroelectric Power Corporation
India	11 October 1996	£20.4	Barclays Bank	Nathpa Jhakri Power Corporation
Hong Kong	4 August 1990	£10.4	J. Henry Schroder & Co.	Castle Peak Power Co. Ltd.
Balfour Beatty Ltd.				
Lesotho	18 November 1991	£49.3	Hill Samuel Bank	Lesotho Highlands Development Authority
Lesotho	15 December 1995	£1.8	Hill Samuel Bank	Lesotho Highlands Development Authority
Lesotho	14 December 1994	£9.7	Hill Samuel Bank	Lesotho Highlands Development Authority
China	18 March 1996	£8.2	West Merchant Bank Ltd.	Bank of China
Netherlands Antilles	10 January 1991	$18.0	Barclays Bank	Resort of the World NV
Malaysia	12 July 1991	£305.0	J. Henry Schroder & Co.	Tenaga Nasional Berhad
Thailand	17 August 1994	£15.0	Australia and New Zealand Banking Group	Provincial Electricity Authority
Turkey	30 July 1987	$18.1	Deutsche Bank AG	Ministry of Housing and Reconstruction

[1] ABN AMRO Bank later took over the loan
[2] Now known as GE Energy (UK) Ltd.

Inward Investment (Greater London)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action his Department is taking to encourage inward investment into the Greater London area. [127139]

Mr. Caborn: The DTI's Invest in Britain Bureau (IBB) provides grant in aid funding to the London First Centre (LFC) to promote London overseas as a location for inward investment. LFC received grant in aid of £1.015 million in 1999–2000, increased to £1,065 million in 2000–01.

LFC efforts are focused world-wide but investment is particularly encouraged, geographically from North America, and sectorally on functions such as European Headquarters, pan-European call centres and high value-added manufacturing. LFC is keen to emphasise London's position as the centre of European e-commerce and a leading destination for projects in knowledge driven sectors.

For the 12-month period ending 31 March 2000, LFC completed 115 projects resulting in 5,440 jobs created and 1,035 safeguarded.

From 3 July 2000, responsibility for inward investment in London will pass to the Mayor and the London Development Agency.

Maternity Pay and Parental Leave

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the terms of reference are for the review of maternity pay and parental leave. [127694]

Mr. Byers: The review will consider the steps needed to make sure that parents have choices to help them balance the needs of their work and their children so that they may contribute fully to the competitiveness and productivity of the modern economy.

The review will seek:

To examine how the economy is changing, particularly in relation to working patterns, and what the needs of the modern economy will be.

To identify how competitiveness and productivity in this context can be enhanced through giving families reasonable choices to help them to balance the needs of their children and work.

In doing so, it will take into account:

The impact of maternity pay and parental leave on business, particularly SMEs, and families including whether it is possible to simplify the implementation of existing legislation.

Best practice in business and its impact, including the extent to which employers currently offer additional entitlements or flexible arrangements.

Factors affecting women's decisions to return to work after childbirth.

Factors affecting the take up of parental and paternity leave.

Impact of returning to work part-time, from home or on flexible hours.

Reducing child poverty, including the particular problems faced by the workless and by parents receiving the Working Families Tax Credit.

I will chair a Ministerial Group to help co-ordinate the work of the review. Other members of the group are listed in the table:

Members	
Baroness Jay	Leader of the House of Lords Lord Privy Seal and Minister for Women
Andrew Smith	Chief Secretary to the Treasury
Lord Falconer	Minister of State, Cabinet Office
Tessa Jowell	Minister of State, DfEE
Margaret Hodge	Parliamentary Under-Secretary, DfEE
Baroness Hollis	Parliamentary Under-Secretary, DSS
Alan Johnson	Parliamentary Under-Secretary, DTI
David Irwin	Chief Executive, Small Business Service

There will be extensive consultation and detailed research to back up the review.

Directors' Salaries

Mr. Mudie: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to enable shareholders to vote on directors' salaries. [125853]

Dr. Howells: The Department of Trade and Industry published a consultation paper on directors' remuneration last year which put forward a number of proposals for improving disclosure of directors' remuneration and the board's accountability to shareholders. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry will make an announcement shortly on the Government's response to the consultation.

Aerospace Industry

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the use made by the United Kingdom aerospace industry of outsourcing to non-EU based companies and locations of items previously manufactured in the United Kingdom. [126833]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I have not made any specific assessment of changes in the sourcing of aerospace items. However my Department is working closely with the Society of British Aerospace Companies on competitiveness improvement programmes for the aerospace industry. DTI funding for this work is helping to improve productivity and other aspects of competitiveness of UK suppliers which should ensure that the outsourcing of aerospace items is kept to a minimum.

Export Promotion

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the status of the Joint Directorate. [126752]

Mr. Caborn: The Joint Directorate was renamed in 1994 as the Joint Export Promotion Directorate, which was run and staffed jointly by the DTI and the FCO. It was also charged with providing a general policy framework for the export promotion work of those two Departments, which was branded as the Overseas Trade Services.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary announced on 12 March 1999, *Official Report*, columns 399–400W, the Government's response to the Cabinet Secretary's Review of Export Promotion, the core of which was that all trade promotion development activities of the DTI and the FCO should be unified in a new joint operation, British Trade International, with a single Chief Executive, Sir David Wright. Copies of the report have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The Joint Export Promotion Directorate and its responsibilities were subsumed in the restructuring of British Trade International.

Rogue Directors

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the DTI Hotline for reporting rogue directors is still operating; how many rogue directors have been reported on it since it was established; and what action has been taken and in how many cases as a result of reports received. [126047]

Dr. Howells: The Hotline continues to operate and, in the period from inception to 31 May 2000, it has received 2,067 inquiries either to its telephone answering machine, through correspondence or by the online submission of information via the Insolvency Service website. As a result, a total of 656 completed questionnaires/letters have been returned to the Insolvency Service concerning the activities of bankrupts and disqualified directors.

The Prosecution Section of the Insolvency Service considers all completed questionnaires, obtains additional information from Official Receivers and Insolvency Practitioners and, where appropriate, submits reports alleging specific offences to Department of Trade and Industry lawyers.

In the period to 31 May this year 181 cases have been referred to DTI lawyers and these have led to six convictions, the issue of 21 warning letters and a further seven defendants being charged with one or more offences. In 56 cases it was decided that no further action should be taken and the balance of the reports are still under consideration.

DEFENCE

Defence Evaluation and Research Agency

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the type of projects which *(a)* New DERA and *(b)* Retained DERA will undertake following the division of the organisation. [126937]

Mr. Hoon: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave my hon. Friend for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) on 17 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 366–67W, which outlined our proposals for the DERA public private partnership. These are described in more detail in the consultation document, a copy of which can be found in the Library of the House and on the internet at www.mod.uk/commercial/ppp/dera/.

Under our current proposals, we envisage that New DERA would continue to provide similar service to the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and other customers, working on a wide range of scientific and technical projects, providing advice, problem-solving, consulting, engineering and research services. It would, however, have much greater freedom to exploit its technology into broader markets, which in turn will have knock-on benefits for its core military business.

RDERA will focus on activities that must be carried out in government plus it will support MOD in its Department of State functions. It will ensure that MOD has an impartial source of advice and systems research capability, providing high level assessment, integration and management of the research programme and international research collaboration. This will include, for example, continued development of MOD's protection measures against chemical and biological weapons and the maintenance and employment of operational analysis models used to underpin policy, operational concept and procurement decisions.

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what measures he will take to ensure that at both Retained DERA and New DERA there is no diminution in *(a)* the scientific qualifications of staff and *(b)* the ability to provide impartial advice, once DERA is divided. [126931]

Mr. Hoon: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I have given to his earlier question on the DERA PPP project, in which I have outlined our proposals for the future of DERA.

(a) Under our preferred option, Core Competence, RDERA will focus on those activities that must be carried out by Government and to do so, we will need to retain those staff with the necessary expertise and qualifications to meet this role. The existing excellent system for recruiting, training and developing staff will be combined with a healthy interchange with industry, including NewDERA, and academia to give staff the opportunity for full and rewarding careers. Similarly, NewDERA will move into the private sector with the appropriate staff to maintain and, hopefully, develop its capabilities. NewDERA will have the freedom to attract and reward the best qualified staff to take it forward as a leading research and technology organisation.

(b) NewDERA will remain a significant supplier of science and technology to the Ministry of Defence (MOD) for the foreseeable future. Consequently we will be putting into place measures to ensure that it continues to be an organisation with which MOD customers are happy to do business. NewDERA itself will be keen to satisfy the needs of MOD, which will continue to be its most important single customer. The provision of high quality, impartial and high integrity advice and services will be at the heart of its business for all customers, including MOD. The proposed constraints described in the consultation document, which include features such as a special share, approval of Directors and contractual constraints, have been designed to provide a balance between allowing NewDERA the freedoms it needs to grow in the private sector and ensuring that access is preserved to those capabilities needed for the effective operation of our armed forces.

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the expected relationship between Retained DERA and New DERA. [126933]

Mr. Hoon: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I have given to his earlier question on the DERA PPP project, in which I have outlined our proposals for the future of DERA.

Under our preferred option, Core Competence, we expect that once bedded down, the relationship between New DERA and RDERA will be the same as the relationship between any private sector company and their main customer.

Contractual frameworks will naturally need to be established to govern relationships between RDERA and New DERA to reflect the changes brought about by the PPP. But this is no different from relationships that currently exist between the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and other private sector organisations. MOD through RDERA would take the lead on all Government to Government collaborations and where necessary, and with the agreement of the other Government or Governments involved, RDERA would sub-contract elements of the programme to New DERA.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the consequences for the development of future generations of military aero engines of the closure of DERA Ryestock's aero engine testing facilities. [127090]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* On completion of the current engine programme for the Eurofighter project in 2002, there will be insufficient future work to justify the retention of the altitude test facilities at DERA Pyestock. There is no Ministry of Defence strategic requirement to retain the facilities. We are satisfied that there will be scope for engine suppliers to make appropriate alternative arrangements.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what consultations his Department has had with the United States Government on the proposed reorganisation of DERA; what the most recent response of the US Government has been; and if he will make a statement. [127091]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* Following the announcement in 1998 of a public-private partnership (PPP) for the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA), consultation has been an important and regular feature of the process. We have consulted with a wide range of key stakeholders, including international collaborative partners. Last year's consultation exercise on a potential PPP solution produced valuable responses, which have informed the most recent phase of work. The current consultation exercise, which I announced on 17 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 366–67W gave all stakeholders the opportunity to submit their views on our revised proposals for the DERA public-private partnership.

Consultation with the USA has concentrated on discussions between MOD officials and Ministers with counterparts in the US Administration, the DoD and other US authorities. As would be expected with such a complex and important process, senior officials have held numerous detailed discussions with their US counterparts. Although it is not practicable for us to keep records of all discussions that take place at senior official level, we can confirm that the Principal Finance Officer, the Chief Scientific Adviser, the Deputy Under Secretary for Science and Technology, the Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff for Equipment Capability and the Chief of Defence Procurement have all been in consultation with their US colleagues.

Since the consultation was extended, as announced on 26 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 768W, discussions at ministerial level are recorded as follows:

Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Geoffrey Hoon, met the Hon. John Hamre, the Deputy Secretary of State for Defense 27–28 January 2000.

Minister for Defence Procurement, Baroness Symons, met the following US representatives to discuss the DERA public-private partnership proposals:

Dr. C. Dorman, the Chief Scientist of the Office of Naval Research (ONR), on 22 November 1999, in London.

Hon. John Hamre, the then Deputy Secretary for Defense in Washington on 29 February 2000, and then again in London on 22 March 2000.

Under Secretary of Defense (Acquisition and Technology) Jacques Gansler on 29 February, and then again on 22 and 23 May 2000.

Rudy de Leon, the Deputy Secretary for Defense in Washington on 2 May 2000.

Baroness Symons has also met senior National Security officials and had telephone conversations with John Hamre, and David Oliver, the Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense Acquisition and Technology, on this subject.

A team of UK Ministry of Defence officials led by the Director of the DERA Partnering Team, has completed a comprehensive series of briefings in the USA from 8 to 24 May 2000. This visit covered a wide range of US laboratories and sites as well as US officials from the US Department of Defense and the State Department.

Responses from the US and our other allies have been generally supportive of the Core Competence approach. They have made it clear that they wish to continue collaboration with the UK and see no reason why this should not be possible along the lines we are proposing. In common with all our collaborative partners, they have welcomed our willingness to listen to their views and engage in genuine consultation. Naturally, they have emphasised that they wish to ensure that government-only information provided under existing arrangements and as part of future collaboration will be adequately protected. Following any decision to proceed with Core Competence we would obviously take forward detailed work on this issue.

The current consultation period ended on 9 June. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that views expressed will be taken into account before a final decision is made.

DSA 2000

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the UK firms represented at DSA 2000 in Malaysia; what recent meetings Ministers or officials have had with such firms in respect of licensed production; and what products on display at DSA 2000 are *(a)* manufactured and *(b)* designed by UK firms. [126765]

Dr. Moonie: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Rifles

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what policy has been adopted with regard to the sale of self-reloading rifles no longer required by the British Army. [126461]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* Our policy is that small arms (other than automatic weapons which are routinely destroyed) which are declared surplus by the Ministry of Defence area available only to Governments, including acceptable military, paramilitary and police organisations (either directly or through duly licensed entities authorised to procure weapons on their behalf), to meet their legitimate defence and security requirements. All such transfers are assessed on a case by case basis against the UK national export licence assessment criteria and the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports.

In practice, few inquiries are received for the purchase of surplus small arms and the reality is that most are destroyed.

Civil Servants

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has for the further dispersal of MOD civil servants outside London to other parts of the United Kingdom. [126678]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* The following planned moves will result in civil service staff being relocated from London to other parts of the United Kingdom:

As part of the Head Office redevelopment the number of staff in London will reduce, fulfilling one of the aims of the Strategic Defence Review. Staff will move to a number of locations including York, Bath and Bristol;

As part of the integration of the former Army Technical Support Agency (ATSA) functions into the Equipment Support (Land) organisation in the Defence Logistics Organisation (DLO), many of the 216 civilian posts at ATSA Woolwich will move to Andover in late 2002;

48 civilian posts at the former Print and Distribution Function Woolwich are due to transfer to the Defence and Storage Distribution Agency (DSDA) at Llangennech.

Other moves may be planned but the details are not held centrally.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what reports he has received concerning the well-being of Major Andrew Harrison, serving in Sierra Leone, following his involvement with the RUF; what assessment he has made of threats to Major Harrison and the Ghurkha detachment being held hostage by the RUF; and if he will make a statement; [127310]

(2) what recent discussions he has had with the *(a)* UN peacekeeping force in Sierra Leone and *(b)* Revolutionary United Front concerning Major Andrew Harrison. [127311]

Mr. Hoon: I receive regular briefings on the situation regarding Major Harrison from civilian and military officials, who are in daily contact with him. I spoke to him myself by telephone on Monday 19 June. He is well and in good spirits, and is well protected by the Indian Gurkha forces at Kailahun. Although, because of the presence of RUF forces, the UN forces there are restricted in their freedom of movement outside the UN compound, they are not hostages and there is currently no direct threat to them or to Major Harrison. Although this is primarily a matter for the UN, we are liaising closely with them in Sierra Leone and New York in an effort to resolve the situation peacefully. I have not had any contact with the RUF.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many troops, and from which regiments, were affected by the failure to supply sufficient quantities of mefloquine in West Africa. [126054]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 15 June 2000]:* The number of personnel who deployed to West Africa on Operation Palliser without supplies of anti-malarial tablets, and the reasons for this, are currently being investigated by my Department. Supplies of the tablets were readily available and there are no known problems with the supply chain.

Non-procurement Fraud

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate his Department has made of the cost to its budget in each of the last five years in relation to non-procurement fraud; and if he will make a statement. [126686]

Dr. Moonie: The reported estimated annual costs of non-procurement fraud for the financial years 1995–96 to 1999–2000 inclusive are as follows:

	£
1995–96	217,000
1996–97	234,000
1997–98	98,000
1998–99	570,000
1999–2000	99,000

No abatement is made for subsequent recoveries. These figures relate to a combination of suspected and proven frauds with estimated values refined from time to time as investigations, sometimes lasting a year or more, reach a conclusion.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 have not received substantive answers, citing as the reason commercial or other confidentiality. [127340]

Dr. Moonie: I will write to the right hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Trigat Programme

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of the medium-range Trigat programme. [125782]

Dr. Moonie: The MR TRIGAT Industrialisation and Production (I&P) Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) has been signed by Germany, France and the UK, but has not come into force because Belgium and the Netherlands have yet to sign. This has delayed the placing of the MR TRIGAT Industrialisation and Production contract by over 12 months. The situation has been further complicated by a request from Germany to reduce the number of equipments envisaged when that country signed the MOU. These uncertainties cast significant doubt on whether (and when) a contract based on the existing MOU will be possible.

Our priority must be to deliver a cost effective anti-tank guided weapon capability with the minimum delay. To this end, we continue to liaise with the participating nations to resolve the current uncertainty and to agree a way forward.

Arms Exports (Saudi Arabia)

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the value of United Kingdom arms exports to Saudi Arabia in each of the past five years. [126251]

Dr. Moonie: I refer my hon. Friend to the 1997 and 1998 Annual Reports on Strategic Export Controls, which contain details of the value of arms exports to Saudi Arabia. Copies of these reports have been placed in the Library of the House. The 1999 Annual Report is due to be published shortly. Comparable information for other year could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

General Permitted Development Order

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to amend the General Permitted Development Order made under the Town and Country Planning Act 1995. [126284]

Ms Beverley Hughes: In February, my Department launched a research project which includes a review of the changes of use granted permission by the General Permitted Development Order 1995. In May, we announced in response to the report by the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones that the Government was

minded to introduce a requirement for an application for full planning permission for all new telecommunications masts. However, we would need to consult widely on the principle and precise scope of any new arrangements, including the extent to which the existing permitted development rights in the Order might need to be amended. My Department also issued jointly with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on 19 June a consultation paper which proposes that a planning application should in future be made for certain works within conservation areas that currently benefit from permitted development rights. Implementation of the proposal would require amendment of the Order.

Transport Plan

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to publish an environmental appraisal alongside the Government's Ten Year Transport Plan. [126852]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Ten Year Plan will contain an assessment of the Plan's impact on key environmental indicators.

Interactive Voice Response Systems

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many agencies of his Department use interactive voice response systems when dealing with telephone inquiries from the general public. [127113]

Ms Beverley Hughes: None of the Department's nine executive agencies currently offers telephone services that recognise and react to the spoken word.

Departmental Accounting Office

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the purpose and functions of his Department's additional accounting officer; and when this post was created. [127128]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Department's additional accounting officer has direct responsibility for Class III Vote 4, Local government, England, and the White Paper account relating to the Pooling of Non-Domestic Rates and Redistribution to Local Authorities in England. This appointment was made following departmental restructuring on 1 April 1998. The Permanent Secretary, as principal Accounting Officer, continues to have personal responsibility for the overall organisation, management and staffing of the department.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 have not received substantive answers, excluding those not answered on grounds *(a)* of disproportionate cost, *(b)* that the information is not available, not held centrally, or not held in the form requested and *(c)* of commercial or other confidentiality. [127098]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 21 June 2000]*: I assume the right hon. Member is referring to parliamentary questions where Ministers indicate in their response that they will write to hon. Members to provide the information requested. If so, there have been 25 such cases, out of a total of 2,865 parliamentary questions answered by my Department in the period in question.

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on how many occasions he has deposited papers in the Library in response to parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000. [127337]

Ms Beverley Hughes: For the period in question, my Department has deposited papers in the Library in response to parliamentary questions on 240 occasions.

Air Traffic Control

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what actions were taken by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* NATS between 9 June and 17 June in order to ensure that the breakdown on 9 June was not repeated. [127239]

Mr. Mullin: Following the computer problem at West Drayton on 9 June, the Department urgently requested: information from National Air Traffic Services Ltd. (NATS) on the nature and cause of the problem; and reassurance that immediate steps were being taken to rectify the fault to ensure that it would not happen again. When a further computer problem occurred on 17 June NATS contacted the Department with detailed information on this incident and the remedial action being taken.

NATS has advised that the causes of the failures were two unrelated application software design faults triggered in established and hitherto correctly functioning systems. The incident on 9 June was traced to an application code which failed to correctly process an unusual flight plan dealing with a flight to Hamburg which required complex co-ordination with an adjacent air traffic control centre (Copenhagen). Immediate action was taken to issue an operational procedure to all units affected not to file flight plans which could cause this problem.

The failure on 17 June resulted from a latent design fault in the flight strip printing system. The failure was cleared by reverting to a previous version of the software and as an additional precautionary measure a system message has been input which actively prevents the system from exercising the faulty code sequence.

As a permanent solution NATS is producing design fixes for both faults. These are currently undergoing test and assurance processes with NATS' operational engineering staff as a matter of high priority.

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when his Department's latest Air Traffic Forecasts will be published. [127814]

Mr. Mullin: The air traffic forecasts referred to are published by my Department every three years and reflect the intention to monitor air traffic developments and to keep assumptions and methodologies under review.

I have now approved the revised forecasts and agreed to their publication. Copies have been placed in the House Libraries and will shortly be on the DETR website.

Index of Local Deprivation

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State, for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact on the level of regeneration funding for London boroughs of the new index of local deprivation. [127161]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Decisions about the level of funding of domestic regeneration programmes is subject to the outcome of the spending review, which is expected to be announced next month. The index of local deprivation is still being finalised and is expected to be published later in the summer.

Birmingham Northern Relief Road

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when work is to start on the Birmingham Northern Relief Road. [127787]

Mr. Hill: The Highways Agency is currently making progress with arrangements for the compulsory purchase of land. Work to clear the site will be undertaken in the autumn and will continue into next year in preparation for construction to start in the spring. A copy of an edited version of the Concession Agreement prepared in accordance with the judgment of the High Court has been placed in the Library.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Eurodac

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on planned UK participation in the Eurodac system. [127196]

Mrs. Roche: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced on 7 October 1999 that the United Kingdom was opting in the draft Regulation to establish Eurodac. The United Kingdom continues to play a full part in the discussion on this text, on which the European Parliament is now to be re-consulted.

Domestic Fires

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people *(a)* died and *(b)* were injured in domestic fires in each of the last five years, and, of these, what proportion of the fires occurred in houses in multiple occupation. [127008]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information is given in the table.

Number of fatal and non-fatal casualties and fires[1] in dwellings[2], 1994–98, UK

	1994	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*[3]
Number of fatal casualties in dwellings	488	559	564	562	506
Number of non-fatal casualties in dwellings	12,916	13,108	14,189	14,896	14,970
Number of fires in all dwellings involving casualties	9,008	9,237	10,033	10,454	10,463
Number of fires in multi occupancy dwellings[4] involving casualties	3,861	3,997	4,551	4,716	4,724
Percentage	43	43	45	45	45

[1] Including late call and heat and smoke damage incidents (not recorded prior to 1994).
[2] Dwelling locations include caravans, houseboats and other non-building structures used as permanent dwellings.
[3] The 1998 casualty information is provisional and will be revised for later publication after death certificate information has been finalised.
[4] Multi occupancy dwellings are those in which the building has been subdivided into separate domestic living areas whether or not part of the building is used for a non-domestic purpose.

Hunting with Dogs

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the total cost of the Burns Inquiry into hunting with dogs. [126901]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I will write to my hon. Friend as soon as the final cost is known.

Metropolitan Police

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the *(a)* current strength and *(b)* number of officers actually available for duty in the Metropolitan Police Service. [127313]

Mr. Straw: I understand from the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis that the strength of the force at the end of May was 25,484. This figure includes officers on secondment to The National Criminal Intelligence Service, the National Crime Squad and central services. When these are excluded the strength of the Metropolitan Police is 24,966. The number of officers available for duty at the end of May was 24,966.

These figures are not comparable with those for previous years because of changes to the boundaries of the Metropolitan Police District. Responsibility and resources for those parts of Essex, Hertfordshire and Surrey previously policed by the Metropolitan Police were transferred to the relevant county forces with effect from 1 April 2000.

Prisons

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* additional prisons and *(b)* additional prison places there were and what was their cost in each of the last five years; how many planned (i) additional prisons and (ii) additional prison places there are and what is their cost in the next three years; and if he will make a statement. [125322]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 9 June 2000]:* The information requested is set out in the table.

	Number of new prisons provided in each of the last five years	*Number of additional uncrowded prison places provided in each of the last five years*[1]	*Cost of additional places in each of the last five years (£ million)*[2,3]
1996–97	0	1,857	186
1997–98	4	4,635	211
1998–99	0	1,697	238
1999–2000	2	2,071	205
2000–01[4]	1	840	244

[1] The number of new places includes those at new prisons and places provided at existing prisons by building houseblocks and Ready To Use units. It is the total of new places and does not take into account places taken out of use, for example by the closure of Aldington.
[2] The total cost of new places includes new prisons provided under the Private Finance Initiative.
[3] This is an estimate of the total capital and current cost as the Prison Service does not record separately the running costs of added accommodation at existing prisons.
[4] The new prison in 2000–01 is called Rye Hill and will open in January 2001.
Note:
A new prison called Dovegate (800 places) is planned to open in July 2001. Plans for 2001–02 are currently being considered as part of the Spending Review 2000.

Global Cultural Diversity Congress

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library a copy of the report to Creditors prepared by the liquidator of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. [127355]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Disclosure of the Report of the Creditors is a matter for the liquidators of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. and so it is not my decision to do so.

Immigration Detention Centres

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the planned capacity is of each of the proposed detention centres at Thurleigh, Harmondsworth and Aldington; what criteria will be used to allocate *(a)* asylum seekers and *(b)* other immigrants to these centres; and if he will make a statement. [127354]

Mrs. Roche: It is proposed that there will be 900 places for immigration detainees at the detention centre at Thurleigh, 550 at Harmondsworth and about 300 at Aldington. People are detained under powers set out in the Immigration Act 1971. Although many have claimed asylum at some time they will be detained because of their status as inadmissible passengers, illegal entrants or people subject to deportation. The primary criterion is whether the person is unlikely to comply with conditions of temporary admission or their removal directions. No particular criteria will attach to these three new centres. The allocation of immigration detainees into a particular centre is primarily dependent on the availability of space and the location of the place of initial detention.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what criteria will be used to select the asylum seekers to be detained at Lindholme; what his target is for the average length of time for which an asylum seeker will remain at Lindholme; and if he will make a statement. [127356]

Mrs. Roche: Lindholme will be used as part of the detention estate, housing, principally, those immigration detainees apprehended in the North of England. The criteria for the use of Lindholme will be the same as for other centres. It will be for illegal entrants, inadmissible passengers and those subject to deportation who are detained under powers in the Immigration Act 1971. Many of these people have claimed asylum at some stage. Detention is used where it is believed a person is unlikely to comply with conditions of temporary admission or their removal directions.

There is no target for the average length of time for which a detainee will remain at Lindholme. Detention must be proportionate and for the minimum period necessary.

Equal Treatment Directive

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which organisations attended his consultative meetings about the EC Directive on implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin. [127352]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: In addition to the organisations that were listed in the reply I gave the hon. Gentleman on 8 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 377–78W, the Government had consultative meetings with the following representatives of organisations:

1. Sushi Sharma (Brent Council, Community Safety Team)
2. Sofi Taylor (Greater Glasgow NHS Primary Care Trust)
3. Bob Purkiss (Transport and General Workers Union)
4. Pauline Granstan (Communication Workers Union)
5. Jacinta J. Barker (Black and Minority Ethnic Community Safety Forum)
6. Wali Tasar Uddin MBE (Commonwealth Society of Edinburgh)
7. Selma Rahman (Fife Racial Equality Council)
8. Sherry Peck (North Herts. Minority Ethnic Forum)
9. Priscilla Marongwe (Edinburgh and Lothians Racial Equality Council)
10. Farkhanda Chaudhry (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisation)
11. Jimshid Ahmadi (North Shields Peoples Centre)
12. Anne Gaspard (United Kingdom Office of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia—EUMC)
13. Diya Muqit (Citizenship Foundation)
14. Khalil Kazi (United Kingdom Migrants Forum)
15. Claude Hendrickson (Youth Enquiry Service)
16. David Hey (Salfia Association, Dewsbury)
17. Ray Sefia (The Ceed Charity)
18. Mohinder Chatrik (Indian Workers' Association, Huddersfield)
19. John Creaby MBE (Tyne and Wear Racial Equality Council)
20. N. Khan Moghal (Manchester Council for Community Relations)
21. Bisi Akinwumi (Voluntary Organisation Internet Service)
22. Geremy Phillips (Manchester Trades Union Council)
23. Robert Cater (Race Equality First)
24. Patrick Yu (Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities)

25. Paul Winstone (Leicester City Council)
26. Paul Auber (Chapelton Young Peoples 10–2 Club)
27. Lee Jasper (The 1990 Trust)
28. Harriette Campbell (African Caribbean Women's Association.)
29. Judith Woodward (National Assembly Against Racism)
30. Royana Meechan (Tribesnetribes)
31. Kazim Khan (Tze UK Incorporating the Race and Drugs Project)
32. Liaquat Ali (Council of British Pakistanis—Scotland)
33. Sheila Rogers (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland Racial Equality Directorate)
34. Dr. Jack Demaine (Loughborough University)
35. Kristin Couper (Universite de Paris 8)
36. Philip Mathew (Haringey Racial Equality Council)
37. Fred Ellis (Haringey Racial Equality Council)
38. Prof. Chris Mullard (Focus Consultancy)
39. Kalpana Desai (Kirlees Asian/Black Women's Association)
40. Mr. P. J. Smith (Labour Party)
41. Laure Tsobgny (Millennium Experience)
42. Mr. Akhtar Shah (Scottish Council for Minorities Rights)
43. Corall Jenkins (Unison)
44. Michelynn Lafleche (Runnymede Trust)
45. Baroness Sarah Ludford (European Parliament—EP Rep. to European and United Nations Conferences Against Racism)
46. Val Carpenter (National Coalition Building Institute)
47. Rajinder Sohpal (Reading Council for Racial Equality)
48. Jayne Done (Oldham Local Education Authority)
49. Alan Corbett (Milton Keynes Council)
50. Tara Mukherjee (European Multicultural Foundation)
51. Stephen Pittam (The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust)
52. Michael Head (European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance)
53. Julia Kaufmann (BBC Children in Need Appeal)
54. Jabeer Butt (Race Equality Unit)
55. Leandra Box (Race Equality Unit)
56. Dr. James Uhomoibhi (Multi Cultural Resource Centre, Northern Ireland)
57. Rita Patel (Belgrave Baheno Women's Organisation)
58. Karen Chouhan (Belgrave Baheno Women's Organisation)
59. Sue Errington (Devon and Exeter Racial Equality Council)
60. Mr. Lloyd Blake (African and Caribbean Peoples Movement)
61. Mr. Abdulaziz Toki (Asian Support Group European Union Migrants Forum)
62. N. Khan Moghal (Manchester Council for Community Relations)
63. Aisling Bryne (Al-Hasaniya Moroccan Women's Centre)
64. Sheila Rogers (Equality Commission for N. Ireland Racial Equality Directorate)
65. Dr. Tony Langlois (Community Relations Council for Northern Ireland)
66. Gerry Gable (Anti-racist and Violent Crime Task Force)
67. Suzette Bronkhorst (I Care—Internet Centre, Anti-racism in Europe)
68. Samir Sharma (Central Scotland Racial Equality Council)
69. Mukami McCrum (Central Scotland Racial Equality Council)
70. Mrs. Bilquis Ahmed (Azeemia Foundation)
71. Margaret Donaghy (Traveller Movement N. Ireland)
72. Dave Hey (Salfia Association, Dewsbury)
73. Mr. Ahmad Fawzi (United Nations Information Centre)
74. Namasiku Liandu (University of Abertay, Dundee)
75. Victor Momodu
76. Elizabeth Kayembe (Abantu—for Development)
77. Gay Moon (Justice)
78. Noel James (Law Society)
79. Asad Rehman
80. Julia Hausermann (Rights Humanity)
81. Mrs. Couper (University de Paris 8)
82. Sanjiv Verdi (Unison).

Road Hauliers (Penalties)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what payments have been received by his Department in respect of civil penalties imposed on road hauliers under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999; and if he will make a statement. [127353]

Mrs. Roche: As at midday on 20 June, a total of £24,000 had been received in respect of civil penalties imposed under the provisions of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. In addition, a total of £137,829.70 had been received by way of payment as security in order to secure the release of vehicles impounded under the provisions of the Act, and a further £5,933.10 had been received in respect of detention of those vehicles and related expenses.

Spiritual Healers Charitable Trust

Mr. Tredinnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with the Charity Commission about the proposed registration of the National Federation of Spiritual Healers Charitable Trust Ltd. as a charity; and if he will make a statement. [126472]

Mr. Boateng: None. The Charity Commission is answerable to the High Court for its legal decisions and its interpretation of charity law. Registration is not a matter for the Home Office.

Home Detention Curfew

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many category A prisoners were released on the home detention curfew scheme up to 31 May; what offences each committed and what was the *(a)* sentence received, *(b)* sentence served and *(c)* time spent on the scheme in each case; if any breached the conditions of the curfew, had their licence revoked or re-offended while on the scheme; and if he will make a statement. [126907]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* As of 31 May 2000, no category A prisoners were placed on the home detention curfew scheme.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Winter Fuel Payments

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security for what reasons 24 September was chosen as the cut-off for the winter allowance for 2000–01. [126045]

Angela Eagle: To ensure people receive their winter fuel payments in good time to contribute to winter fuel bills, the qualifying week must precede the onset of winter. The week of 18 to 24 September will be used as the qualifying week for the coming winter to ensure that the correct payments can be made before Christmas, in good time to contribute to winter fuel bills. The process for identifying eligible people and determining the amount payable takes around 10 weeks. This allows for completion of the enormous task whereby around 11.5 million people who are now eligible for winter fuel payments are either identified from our records or through a claims process.

If there were an entitlement provision for those people who had reached age 60 after the qualifying week, greater complexity would be brought to the scheme. The administration process of establishing the eligibility of all those who claimed, by checking age and household circumstances, would take a great deal of time and would add significant expense.

The current approach ensures all those eligible, particularly the oldest, get a significant and well timed payment. Clearly, there will be people who just miss out, but this would happen even if both a qualifying week and mop-up period were used, since the mop-up period would need to end at some point. We believe it has struck the right balance between providing help to the great majority of older people and ensuring that the payments can be made in time for the coldest weather.

Housing Benefit

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his Department's estimate of the annual costs of increasing the earnings disregard for Housing Benefit claimants by *(a)* £5 per week for a single person aged under 65 years and *(b)* by £10 for a household with children. [126435]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Estimated costs of increasing the earnings disregard for Housing Benefit claimants

£ million

	Cost in 2000–01
Increase the Housing Benefit earnings disregard by £5 per week for a single person aged under 65 years	15
Increase the Housing Benefit earnings disregard by £10 per week for a family with children	70

Notes:

1. Based on the 1997–98 Family Resources Survey and Housing Benefit administrative/forecast data.
2. Costs are rounded to the nearest £5 million.
3. The estimates do not take into account any behavioural effect that may be caused by these measures.

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what would be the annual cost of disregarding child maintenance from housing benefit calculations *(a)* for all claimants and *(b)* for claimants also receiving working families tax credit. [126434]

Angela Eagle: We estimate that the cost of fully disregarding maintenance payments in Housing Benefit would be about £20 million a year. This includes an estimate for the cost for cases who would become newly entitled as a result of the full disregard.

The cost of fully disregarding maintenance payments in Housing Benefit (HB) for claimants who receive working families tax credit is also about £20 million a year.

Notes:

1. Cost for existing claims based on data taken from May 1998 HBMIS dataset, a 1 per cent. survey of HB claims.
2. Cost for cases who become newly entitled is calculated from data taken from 1996–97 Family Resources Survey uprated to 2000–01 prices, benefits and earnings levels.
3. Costs and Caseloads are calibrated to forecast caseloads for 2000–01. The cost has been rounded to the nearest £10 million.
4. This cost will include a small element of spousal maintenance.

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 15 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 713W, on housing benefit, what average time is taken to process the housing benefit claims dealt with by Chelmsford Borough Council that are not dealt with within the 14 day guidelines. [127205]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested is not currently available. However, under the Best Value regime introduced from April 2000, local authorities are required to submit data on the average length of time taken to determine new claims. The first figures are expected to be available to the Department by autumn this year.

Single Payments

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out for each of the last three years before its abolition *(a)* the total amount spent on the single payments scheme and *(b)* the amount spent on each major category of item for which such grants were available. [125285]

Angela Eagle: Expenditure on the single payment scheme for the last three years before its abolition is given in the Annual Report on the Social Fund 1988–89.

Statistical samples of single payments, by item, are given in the Supplementary Benefit Annual Statistical Enquiries, 1986 and 1987.

The publications are available in the Library.

Benefit Information

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how he seeks to ensure easy access by all potential claimants to accurate benefit information; what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the complaints handling system in each division within his Department; and if he will make a statement. [125443]

Angela Eagle: We are modernising the way DSS services are delivered and restructuring the Department to provide a comprehensive, dedicated service focused on the needs of our key client groups: pensioners, working age people and children. Our programme includes initiatives to provide better information and effective systems for complaints and redress, if things go wrong.

Key improvements in quality and accessibility of information about benefits include:

Benefits Agency leaflets have been redesigned making them clearer, easier to follow and more tailored to customers needs;

information on benefits is now available in bilingual/Welsh, eight ethnic minority languages, large print, audiocassette and Braille;

the new Pensions Direct teleservice means we can take claims and deal with queries over the telephone;

through the New Deals and the ONE service we are providing one-to-one personal help and advice on jobs, training, child care and other services, as well as information on benefits;

an improved Departmental website due to be launched shortly will provide customers with easy access to benefit information and in the future will enable them to contact us electronically.

We are reviewing our complaints and redress systems, in relation to our main client groups. Considerable work on this is already underway in the Department's current Agencies, most notably:

from July 2000 a new system will be introduced in Benefits Agency which will help us reduce complaints handling time;

the Child Support Agency and War Pensions Agency have each recently introduced an independent body to review complaints.

In addition to the Department's own complaints procedures the Parliamentary Ombudsman investigates complaints of maladministration. Since 1997, the Ombudsman's reports show a 25 per cent. reduction in the number of complaints made to him about Departmental Agencies.

Income Support

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the characteristics of households with incomes below the level of Income Support. [127005]

Mr. Bayley: Research has been, and continues to be, commissioned by the Department to examine the characteristics of the poorest groups and, where appropriate, to explore the reasons for non-take-up of benefits.

A substantial programme of research was undertaken to examine the characteristics of the poorest pensioners and to explore their barriers to claiming Income Support. Ongoing surveys of low-income families with children also provide detailed information about Britain's poorest families. In addition, research was completed in 1999 that examined the circumstances of the lowest income households identified from the Department's Households Below Average Income (HBAI) series. This followed evidence that households reporting the lowest incomes in household surveys do not necessarily have the lowest living standards.

All findings from research undertaken by the Department are published and placed in the Library.

Expenditure

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the level of social security expenditure as a percentage of GDP is *(a)* in the United Kingdom and *(b)* on average in the other EU member states. [126978]

Mr. Darling: Comparative data across European Union member states are published by the Statistical Office of the European Communities. It produces comparisons of expenditure on social protection using a broader definition than Social Security alone. The definition includes spending on health, social services, active labour market policies and public sector occupational pensions. The most recent figures are for 1997 and show that UK spending on social protection represented 26.8 per cent. of Gross Domestic Product, compared with an EU average of 28.2 per cent.

Source:

Social protection: expenditure and receipts, 1999 edition, Eurostat.

Child Support

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to make it a criminal offence to give false information to the Child Support Agency. [126654]

Angela Eagle: Under proposals in the current Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill, we will introduce new criminal offences for providing false information in relation to child support and failing to provide information when required to do so. Any person who deliberately misleads the Child Support Agency or withholds information will be liable to a fine of up to £1,000 on conviction.

Average Incomes

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the average income from state benefits for *(a)* pensioners, *(b)* pensioners over 75, *(c)* single parents and *(d)* the disabled (i) in cash and real terms and (ii) as a percentage of average earnings for (1) 1979, (2) 1984, (3) 1989, (4) 1994 and (5) for each year from 1994. [126682]

Mr. Bayley: Information on components of pensioners' incomes is published in the annual statistical publication, The Pensioners' Incomes Series, copies of which are in the Library. The latest available figures are for 1997–78.

Benefits (Balkan Claimants)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many nationals of each of the successor republics to the former Yugoslavia who are residing in the United Kingdom are claiming social security benefits in this country. [127350]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available as details of a claimant's nationality are not routinely recorded. Benefit entitlement is dependent upon a person's immigration status rather than nationality.

SCOTLAND

Caledonian MacBrayne

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last discussed issues relating to Caledonian MacBrayne with the European Commission; and if he will make a statement. [125723]

Dr. Reid: My hon. Friend the Minister of State, Scotland Office, recently met with representatives of the European Commission to discuss a wide range of issues affecting transport in remote and peripheral regions in Scotland and elsewhere in Europe including ferry services. Responsibility for issues affecting the operation of Caledonian MacBrayne ferry services is devolved and therefore rests with the Scottish Executive.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many of the written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 have not received substantive answers, citing as the reason that the information is *(a)* not held centrally, *(b)* not held in the form requested and *(c)* not available. [127333]

Dr. Reid: Four questions did not receive substantive replies because the information was not held centrally. Three questions could not be answered fully because some of the information requested was not held centrally.

No question did not receive a substantive reply because the information was not held in the form requested.

The information to answer one question was not available and some information requested was not available in respect of three questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Chevening Scholarships

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many Chevening scholarships have been awarded to *(a)* Kazakhstan, *(b)* Uzbekistan, *(c)* Turkmenistan, *(d)* Tadjikistan and *(e)* Kyrgyzstan. [R] [126430]

Mr. Hain: In 1999–2000 there were 11 Chevening Scholars from Kazakhstan, 13 from Uzbekistan, five from Kyrgyzstan, two from Turkmenistan, and one from Tadjikistan.

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the criteria are on which the number of Chevening scholarships are made available to different countries. [126431]

Mr. Hain: Chevening Scholarships funding is allocated to different countries each year in line with FCO Objectives. As the cost of academic courses varies, it is not possible to make a precise correlation between the funding available and the number of scholarships.

Recruitment (Women Graduates)

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many female graduates were recruited by his Department, and, of these, how many are still employed by his Department, in each of the last 20 years. [126429]

Mr. Hain: The table shows the number of women recorded as having been recruited to the FCO through the fast stream competition where candidates are required to have a degree. The table also shows how many of these are still with the FCO for each of the last 20 years.

Women graduates may have been recruited into other grades but in these cases information on whether or not they had a degree was not systematically recorded as possession of a degree was not a requirement for recruitment in most cases.

	Number Recruited	*Number still with the FCO*
1980	0	0
1981	5	3
1982	5	5
1983	5	3
1984	2	2
1985	12	10
1986	12	8
1987	8	8
1988	12	8
1989	6	5
1990	12	9
1991	14	14
1992	3	3
1993	4	4
1994	6	6
1995	10	9
1996	9	7
1997	10	10
1998	11	11
1999	11	11

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many ministerial visits were made by United Kingdom Ministers to *(a)* Kazakhstan, *(b)* Uzbekistan, *(c)* Turkmenistan, *(d)* Tadjikistan and *(e)* Kyrgyzstan in each of the last three years. [R] [126428]

Mr. Vaz: The following Ministers have visited the countries of Central Asia in the last three years:

Foreign Office Minister of State, Doug Henderson MP, visited Turkmenistan in May 1998;

Doug Henderson's successor, Joyce Quin MP, visited Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in October 1998; and

the Minister for Construction (DETR), Nick Raynsford MP, visited Kazakhstan this month.

More ministerial visits to the region are planned for the coming months.

South Lebanon

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made on the protection of civilians in South Lebanon following the Israeli withdrawal. [126438]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I have publicly called on all parties to exercise restraint. We have also, privately, raised our concerns with Lebanese, Syrian and Israeli leaders during recent visits to their countries. We continue to work hard with the UN to maximise calm and stability.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment the United Nations or its associated bodies have made of the role of Liberia in respect of the conflict in Sierra Leone; and what action is proposed as a result. [126771]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* The United Nations has made no formal assessment of Liberia's role in respect of the conflict in Sierra Leone. However, there is increasing international concern over reports of close links between RUF rebels in Sierra Leone and supporters in Liberia, and Liberia's alleged involvement in the illicit trade in Sierra Leone diamonds.

We will be taking forward our discussions with international partners on these issues over the coming period. Meanwhile, we welcome the EU's decision on 13 May to delay signature of the National Indicative Programme for Liberia in the light of concerns about Liberia's current activities.

Burma

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps are being taken to identify the location and value of assets held by the Burmese Government which have been frozen by the EU. [127160]

Mr. Battle: The Bank of England's Sanctions Emergency Unit, on behalf of HM Treasury, has issued a Notice to all financial institutions in the UK instructing them to freeze all funds belonging to those individuals subject to EC Regulation 1081/2000. UK financial institutions are required to report all such funds to the Bank of England.

The Burma (Freezing of Funds) Regulations 2000 makes breaches of the EC Regulation a criminal offence and provides penalties for such breaches.

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to introduce investment sanctions against Burma. [127159]

Mr. Battle: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave her on 20 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 156W.

HEALTH

MRSA (Netherlands)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of the incidence, control and reduction of MRSA in hospitals in the Netherlands. [126325]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* We are aware of the very strict protocols used for the management of MRSA in the Netherlands. Practice there and in other European Union countries is taken into account when formulating central policy. We have recently set national standards for the control of hospital acquired infections, including MRSA. These will be delivered locally and will be independently inspected and reviewed by the Audit Commission and the Commission for Health Improvement.

Administrative Costs

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of the budget for hospital and community health services of *(a)* health authorities and *(b)* primary care groups and primary care trusts was spent on administrative costs in the last year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [126916]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* In 1998–99 £420 million was spent on the cost of managing health authorities, 1.15 per cent. of the £36,612 million total National Health Service expenditure (net).

Primary care groups were not established until April 1999; therefore no figures on their management costs are yet available.

Hospital Cleaning

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the financial savings made by NHS trusts in *(a)* domestic services and *(b)* cleaning contracts in the last year for which figures are available. [126920]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* The information is not collected centrally.

Voluntary Sector

Dr. Desmond Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the voluntary sector organisations involved in *(a)* primary care groups and *(b)* healthy living centres. [126881]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* The names of all voluntary sector organisations currently working with primary care groups (PCGs) are not collected centrally. PCGs should work alongside voluntary organisations in identifying local priorities and developing the Health Improvement Programme (HImP).

The New Opportunities Fund (NOF) who are running a programme to support the development of a network of healthy living centres (HLCs) collect information about partners involved in bids as part of the application process. I have placed in the Library a list of those voluntary organisations involved at the bidding stage in the seven NOF funded HLCs.

Prescriptions (Incapacity Benefit)

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will estimate the cost of granting all those on Incapacity Benefit in the UK free prescriptions; [127240]

(2) if he will estimate the costs of giving free prescriptions to all those on Incapacity Benefit in Norwich, North. [127241]

Ms Stuart: In England, it is estimated that the cost of extending entitlement to free prescriptions to all recipients of Incapacity Benefit would be around £120 million per year. Information is not available on a constituency basis.

Repairs and Maintenance

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the outstanding repair and maintenance backlog at NHS facilities in each health authority in each year since 1995; and if he will make a statement. [127164]

Ms Stuart: The table provides the details requested.

Outstanding repair and maintenance backlog figures in each health authority in each year since 1995

£000

Health authority	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99
Avon	39,962	42,294	58,610	51,593
Barking and Havering	42,150	49,631	47,116	13,317
Barnet	7,914	7,904	11,273	15,683
Barnsley	3,582	3,222	2,931	1,755
Bedfordshire	8,577	13,671	11,714	14,762
Berkshire	33,958	67,528	75,670	76,355
Bexley and Greenwich	18,807	11,395	1,930	3,890
Birmingham	102,672	120,034	153,721	178,950
Bradford	18,836	36,871	30,645	29,800
Brent and Harrow	35,282	58,428	27,396	32,231
Bromley	50,950	54,288	51,962	14,881
Buckinghamshire	28,781	45,548	43,924	26,399
Bury and Rochdale	11,330	10,530	18,155	7,834
Calderdale and Kirklees	59,953	64,495	67,147	76,827
Cambridge and Huntingdon	22,676	17,633	25,768	32,539
Camden and Islington	97,610	140,919	105,889	120,775
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	12,450	13,114	8,690	8,929
County Durham	35,383	35,627	35,745	12,780
Coventry	36,280	42,172	40,196	71,852
Croydon	21,997	20,012	28,547	23,200
Doncaster	15,209	18,188	14,738	13,772
Dorset	27,321	10,339	9,774	7,036
Dudley	242	14,815	25,695	28,916
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	64,250	106,666	99,863	99,056
East Kent	39,664	15,576	13,583	11,568
East Lancashire	14,995	23,859	26,710	32,879
East London and The City	92,758	90,396	122,008	102,314
East Norfolk	36,510	33,243	40,624	27,038
East Riding	148,755	44,409	56,968	63,735
East Surrey	6,420	5,320	5,005	7,530
East Sussex	30,227	17,185	21,468	19,552
Enfield and Haringey	6,716	10,474	11,847	14,785
Gateshead and South Tyneside	8,899	9,413	9,907	9,390
Gloucester	8,306	20,126	18,075	17,150
Herefordshire	9,041	8,532	8,232	8,552
Hillingdon	3,055	6,823	5,850	5,482
Isle of Wight	1,340	1,250	1,162	1,491
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	22,121	47,840	48,450	48,742
Kingston and Richmond	6,264	4,498	3,893	8,022
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	81,945	76,420	75,975	119,506
Leeds	67,622	67,150	73,377	87,440
Leicestershire	62,994	56,499	56,925	42,504
Lincolnshire	35,253	37,053	37,178	103,810
Liverpool	11,148	17,634	23,231	28,953
Manchester	42,325	63,276	71,840	109,650
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	28,254	30,022	39,564	24,540
Morecambe Bay	5,396	4,822	4,226	14,318
Newcastle and North Tyneside	4,432	23,068	38,624	52,426
North and East Devon	12,743	13,086	12,217	8,034
North and East Hertfordshire	10,453	11,114	11,502	44,057
North and Mid Hampshire	10,777	24,201	20,454	14,838
North Cheshire	3,005	2,484	2,393	5,657
North Cumbria	27,609	24,935	25,038	12,994
North Derbyshire	5,530	4,970	5,441	6,048
North Essex	71,095	90,471	66,814	52,224
North Nottinghamshire	12,831	12,440	13,343	12,550
North Staffordshire	16,080	37,750	35,055	31,803
North West Anglia	3,679	488	13,436	12,185
North West Lancashire	24,231	28,332	32,368	30,463
North Yorkshire	10,100	23,054	23,187	6,851
Northamptonshire	31,580	29,364	29,142	27,400
Northumberland	6,390	6,778	6,828	11,054
Nottingham	29,257	38,951	56,158	51,046
Oxfordshire	20,466	28,884	29,697	43,257
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	11,346	10,548	48,329	9,711
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	0	27,423	28,239	14,268
Rotherham	2,850	3,520	5,975	4,519
Salford and Trafford	30,951	27,633	29,899	14,356
Sandwell	8,086	7,431	4,115	4,596

Outstanding repair and maintenance backlog figures in each health authority in each year since 1995

£000

Health authority	*1995–96*[1]	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Sefton	7,645	6,165	5,270	11,746
Sheffield	14,048	12,341	22,181	30,827
Shropshire	8,868	28,482	39,912	26,974
Solihull	0	245	175	1,770
Somerset	5,280	5,073	3,925	5,786
South and West Devon	16,508	12,428	12,492	12,458
South Cheshire	7,900	6,153	13,119	14,681
South Derbyshire	6,896	7,949	7,577	3,302
South Essex	17,931	20,644	17,013	8,258
South Humber	3,866	6,529	6,423	5,668
South Lancashire	9,301	9,439	9,118	4,997
South Staffordshire	16,581	6,829	12,972	10,553
Southampton and South West Hampshire	113,700	19,571	13,512	10,863
St. Helens and Knowsley	8,915	8,050	7,688	9,337
Stockport	14,558	16,068	12,858	12,785
Suffolk	9,941	15,252	15,427	32,900
Sunderland	6,182	6,136	6,326	12,138
Tees	23,856	28,723	24,484	26,446
Wakefield	18,919	1,981	21,316	41,831
Walsall	2,346	5,193	5,397	11,172
Warwickshire	11,574	7,823	9,620	6,462
West Hertfordshire	34,619	35,706	28,316	28,741
West Kent	57,073	53,947	73,113	75,539
West Pennine	6,045	6,650	6,866	11,348
West Surrey	12,185	14,834	13,059	20,974
West Sussex	21,634	24,438	29,879	23,973
Wigan and Bolton	15,290	13,281	15,428	13,146
Wiltshire	25,414	42,425	47,719	52,848
Wirral	7,207	5,759	9,505	10,447
Wolverhampton	0	22,842	17,074	18,560
Worcester	11,377	14,883	17,246	17,688

[1] Fire safety backlog was not collected in 1995–96. The figures for the remaining years include all aspects of backlog repair and maintenance.

Source:

The figures are derived from the Estates Returns Information Collection (ERIC) collected annually by NHS Estates.

Accident and Emergency

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many vacancies there were in medical posts in the specialty of accident and emergency in England in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [127163]

Ms Stuart: Information about consultant vacancies in accident and emergency medicine is contained in the Department of Health Recruitment, Retention and Vacancies Survey, March 1999. Data are only available for that year and only for consultants in that specialty. The survey does not include information about other grades of medical staff in accident and emergency medicine. Copies of the survey are available in the Library.

Spanish Medicines Law

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he *(a)* has made and *(b)* plans to make to the European Commission in respect of the December amendment to Article 100 of the Spanish Medicines Law. [126667]

Dr. Howells: I have been asked to reply.

We have made no representations to the European Commission in respect of the Spanish law, and currently have no plans to do so.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Running Costs

Mr. Flynn: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, what the running costs of the House are on *(a)* sitting and *(b)* non-sitting Fridays. [126324]

Mr. Kirkwood *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* It is not possible to distinguish running costs between sitting and non-sitting days because staff salaries are computed on an annual basis. Overtime figures for normal working days vary as a result of the unpredictability of adjournments; they are minimised wherever possible.

Heating, power and other services costs are substantially unaffected by a non-sitting Friday as normal departmental activities still have to be carried out. It is not practicable to calculate the small volume savings associated with the absence of Members, which in any case will be partly compensated for by increased visitor requirements.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Rwanda

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proportion of her Department's bilateral country programme aid for Rwanda is spent by the Government of Rwanda. [126456]

Clare Short: Of the £30 million committed in

December 1998, £10.6 million has been used to help Rwanda service multilateral debt and £15 million has been provided as budget support to underpin Government of Rwanda's commitment to increase spending on health and education as a proportion of GDP.

Nigeria

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proportion of her Department's bilateral country programme aid for Nigeria is spent by the Government of Nigeria. [126453]

Clare Short: None of the bilateral programme is spent by the Government of Nigeria.

China

Mr, Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proportion of her Department's bilateral country programme aid for China is spent by the Government of China. [126455]

Clare Short: Our programme in China is developed and implemented in full consultation with the Government of China. We do, however, work with and through a range of other actors, including non-governmental organisations and, increasingly, multilateral donors such as the World bank and the Asian Development bank.

We estimate that about 30 per cent. of our total programme resources are channelled through the Government of China, under the strict controls applicable under Financial Aid. A detailed list of our activities in China, together with our Country Strategy paper, will be placed in the Library of the House.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the cost of her Departmental publications each year from 1992 to 1999. [126449]

Clare Short: The costs of Departmental publications since 1992 are as follows (costs are recorded on a financial year basis):

	£
1992–93	252,175
1993–94	248,710
1994–95	318,596
1995–96	351,867
1996–97	374,651
1997–98	381,638
1998–99	537,007
1999–2000	657,801

Interactive Voice Response Systems

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many agencies of her Department use interactive voice response systems when dealing with telephone inquiries from the general public. [127392]

Clare Short: My Department has no interactive voice response systems that deal with telephone inquiries from the general public operational either within the Department or in use in any agencies thereof.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many parliamentary questions were tabled to her Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 which requested information, pursuant to her previous answers. [127332]

Clare Short: Ten parliamentary questions were tabled to my Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 requesting information pursuant to previous answers.

Ghana

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proportion of her Department's bilateral country programme aid for Ghana is spent by the Government of Ghana. [126451]

Clare Short: In November 1999, we committed £40 million in flexible budget support to the Government of Ghana for 2000–02. We anticipate that the larger part of this (£25 million) will be disbursed in 2000 to help Ghana recover from the economic shocks of 1999.

Additionally, we anticipate that £7 million will be provided in flexible budget support specifically for social sectors in 2000–01. Up to £11 million is available for this purpose in 2001–02.

In total, flexible budget support represents 55 per cent. of the total bilateral commitment to Ghana over the next two years.

CABINET OFFICE

People's Panel

Lorna Fitzsimons: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when she will publish results from the People's Panel Ethnic Minority Booster Research; and if she will make a statement. [127382]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Initial research has now been carried out using the People's Panel Ethnic Minority Booster to find out more about the experiences of people from an ethnic minority background in using a range of public services. An extra 830 people from ethnic minority communities were recruited to the original People's Panel to ensure that views could be analysed in detail. Results have been published today, and I have placed copies in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the progress of the People's Panel. [126104]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Four major waves of quantitative research and several qualitative research projects using the People's Panel have been carried out since it was set up in the summer of 1998. Summaries of the research results have been placed in the House Library and published on the internet. A fifth wave of research, which will set a baseline for the new consumer focus for public services announced on 9 February, is under way. This will measure

satisfaction with and expectations of key public services. The results are expected to be announced during the summer. An additional 830 people from ethnic minority communities have been recruited to allow us to examine their views in detail. The results from the first research using this group will be announced shortly.

An independent evaluation of the panel was published on 23 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 451W. Copies of the evaluation were placed in the Library of the House. The evaluation report concluded that the Panel had

> proved its worth as a vehicle to promote greater understanding, within local and national government, of public views, and of the need to obtain these views, and that the Panel has proved a valuable asset.

The recommendations arising from the evaluation are in the course of being implemented.

Government Annual Report

Mr. Evans: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many copies of the Government Annual Report have been *(a)* sold at full price and *(b)* given away free of charge, to date. [125745]

Marjorie Mowlam: Over 10,000 copies of the Government Annual Report 1998–99 have been bought by members of the public at full price. No figures are kept for copies requested by and supplied to members of the public from Departments or otherwise given away without charge.

Government IT Projects

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what is her estimate of the total cost to public funds of the work of the Steering Committee and Review Team engaged upon the review of major Government IT projects. [126417]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The estimated total cost to the public fund of the review of Government IT projects is £290,000.

Expenditure in financial year 1999–2000 was £189,000 and in financial year 2000–01 it was £101,000.

Volunteering (Civil Service)

Dr. Desmond Turner: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what steps she will take to promote volunteering among civil service employees during the International Year of Volunteering 2001. [126880]

Mr. Stringer: Following on from the Prime Minister's recent initiative to promote voluntary activity in the community, the Cabinet Office has written recently to all Departments and agencies encouraging them to allow and support their staff to undertake voluntary work through the provision of designated paid leave for that purpose. We will continue to promote this initiative throughout the year and into 2001. We are currently in consultation with colleagues in other Departments over what we intend to do specifically during the International Year of Volunteering.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many written parliamentary questions were tabled to her Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000; and how many of them have not received substantive answers, with disproportionate cost cited as the reason. [127336]

Mr. Stringer: Between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000, 238 written questions were tabled to my Department, of which two were replied to by stating that the information was not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. A further 13 questions received partial answers, with disproportionate cost cited as the reason why a complete answer could not be given.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

LEA Funding

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the value was of additional support to schools in *(a)* Westminster city council area and *(b)* the Royal boroughs of Kensington and Chelsea additional to revenue support grant since 1997 in respect of *(a)* the School Standards Fund, *(b)* section 11/ethnic minority achievement grant, *(c)* Excellence in Cities *(d)* education action zone and *(e)* other categories. [125417]

Ms Estelle Morris: The additional support provided for schools is contained in the table:

£

	Westminster	*Kensington and Chelsea*
Standards Fund (Main)[1]		
1997–98	865,543	609,905
1998–99	1,697,559	977,941
1999–2000	5,606,292	3,190,611
2000–01	7,317,157	[2]3,585,179
Section 11 (Home Office)		
1997–98	1,363,058	739,615
1998–99	1,398,498	758,845
Education Action Zones		
2000–01	800	0
Special Grants[3]		
2000–01	*818,000*	*494,000*

[1] Includes Excellence in Cities and Ethnic Minority Achievement 1999–2000 to 2000–01.
[2] Offered £4.1 million initially 2000–01.
[3] Including School Budget Support and School Standards Grants

Notes:
1. NDS Capital excluded from figures.
2. Standards Fund grants include the local authority contribution, where required.

School Playing Fields

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many sales of school playing fields he has *(a)* approved and *(b)* rejected in each month since October 1998; [125928]

(2) what the acreage is of the school playing fields whose disposal he has *(a)* approved and *(b)* rejected in each month since October 1998; [125929]

(3) what has been the total sale value of school playing fields whose disposal he has *(a)* approved and *(b)* rejected in each month since October 1998. [125930]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 15 June 2000]:* Before October 1998, there was no regulation of the sale of school playing fields whatever. If a local authority wanted to sell a school playing field, there was nothing to stop it and it could spend the proceeds as it wished.

To put a stop to the indiscriminate sale of school playing fields, the Government introduced Section 77 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998. Section 77 requires a local authority, or the governing body of a maintained school, to obtain the Secretary of State's consent before disposing, or changing the use, of any school playing field. Local authorities are aware of the tough criteria against which their applications are considered and only put forward those applications they are confident will meet the criteria. The table shows the requested information.

Sale of school sports pitches approved under Section 77 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 since 1 October 1998

	Number of sales		*Area (m^2)*		*Total sale value (£)*	
	Approved	*Rejected*	*Approved*	*Rejected*	*Approved*	*Rejected*
1998						
October	1	—	16,000	—	2,414,000	—
November	2	—	71,665	—	2,250,000	—
December	4	—	51,780	—	1,283,000	—
1999						
January	2	—	75,900	—	—[1]	—
February	6	—	139,180	—	12,645,000	—
March	6	—	171,100	—	6,670,000	—
April	10	—	177,590	—	6,122,000	—
May	7	—	93,450	—	13,430,000	—
June	2	2	51,300	51,500	90,000	516,000
July	2	—	82,500	—	5,160,000	—
August	1	—	33,000	—	32,600	—
September	1	—	9,000	—	650,000	—
October	2	—	36,500	—	1,280,000	—
November	2	—	56,800	—	2,180,000	—
December	3	—	27,110	—	1,320,000	—
2000						
January	2	—	14,360	—	806,500	—
February	1	—	48,300	—	3,100,000	—
March	1	—	5,880	—	150,000	—
April	—	—	—	—	—	—
May	4	—	41,780	—	12,520,000	—
June	2	—	28,170	—	1,200,000	—

[1] Not known

Notes:

1. All sale proceeds are used to provide new or improved sports or education facilities at maintained schools.
2. 40 per cent. of applications are in respect of sports pitches at closed or closing schools.
3. In 66 per cent. of cases at operating schools, the sale proceeds have been used to provide new or enhanced sports facilities, including sports halls, all-weather pitches or improved grass sports pitches.

Standards Fund

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list *(a)* the education authorities which did not accept Standards Fund grants available through the provision of matching funding in each of the last two years and *(b)* the amount of grant involved in each case; and how the undistributed funds were used. [126319]

Ms Estelle Morris: The tables show the sums initially surrendered for the main Standards Fund programme. We cannot separately identify where this was due to difficulty in finding match funding. Most authorities accepted allocations in full in both years. The requirement for authorities to contribute to the 2000–01 Standards Fund of over £1.6 billion supported expenditure was allowed for in the 5.4 per cent. increase in education Standard Spending Assessment for 2000–01. Surrendered sums are re-used in full for supporting education priorities, mainly within the Standards Fund programme.

Standards Fund

£

Local education authority	*Initial DfEE grant*
2000–01 surrendered allocations	
302 Barnet	1,972,471
370 Barnsley	183,866
820 Bedfordshire	365,107
867 Bracknell Forest	50,000
304 Brent	1,084,292
846 Brighton and Hove	114,685
305 Bromley	56,666
351 Bury	200,256
875 Cheshire	1,379,056
801 City of Bristol	473,857
909 Cumbria	469,808
841 Darlington	36,739
878 Devon	1,284,058
835 Dorset	79,418
332 Dudley	66,178
840 Durham	167,038
811 East Riding of Yorkshire	73,411
308 Enfield	200,610
916 Gloucestershire	163,112
850 Hampshire	303,731
207 Kensington and Chelsea	319,145

Standards Fund

£

Local education authority	*Initial DfEE grant*
810 Kingston-upon-Hull	24,500
314 Kingston upon Thames	169,515
856 Leicester	424,956
855 Leicestershire	325,750
821 Luton	37,571
315 Merton	40,055
806 Middlesbrough	150,216
391 Newcastle upon Tyne	700,740
926 Norfolk	120,006
802 North Somerset	43,118
928 Northamptonshire	755,049
929 Northumberland	1,407,923
892 Nottingham City	78,910
891 Nottinghamshire	637,089
353 Oldham	100,000
874 Peterborough	270,035
879 Plymouth	127,434
870 Reading	85,832
807 Redcar and Cleveland	41,956
354 Rochdale	274,135
857 Rutland	201,567
333 Sandwell	1,252,750
343 Sefton	15,319
893 Shropshire	424,384
393 South Tyneside	36,740
342 St. Helens	303,158
356 Stockport	52,500
935 Suffolk	390,455
936 Surrey	245,527
880 Torbay	59,090
358 Trafford	128,804
937 Warwickshire	50,000
869 West Berkshire	250,000
359 Wigan	214,004
865 Wiltshire	145,555
872 Wokingham	95,000
816 York	6,790
Total	18,729,923

Standards Fund

£

Local education authority	*DfEE grant*
1999–2000 surrendered allocations	
Barnsley	6,000
Brent	476,538
Coventry	101,580
Devon	47,260
East Riding of Yorkshire	87,750
Greenwich	25,000
Hillingdon	48,450
Manchester	18,750
Newcastle	31,792
North Lincolnshire	18,705
North Somerset	32,831
Northumberland	19,689
Richmond on Thames	20,000
Salford	16,004
Solihull	10,000
Southampton	34,000
South Tyneside	9,000
Suffolk	374,665
Trafford	20,000
Wandsworth	14,644
Warrington	5,500
Total	1,418,156

Notes:

1. Adjustments to 2000–01 are continuing. Once complete, they will result in reductions to the total allocations initially surrendered.
2. Reasons given for the surrender by authorities include claim of difficulty with matching funding.

School Instructors

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance he gives to local education authorities on ensuring that instructors in maintained secondary schools have the same basic numeracy and literacy skills as those with qualified teacher status; and if he will make a statement. [126783]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Education (Teachers' Qualifications and Health Standards) (England) Regulations 1999 provide that it is for governing bodies acting with the consent of local education authorities to satisfy themselves as to the qualifications and experience of prospective instructors. This would include satisfying themselves as necessary that instructors whom they wish to employ have the requisite literacy and numeracy skills.

Unit Costs

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the average cost of educating *(a)* a primary and *(b)* a secondary school pupil in (i) 1970, (ii) 1980, (iii) 1990 and (iv) 1999; and what was the cost of educating a pupil excluded from school in each of those years. [126785]

Ms Estelle Morris: Unit costs based on net institutional expenditure for primary and secondary pupils in English maintained schools for the financial years 1979–80, 1989–90 and 1998–99 are set out in the following table. Figures on the same basis for 1969–70 are not readily available. Information about the cost of educating pupils excluded from school is not collected centrally.

	Primary	*Secondary*
1979–80	430	610
1989–90	1,210	1,860
1998–99	1,882	2,450

Under this Government, funding per pupil has increased by over £300 per pupil. In this year alone it has risen by £180. And that does not even include capital expenditure. Under the last Government, spending per pupil fell by £60 in real terms between 1994–95 and 1997–98.

Teachers (Absence and Resignations)

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many teachers resigned from teaching in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980, *(c)* 1990 and *(d)* 1999 citing stress-related reasons; [126786]

(2) what the most frequently cited reasons were for teacher absence giving rise to the need for supply teachers in each of the last five years; [126788]

(3) how many teaching days were lost at schools in England and Wales owing to absence of teachers because of stress-related illness in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980, *(c)* 1990 and *(d)* 1999. [126787]

Ms Estelle Morris: This information is not held centrally.

Teacher Training

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the total level of Government funding the current financial year for higher education institutions to support the training of teachers on PGCE courses in a subsidiary subject; and if he will make a statement. [126965]

Ms Estelle Morris: There is no separately identified funding for subsidiary subjects within initial teacher training (ITT) courses. The level of funding for individual courses, which varies between primary and secondary and between individual secondary subjects, depends only on the main subject of study. In 1999–2000 public expenditure to higher education institutions in England for secondary Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses was some £58.6 million, of which £46.5 million was distributed by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) and £12.1 million paid through LEAs to cover tuition fees.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to offer financial support to higher education institutions that train teachers in a subsidiary subject; and if he will make a statement. [126964]

Ms Estelle Morris: Government funding covers all aspects of initial teacher training (ITT) courses. The level depends on the main subject of study. There are no plans to include any subsidiary subjects that providers might offer in determining the level of funding ITT providers receive. The Government pay the fees for home and European Union students on Post Graduate Certificate in Education courses irrespective of their subject of study.

Special Educational Needs

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action his Department has taken to help LEAs increase the percentage of statements of special educational needs issued within 18 weeks of application; and which LEAs have received specific support on this matter. [127141]

Jacqui Smith: In 1998, my Department provided good practice guidance to LEAs which were not producing at least 60 per cent. of their draft statements within 18 weeks. We have followed this up by asking for evidence of improved performance, and we are currently considering what action to take in relation to continuing poor performers as identified in the Audit Commission's performance indicators for 1998–99, the most recent available. We will continue to keep LEA performance in this area under review. It is encouraging to note that the Audit Commission's figures show a continuing improvement, with English councils overall preparing 67 per cent. of draft statements within 18 weeks in 1998–99, compared to 54 per cent. in 1997–98 and 48 per cent. in 1996–97.

School Repairs

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for *(a)* England and *(b)* each local education authority, the number and value of funding bids made to his Department in each financial year since 1995–96 for the repair of school buildings. [126846]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* The following table shows the number and value of bids made under the New Deal for Schools programme. There was no equivalent programme prior to 1997–98.

New Deal for Schools Programme—Bid Information

	NDS 1		*NDS 2*		*NDS 3*	
LEA name	*Number of projects*	*NDS bid*	*Number of projects*	*NDS bid*	*Number of projects*	*NDS bid*
England	1,138	143,673,836	2,407	761,231,849	6,753	1,427,768,901
Barking and Dagenham	5	210,520	19	1,548,000	101	21,097,222
Barnet	10	370,300	6	1,610,071	18	5,967,682
Barnsley	1	500,000	2	2,076,000	24	7,639,233
Bath and North East Somerset	4	1,032,300	11	1,078,027	43	5,290,678
Bedfordshire	6	1,950,190	1	1,382,000	11	4,698,729
Bexley	10	572,000	22	984,375	78	3,228,916
Birmingham	8	1,622,306	279	2,771,700	24	16,760,924
Blackburn with Darwen	—	0	21	832,939	35	7,818,980
Blackpool	—	0	25	667,395	206	8,855,600
Bolton	3	647,925	8	1,497,039	19	17,725,984
Bournemouth	3	418,000	4	855,091	20	5,859,788
Bracknell Forest	—	0	1	745,500	25	6,100,413
Bradford	18	1,135,308	10	1,895,300	37	27,026,971
Brent	7	807,975	2	1,321,900	30	13,313,899
Brighton and Hove	1	1,588,000	9	1,065,431	27	4,637,498
Bristol, City of	9	619,515	20	12,286,387	87	9,471,973
Bromley	18	304,700	7	582,700	38	3,357,485
Buckinghamshire	3	564,365	18	1,081,883	153	13,138,480
Bury	3	343,000	26	650,000	44	2,081,550
Calderdale	2	842,970	3	2,969,980	19	3,241,146
Cambridgeshire	5	598,000	17	2,375,468	119	24,241,315
Camden	8	220,406	8	620,517	46	5,044,598
Cheshire	10	971,903	6	1,566,890	37	9,684,187
Cornwall	2	1,018,781	29	1,577,016	148	11,075,669
Coventry	3	668,534	20	409,926	58	11,103,475
Croydon	26	2,293,503	9	2,227,540	54	17,079,880
Cumbria	9	655,000	8	1,632,666	31	3,115,942
Darlington	8	320,340	4	185,775	37	5,506,754

New Deal for Schools Programme—Bid Information

	NDS 1		NDS 2		NDS 3	
LEA name	*Number of projects*	*NDS bid*	*Number of projects*	*NDS bid*	*Number of projects*	*NDS bid*
Derby, City of	5	555,848	12	1,149,812	39	5,727,180
Derbyshire	10	1,125,000	11	2,677,488	16	11,834,372
Devon	7	2,047,797	21	3,517,200	40	12,146,776
Doncaster	5	419,000	11	446,900	31	9,250,567
Dorset	12	1,637,808	17	2,645,000	39	18,231,100
Dudley	6	278,432	18	66,739,238	47	30,513,213
Durham	14	930,000	20	2,068,052	58	7,535,852
Ealing	7	554,111	5	1,036,000	19	5,265,197
East Riding of Yorkshire	74	1,187,400	3	1,508,680	26	15,186,328
East Sussex	24	2,475,119	5	2,088,000	13	5,271,311
Enfield	9	369,774	8	23,455,000	30	8,124,930
Essex	10	1,479,192	11	2,556,250	52	12,771,860
Gateshead	5	352,000	3	1,187,000	23	8,683,450
Gloucestershire	20	1,618,041	8	4,000,210	50	6,843,046
Greenwich	7	306,850	5	614,725	44	23,149,769
Hackney	—	0	2	575,000	45	6,071,504
Halton	—	0	10	723,500	21	4,481,894
Hammersmith and Fulham	2	300,000	3	870,000	36	7,601,901
Hampshire	21	7,232,201	44	27,277,610	128	20,070,199
Haringey	4	556,000	14	2,125,160	53	7,861,247
Harrow	3	188,500	9	1,057,300	26	7,419,442
Hartlepool	6	412,500	7	426,728	12	2,822,244
Havering	6	446,382	3	333,000	66	5,225,870
Herefordshire	15	810,439	9	1,849,708	101	7,664,268
Hertfordshire	2	1,529,000	22	3,461,399	47	21,453,011
Hillingdon	39	1,341,306	7	1,392,630	45	4,683,851
Hounslow	33	5,232,395	10	1,506,644	149	9,946,717
Isle of Wight	10	232,075	44	5,301,971	12	4,486,077
Isles of Scilly	—	0	1	52,550	3	57,596
Islington	2	395,700	8	1,248,100	30	7,795,865
Kensington and Chelsea	1	244,000	5	550,563	13	1,108,330
Kent	64	3,342,344	6	7,064,000	52	34,169,038
Kingston upon Hull, City of	1	590,000	3	503,195	38	10,099,179
Kingston upon Thames	2	724,000	2	767,000	56	4,350,254
Kirklees	7	660,045	21	768,528	47	5,379,495
Knowsley	4	1,894,130	24	8,441,650	9	5,601,137
Lambeth	3	361,475	6	2,291,688	41	13,508,349
Lancashire	6	2,105,570	7	3,507,489	36	13,350,490
Leeds	5	1,402,380	18	69,620,431	38	14,943,428
Leicester, City of	5	589,000	51	48,287,830	61	9,961,677
Leicestershire	26	795,216	59	7,177,112	96	14,221,370
Lewisham	5	1,105,582	7	3,600,157	18	26,779,014
Lincolnshire	16	1,545,614	15	1,259,945	45	8,359,932
Liverpool	17	6,977,431	4	4,016,000	15	19,410,197
London, City of	0	0	0	0	0	0
Luton	2	345,000	25	397,000	31	5,589,822
Manchester	6	1,447,600	4	2,829,300	35	13,567,400
Medway	—	0	13	1,218,134	34	4,641,936
Merton	1	1,828,547	7	1,288,311	17	7,562,704
Middlesbrough	2	300,000	4	1,512,944	26	3,444,881
Milton Keynes	7	271,000	12	926,520	15	2,182,980
Newcastle upon Tyne	7	611,000	4	8,952,859	15	8,922,816
Newham	3	482,643	9	1,306,430	29	6,435,236
Norfolk	2	1,482,000	7	2,696,680	46	29,633,848
North East Lincolnshire	2	328,437	14	1,471,655	35	8,129,485
North Lincolnshire	1	143,260	10	1,320,263	49	11,603,862
North Somerset	1	2,591,000	4	1,617,238	7	4,301,910
North Tyneside	2	406,000	9	837,775	64	3,626,255
North Yorkshire	3	962,000	5	7,374,000	58	56,602,284
Northamptonshire	21	1,165,050	60	6,961,690	77	10,538,379
Northumberland	21	541,500	12	2,022,500	48	14,313,550
Nottingham, City of	—	0	8	2,619,700	69	19,920,230
Nottinghamshire	4	3,533,651	38	14,643,648	42	22,630,536
Oldham	14	784,323	6	2,591,367	36	9,455,699
Oxfordshire	1	1,030,000	66	41,652,522	111	12,100,128
Peterborough, City of	—	0	15	1,255,500	84	9,126,958
Plymouth, City of	—	0	14	1,641,168	16	3,768,519
Poole	3	241,000	3	905,310	15	2,415,718
Portsmouth	3	1,901,000	24	740,800	75	10,017,757
Reading	—	0	1	2,279,825	14	2,792,418

New Deal for Schools Programme—Bid Information

LEA name	NDS 1 Number of projects	NDS 1 NDS bid	NDS 2 Number of projects	NDS 2 NDS bid	NDS 3 Number of projects	NDS 3 NDS bid
Redbridge	2	335,000	13	981,750	44	3,766,960
Redcar and Cleveland	3	337,210	7	941,625	30	11,510,296
Richmond upon Thames	2	317,100	9	218,500	18	2,163,900
Rochdale	2	1,460,130	4	1,962,000	15	3,297,824
Rotherham	3	817,000	6	2,183,864	21	18,139,193
Rutland	2	340,450	9	1,127,200	47	4,779,155
Salford	4	2,013,155	34	23,344,854	50	7,643,480
Sandwell	5	914,125	6	16,563,955	63	12,807,740
Sefton	10	836,000	8	442,204	199	20,032,123
Sheffield	2	1,273,000	1	4,862,000	21	14,328,791
Shropshire	3	1,277,908	19	1,184,252	52	7,615,357
Slough	—	0	13	384,528	40	6,554,768
Solihull	6	2,931,445	1	1,525,780	115	5,317,434
Somerset	5	620,663	9	2,958,500	26	8,253,903
South Gloucestershire	2	412,270	9	1,507,180	19	6,039,642
South Tyneside	2	945,000	55	16,519,322	19	5,032,435
Southampton	3	711,000	24	724,414	90	7,542,431
Southend on Sea	—	0	4	598,117	46	2,007,530
Southwark	9	381,747	2	770,350	1	280,000
St. Helens	2	663,000	1	1,369,000	5	4,890,400
Staffordshire	16	8,847,122	269	82,143,638	145	14,550,466
Stockport	22	979,429	13	2,173,544	70	8,274,324
Stockton on Tees	3	697,000	15	371,687	31	8,006,946
Stoke on Trent	2	900,000	3	4,414,739	12	3,362,269
Suffolk	2	1,065,000	15	1,578,900	25	4,457,500
Sunderland	2	719,000	2	960,000	36	11,320,320
Surrey	13	1,406,380	33	2,340,108	82	7,547,268
Sutton	6	894,510	4	515,500	72	2,268,003
Swindon	11	1,292,000	4	219,250	11	4,117,373
Tameside	5	462,050	4	2,637,550	38	6,262,009
Telford and Wrekin	—	0	5	675,200	40	5,861,218
Thurrock	—	0	8	507,300	22	1,613,942
Torbay	—	0	14	20,605,047	27	2,755,011
Tower Hamlets	3	928,490	5	21,448,700	25	5,110,392
Trafford	3	425,000	6	1,138,550	22	13,948,425
Wakefield	12	600,225	4	1,923,650	21	8,364,798
Walsall	8	682,250	10	1,805,100	61	11,112,860
Waltham Forest	2	886,272	3	19,563,222	12	7,148,533
Wandsworth	4	260,690	5	865,155	10	3,148,794
Warrington	—	0	26	1,081,554	149	8,748,072
Warwickshire	2	1,177,000	3	2,591,000	17	13,018,883
West Berkshire	1	1,092,650	13	1,359,491	16	2,716,697
West Sussex	125	3,021,104	8	2,130,522	42	6,818,827
Westminster, City of	1	312,800	7	999,371	52	8,209,792
Wigan	3	720,914	3	2,619,300	19	8,755,708
Wiltshire	7	1,541,320	7	1,007,615	47	10,664,442
Windsor and Maidenhead	—	0	8	635,300	21	3,780,690
Wirral	2	500,000	21	1,901,900	41	14,537,717
Wokingham	—	0	3	1,508,050	44	9,297,570
Wolverhampton	7	475,803	29	760,948	48	5,636,120
Worcestershire	—	0	73	16,582,464	80	11,690,306
York, City of	1	180,115	2	691,000	11	5,751,458

LEA name	NDS 4 Number of projects	NDS 4 NDS bid	All NDS Number of projects	All NDS NDS Bid
England	4,963	1,578,330,159	15,261	3,911,004,745
Barking and Dagenham	94	15,240,538	219	38,096,280
Barnet	31	21,453,457	65	29,401,510
Barnsley	31	10,799,803	58	21,015,036
Bathand North East Somerset	23	3,918,505	81	11,319,510
Bedfordshire	16	3,103,705	34	11,134,624
Bexley	61	5,286,907	171	10,072,198
Birmingham	62	22,131,407	373	43,286,337
Blackburn with Darwen	47	6,253,074	103	14,904,994
Blackpool	29	4,597,791	260	14,120,786

LEA name	NDS 4 Number of projects	NDS 4 NDS bid	All NDS Number of projects	All NDS NDS Bid
Bolton	12	13,072,477	42	32,943,425
Bournemouth	21	10,955,817	48	18,088,696
Bracknell Forest	9	2,036,643	35	8,882,556
Bradford	51	17,363,269	116	47,420,848
Brent	20	16,875,729	59	32,319,503
Brighton and Hove	12	2,989,677	49	10,280,606
Bristol, City of	15	7,659,401	131	30,037,276
Bromley	9	4,478,214	72	8,723,099
Buckinghamshire	56	9,626,414	230	24,411,142
Bury	58	2,452,095	131	5,526,645
Calderdale	32	4,447,833	56	11,501,929
Cambridgeshire	111	17,746,575	252	44,961,358
Camden	15	1,974,604	77	7,860,126
Cheshire	88	22,968,453	141	35,191,433
Cornwall	20	7,522,815	199	21,194,281
Coventry	48	15,356,820	129	27,538,755
Croydon	29	6,617,510	118	28,218,433
Cumbria	41	3,824,576	89	9,228,184
Darlington	29	11,963,599	78	17,976,468
Derby, City of	19	2,972,188	75	10,405,028
Derbyshire	23	11,020,239	60	26,657,099
Devon	48	23,214,431	116	40,926,204
Doncaster	31	19,800,876	78	29,917,343
Dorset	20	13,834,750	88	36,348,658
Dudley	16	9,476,399	87	107,007,282
Durham	47	6,315,317	139	16,849,221
Ealing	12	3,507,648	43	10,362,956
East Riding of Yorkshire	18	10,986,364	121	28,868,772
East Sussex	18	4,826,272	60	14,660,702
Enfield	49	16,606,730	96	48,556,434
Essex	57	30,670,861	130	47,478,163
Gateshead	49	8,061,963	80	18,284,413
Gloucestershire	27	9,581,515	105	22,042,812
Greenwich	28	10,492,818	84	34,564,162
Hackney	72	12,833,120	119	19,479,624
Halton	34	5,167,568	65	10,372,962
Hammersmith and Fulham	41	9,595,337	82	18,367,238
Hampshire	98	20,600,587	291	75,180,597
Haringey	38	5,980,341	109	16,522,748
Harrow	29	8,607,514	67	17,272,756
Hartlepool	21	4,032,982	46	7,694,454
Havering	78	11,476,617	153	17,481,869
Herefordshire	31	5,630,030	156	15,954,445
Hertfordshire	25	12,937,434	96	39,380,844
Hillingdon	12	4,090,842	103	11,508,629
Hounslow	82	16,846,310	274	33,532,066
Isle of Wight	18	5,139,669	84	15,159,792
Isles of Scilly	5	55,326	9	165,472
Islington	19	11,231,566	59	20,671,231
Kensington and Chelsea	8	1,103,275	27	3,006,168
Kent	20	15,840,643	142	60,416,025
Kingston upon Hull, City of	31	9,855,426	73	21,047,800
Kingston upon Thames	17	3,799,051	77	9,640,305
Kirklees	51	12,470,646	126	19,278,714
Knowsley	9	3,857,597	46	19,794,514
Lambeth	30	10,417,819	80	26,579,331
Lancashire	28	16,362,366	77	35,325,915
Leeds	30	14,692,588	91	100,658,827
Leicester, City of	10	9,774,886	127	68,613,393
Leicestershire	80	15,100,892	261	37,294,590
Lewisham	35	29,074,518	65	60,559,271
Lincolnshire	26	4,770,890	102	15,936,381
Liverpool	10	33,102,065	46	63,505,693
London, City of	0	0	0	0
Luton	9	2,275,363	67	8,607,185
Manchester	24	14,643,124	69	32,487,424
Medway	20	4,088,953	67	9,949,023
Merton	25	17,059,638	50	27,739,200
Middlesbrough	19	4,698,723	51	9,956,548
Milton Keynes	20	4,816,413	54	8,196,913
Newcastle upon Tyne	14	47,077,611	40	65,564,286

LEA name	NDS 4 Number of projects	NDS 4 NDS bid	All NDS Number of projects	All NDS NDS Bid
Newham	30	4,984,823	71	13,209,132
Norfolk	29	39,751,229	84	73,563,757
North East Lincolnshire	15	8,193,255	66	18,122,832
North Lincolnshire	38	13,756,693	98	26,824,078
North Somerset	15	8,384,494	27	16,894,642
North Tyneside	9	2,956,129	84	7,826,159
North Yorkshire	27	10,761,617	93	75,699,901
Northamptonshire	77	18,365,633	235	37,030,752
Northumberland	36	15,286,701	117	32,164,251
Nottingham, City of	22	6,148,460	99	28,688,390
Nottinghamshire	63	61,138,652	147	101,946,487
Oldham	43	8,863,589	99	21,694,978
Oxfordshire	28	12,978,067	206	67,760,717
Peterborough, City of	68	15,365,282	167	25,747,740
Plymouth, City of	17	3,706,030	47	9,115,717
Poole	12	4,823,309	33	8,385,337
Portsmouth	37	10,836,597	139	23,496,154
Reading	20	7,217,449	35	12,289,692
Redbridge	44	4,915,155	103	9,998,865
Redcar and Cleveland	21	9,774,307	61	22,563,438
Richmond upon Thames	21	2,306,900	50	5,006,400
Rochdale	20	7,135,981	41	13,855,935
Rotherham	5	35,694,167	35	56,834,224
Rutland	36	6,409,153	94	12,655,958
Salford	38	4,238,528	126	37,240,017
Sandwell	66	15,322,489	140	45,608,309
Sefton	122	15,562,099	339	36,872,426
Sheffield	16	9,055,560	40	29,519,351
Shropshire	31	3,616,268	105	13,693,785
Slough	10	4,466,849	63	11,406,145
Solihull	10	3,314,400	132	13,089,059
Somerset	25	6,808,108	65	18,641,174
South Gloucestershire	34	14,395,265	64	22,354,357
South Tyneside	18	3,734,149	94	26,230,906
Southampton	70	5,275,710	187	14,253,555
Southend on Sea	27	7,512,240	77	10,117,887
Southwark	21	13,315,218	33	14,747,315
St. Helens	8	4,413,355	16	11,335,755
Staffordshire	53	8,994,369	483	114,535,595
Stockport	21	9,629,519	126	21,056,816
Stockton on Tees	17	5,303,280	66	14,378,913
Stoke on Trent	10	4,656,877	27	13,333,885
Suffolk	56	12,580,000	98	19,681,400
Sunderland	9	5,164,736	49	18,164,056
Surrey	99	12,878,258	227	24,172,014
Sutton	44	1,734,470	126	5,412,483
Swindon	50	15,237,262	76	20,865,885
Tameside	30	10,954,379	77	20,319,988
Telford and Wrekin	47	13,044,261	92	19,580,679
Thurrock	36	1,800,063	66	3,921,305
Torbay	56	6,462,291	97	29,822,349
Tower Hamlets	15	9,060,712	48	36,548,294
Trafford	38	12,120,431	69	27,632,406
Wakefield	8	7,804,550	45	18,693,223
Walsall	48	13,670,987	127	27,271,197
Waltham Forest	11	2,698,057	28	30,296,084
Wandsworth	6	4,650,522	25	8,925,161
Warrington	44	6,302,252	219	16,131,878
Warwickshire	23	13,011,898	45	29,798,781
West Berkshire	6	1,200,308	36	6,369,146
West Sussex	35	19,467,210	210	31,437,663
Westminster, City of	48	5,162,836	108	14,684,799
Wigan	20	7,554,932	45	19,650,854
Wiltshire	51	14,822,736	112	28,036,113
Windsor and Maidenhead	10	1,581,098	39	5,997,088
Wirral	32	23,161,690	96	40,101,307
Wokingham	25	4,374,055	72	15,179,675
Wolverhampton	35	7,104,625	119	13,977,496
Worcestershire	90	11,717,681	243	39,990,451
York, City of	10	10,446,099	24	17,068,672

Early Years Education

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* each local education authority, the number of three-year-olds with free early years education places providing five or more session of education per week in (i) 1979, (ii) 1990 and (iii) each year since 1992. [126845]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* The information is not available in the form requested. Up to September 1999, 'free' places for three-year-olds were only available in maintained nursery and primary schools funded by local education authorities from their own budgets. Since September 1999 specific funding by the Government for three-year-olds has been introduced and is available to both maintained and private, voluntary and independent providers via the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships. From summer 2000 this extra funding will be available in all local authority areas.

The available information on the numbers of three-year-olds in early-years provision for England and in each local education authority is contained in tables, copies of which have been placed in the Libraries. Table 1 gives the number of children in free early-years education places from 1996 to 2000. Table 2 shows the number of new funded places for three-year-olds being created in all sectors over the next year, including newly projected figures for summer 2000, autumn 2000 and spring 2001.

The new places this year are supported by £100 million of funding. Half of all three-year-olds will have access to a free place by spring 2001, and the Government are well on track to meet the 2002 target of expanding overall nursery provision to 66 per cent. of three-year-olds.

For information on three-year-olds with free early years places in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, I refer the hon. Member to the Ministers in the Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland Executives respectively.

Paddy Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the number of free places available in early years education for three-year-olds in each year from 1996–97 to 2000–01, in each county and local eduction authority; and if he will make a statement. [126583]

Ms Hodge: The information is not available in the form requested. Up to September 1999, 'free' places for three-year-olds were only available in maintained nursery and primary schools funded by local education authorities from their own budgets. Since September 1999 specific funding by the Government for three-year-olds has been introduced and is available to both maintained and private, voluntary and independent providers via the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships. From summer 2000 this extra funding will be available in all local authority areas.

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Employment Action Plan

Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will place copies of the United Kingdom's Employment Action Plan in the Library. [127788]

Ms Jowell: I have today placed in the Library copies of the UK Employment Action Plan, which sets out the Government's policies for implementing the 2000 Employment Guidelines agreed at the European Council held in Helsinki in December 1999. The Plan contains the latest information on policies for employment and employability, encouraging entrepreneurship and labour market adaptability, lifelong learning and equal opportunities.

Child Care

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the relationship between the costs of child care in London and the child care component of the Working Families Tax Credit. [127004]

Dawn Primarolo: I have been asked to reply.

The child care tax credit within the Working Families Tax Credit is designed to help working families who incur eligible child care costs by providing a credit worth 70 per cent. of eligible child care costs of a maximum of £100 for families with one child and £150 for families with two or more children. Like all the other elements of the Working Families Tax Credit it is available at the same rates throughout the UK for to all families who qualify.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

New Millennium Experience Company

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the payment of the additional aid to the New Millennium Experience Company has been authorised by the European Commission. [124133]

Mr. Chris Smith: No. The funding of the New Millennium Experience Company is not considered to be State Aid and therefore does not require notification to the European Commission.

Digital Television

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what proportion of homes in *(a)* Wales, *(b)* England and *(c)* Scotland receive digital television; and what his target is for increasing these figures. [126074]

Mr. Chris Smith: Most homes in Wales, England and Scotland are able to receive digital television through terrestrial, satellite or cable delivery platforms. The

Government's policy is that all viewers who receive analogue television should be able to receive the main free-to-air channels digitally before the analogue transmissions are fully switched to digital. At present, over 4 million people have subscribed to digital television.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what was the total cost to public funds of the recent visit of the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting to Las Vegas. [127307]

Janet Anderson: I visited Las Vegas as part of a wider visit to North America on official business as the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting. In Canada I represented the Government at the Banff International Television Festival, met the British Columbia Minister for Film to discuss current revisions to the film co-production Treaty between the UK and Canada, and undertook several engagements for the British Tourist Authority. In Nevada I made the Keynote Speech at the opening of the Annual Conference of the Institute of Travel and Tourism, had meetings with the Lt. Governor of Nevada, the Mayor of Las Vegas and with the Aladdin Project, the first major UK investment in the Las Vegas tourist industry. I attended 22 official engagements during my visit which was arranged jointly by my Department and the Foreign Office.

I will write to the hon. Member shortly with details of the costs of the visit.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Committees (Evidence)

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is his policy on *(a)* ministers and *(b)* officials from his Department giving evidence to committees of the Northern Ireland Assembly in relation to the impact of reserved matters on devolved policy areas. [126690]

Mr. Mandelson: The Government's approach on such matters is set out in Devolution Guidance Note 12 which is published by the Constitution Secretariat in the Cabinet Office.

It is available on the internet at:

www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/constitution/2000/devolution/guidance/dgn12.htm

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the occasions on which *(a)* ministers and *(b)* officials have been invited to give evidence to Northern Ireland Assembly committees; how many have been (i) accepted and (ii) refused, indicating the reasons for refusal; and what was the subject matter to be discussed in each case. [126691]

Mr. Mandelson: To date no NIO Ministers or officials have been invited to give evidence to Northern Ireland Assembly Committees.

TREASURY

Pensioners (Tax)

15. **Mr. Edward Davey:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many pensioners were sent a self-assessment tax form and were subsequently assessed as having no income tax liability in 1998–99. [125840]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave him on 5 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 81W.

Inflation Forecasts

16. **Mr. Michael Jabez Foster:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the inflation forecasts set out in the Red Book. [125841]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Latest RPIX inflation outturns are in line with the Budget forecast. The monetary policy framework set up by this Government is delivering low and stable inflation. It is because of this that interest rates are historically low—less than half the level seen in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Married Couples (Taxation)

17. **Mr. Leigh:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on taxation of married couples. [125842]

Dawn Primarolo: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has affirmed our commitment to the principle that the tax system should treat people as individuals, each entitled to their own personal allowance.

28. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received on the abolition of the married persons tax allowance; and if he will make a statement. [125854]

Dawn Primarolo: The Chancellor regularly receives representations on all aspects of the tax system.

We have introduced a package of reforms designed to make work pay better and focus resources on families with children. As part of the package, we have increased Child Benefit to record levels of £15 a week for the first child and £10 for subsequent children from April 2000, and it will rise further to £15.50 and £10.35 respectively from April 2001. We are increasing the Working Families Tax Credit by £4.35 a week from this month for children under 16. And in April 2001 we are introducing the Children's Tax Credit which will be worth up to £442, over twice as much as the old married couple's allowance which it replaces. By 2001, personal tax and benefit changes in this and previous Budgets will mean that 1.2 million children will be lifted out of poverty.

Landfill Tax

18. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions he has had with other Departments on the impact of the landfill tax on fly-tipping. [125843]

Mr. Timms: Treasury and Customs officials work closely together with those other departments that have policy interests on matters relating to waste disposal and

landfill tax. All evidence suggests that the majority of fly-tipping is by householders, who are not directly affected by the tax.

Hypothecated Taxation (NHS)

19. **Tony Wright:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he is undertaking studies on the role of hypothecated taxation as part of the Government's review of the NHS. [125844]

Mr. Andrew Smith: No such studies are being undertaken as part of the current review.

Corporation Tax

20. **Mr. Derek Twigg:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the level of UK corporation tax in *(a)* the current financial year and *(b)* in 1997. [125845]

Dawn Primarolo: Corporation tax rates in the UK are at their lowest ever levels. The main rate of corporation tax for the current year is 30 per cent., and the small companies' rate is 20 per cent. Since 1997, the Government have cut these rates from 33 per cent. and 23 per cent. respectively. In addition, a new starting rate of 10 per cent. was introduced from April 2000.

Climate Change Levy

21. **Mr. Brooke:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent representations he has received from businesses on the climate change levy. [125846]

Mr. Timms: The Government have developed climate change levy in an open and consultative way. Firstly through the work of Lord Marshall's Task Force and then through the extensive consultation exercises which followed the announcement of the levy in Budget 99. More recently the Government have consulted on the draft legislation underpinning the levy, on the support for energy efficiency measures under the levy package, and on the definition of "good quality" Combined Heat and Power plant.

During this process, the Government have received many representations from business and other interested parties and these views have helped to refine the design of the levy.

Working Families Tax Credit

22. **Mr. Russell Brown:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the impact of the changes to the Working Families Tax Credit announced in the Budget. [125847]

Dawn Primarolo: The impact of the changes to the Working Families Tax Credit, and the increase of the national minimum wage from October 2000 to £3.70 per hour announced in the Budget, will guarantee a family with children, with someone working at least 35 hours a week, a minimum income of £208 a week from October 2000 and £214 from April 2001. These, together with other measures the Chancellor announced in Budget 2000, will lift 1.2 million of the children out of poverty this Parliament.

32. **Mr. Ernie Ross:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the effect on family incomes of the changes to the Working Families Tax Credit he announced in his Budget. [125858]

Dawn Primarolo: The introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, together with other measures announced in the Budget, means that from October 2000 the minimum income guarantee for a family with children and someone working at least 35 hours a week will be £208 a week. This figure will rise to £214 a week from April 2001. These measures, together with the other measures the Chancellor announced in Budget 2000 will lift 1.2 million children out of poverty this Parliament.

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the cost to public funds of the Working Families Tax Credit advertising campaign in *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01. [126179]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* The total cost of the Working Families Tax Credit advertising campaign in 1999–2000 was £13.8 million. To date, the cost for 2000–01 has been £2 million.

The freephone response line and the Tax Credits Office helpline have both performed extremely well and have now received over 3 million calls since September 1999.

Drugs Seizures

23. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the value of drugs originating in South American countries seized by Customs and Excise in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [125848]

Dawn Primarolo: Customs do not have a comprehensive record of the origin of all drugs seized. Evidence shows cocaine is the drug most frequently seized from South America and that most of the cocaine seized by Customs is from there. In 1999, the estimated value at street price of Customs cocaine seizures amounted to over £250 million.

ECOFIN

24. **Sir David Madel:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many meetings of ECOFIN there have been since 2 May 1997; and how many he has attended. [125849]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Since 12 May 1997, there have been 32 meetings of the Economic and Finance Council of Ministers, of which the Chancellor of the Exchequer has attended 26. On other occasions Treasury Ministers and officials have represented the Government.

Venture Capital

25. **Mrs. Curtis-Thomas:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the increase in the availability of venture capital in the United Kingdom from 1997 to 2000. [125850]

Mr. Timms: According to statistics published by the British Venture Capital Association, the amount of venture capital invested in the United Kingdom increased from £3,066 million in 1997 to £6,169 million in 1999, the latest year for which data are available. The fastest growth sector was investment in management buy-outs

and buy-ins, which now account for around three quarters of total venture investment in the UK. Start-up and other early stage investments grew strongly, but still account for only some 6 per cent. of total venture investment in the UK. The Government are concerned to improve the availability of small scale and early stage venture capital in the UK, as well as addressing access across the UK's regions and across technology sectors. To this end, the Department of Trade and Industry, through the Small Business Service and a new Small Business Investment Taskforce, is working to stimulate the creation of new public-private partnerships, within the framework of a new £1 billion target "umbrella" fund, to increase the supply of small scale venture capital. To better understand the factors affecting the UK institutions' decisions on investing in venture capital and other asset classes, the Chancellor has also commissioned Paul Myners, chairman of Gartmore investment managers, to conduct a review and report with recommendations in time for the Budget in 2001.

Savings Ratio

26. **Mr. Collins:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what projection he has made for the savings ratio in the next quarter. [125851]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Treasury do not publish quarterly projections of the saving ratio. Estimates for 2000 Q1 will be published by the Office for National Statistics on 29 June.

Income Redistribution

27. **Mr. Boswell:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his policy is towards use of the tax system for the redistribution of income. [125852]

Dawn Primarolo: Budget 2000 builds on the success of the last three years. It supports work, families and enterprise and it cuts poverty, helps pensioners, and delivers substantial new resources for schools and hospitals. By 2001, personal tax and benefit changes mean that a single earner family with two children on £12,500 will be £2,600 a year better off. On £25,000, they will be £370 better off.

Environmental Targets

29. **Mr. Chaytor:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the contribution his Department is making to efforts to ensure that Britain meets its national and international environmental targets. [125855]

Mr. Timms: Recent Budgets have introduced many measures to help the UK to achieve its national and international environmental goals. Measures to tackle climate change include the climate change levy and reforms to vehicle excise duty (VED). They put the UK on track to meet its legally binding Kyoto target for a 12.5 per cent. reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and move towards its own more challenging domestic goal of a 20 per cent. reduction in carbon emissions. Measures to improve air quality, to help meet targets in the Air Quality Strategy, include cutting and freezing duty on road fuel gas, introducing a duty differential to encourage ultra-low sulphur petrol, and extra incentives within the new graduated VED and company car tax systems for cars which use less-polluting fuels.

Fuel Duties

30. **Mr. Paterson:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of increases in fuel duties since May 1997. [125856]

Mr. Timms: Revenues from fuel duties are set out in table 2.1D of Financial Statistics and table K2 in the Customs and Excise Annual Report 2000.

The Government are committed to appraising the environmental impact of all Budget measures and these assessments are published in Chapter 6 of the Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report 2000.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how standard temperatures are applied in the determination of volume on which motor fuel duty is paid. [127362]

Mr. Timms: When motor fuel passes the duty point both its actual volume and its temperature are recorded. Using internationally agreed conversion tables the volume of the oil, had it been at a temperature of 15°C, is calculated. These are the "standard litres" on which excise duty is charged and paid by the oil companies.

Single Currency

31. **Mr. Amess:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent representations he has received about joining the single currency. [125857]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government's policy on membership of the single currency remains as set out by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in October 1997, and restated by the Prime Minister in February 1999. The Government have said they will recommend joining a successful single currency only if it is in our national economic interest to do so.

Disadvantaged Areas

33. **Mr. Bradshaw:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures he proposes to promote enterprise among disadvantaged groups and in disadvantaged areas in the south-west. [125859]

Mr. Timms: The Government's aim is to help create a supportive environment for entrepreneurial activity in all sections of society. Long-term unemployed people who want to move into self-employment are being helped with support under New Deal options nationally; while the Employment Zone pilot in Plymouth has been helping long-term unemployed adults aged 25 plus to get back into work, including the opportunity to pool benefits, training and job search funds to help with business start-up costs, since April 2000. We will also be offering New Entrepreneur Scholarships in high unemployment areas, to equip potential entrepreneurs with the management and business skills needed to turn their aspirations into successful businesses. A pilot programme will be running in Cornwall (and London and Manchester) later this year, before a national roll-out in September 2001.

Moreover, the Government announced in November 1999 the creation of a new Phoenix Fund, with £30 million to invest over three years in promoting better access to business support and finance in deprived areas. This includes:

- a development fund to promote innovative enterprise support in deprived areas, including incubator units;
- a national challenge fund to help resource community finance initiatives, and to evaluate the variety of approaches and distil best practices;
- loan guarantee support for community finance initiatives borrowing from wholesale sources of finance, so that they can on-lend in deprived areas; and
- a network of mentors to pre and early phase business start-ups through a new Business Volunteer Mentoring Association, being run on a pilot basis until April 2001.

The Department of Trade and Industry has lead responsibility for the Phoenix Fund, including the disbursal of funding and business support in the South West.

The Government have also instigated a range of measures in recent Budgets, including cuts in capital gains tax and corporation tax, and enhanced capital allowances, which will benefit many of the 65,000 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in disadvantaged areas and the wider South West region. Moreover, the Government are currently financing a network of regional venture capital investment funds for early-stage SMEs, and contributing to a regional target of £85 million for the South West. The first steps towards this target are being taken now with the regional venture capital competition being run by the DTI.

The Small Business Service is also tasked with the brief of reaching-out to start-up and existing enterprises in disadvantaged communities, to increase accessibility of business support.

We are also bringing schools and businesses closer together, particularly those in high unemployment areas. We have already provided an extra £10 million nationally to boost enterprise skills in our schools. The new National Enterprise Campaign, launched this month, includes a particular focus on our high unemployment areas.

Taxation

34. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent estimate he has made of the net increase in the amount of tax that will be paid in the current financial year as a result of his Budget. [125860]

Dawn Primarolo: Details of the Budget measures can be found in Table A.13 of the March 2000 Financial Statement and Budget Report.

Employment Support

35. **Mr. Redwood:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his policy is on supporting *(a)* manufacturing and *(b)* service employment in the UK economy. [125861]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government are pursuing a comprehensive range of policies which are helping to support both manufacturing and service sector employment, including the Welfare to Work programme and tax and benefit reform. Since May 1997 UK employment has increased by over 900,000.

Small Businesses

36. **Ms Keeble:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what fiscal measures he has taken to encourage small businesses. [125862]

Mr. Timms: The Government have dramatically improved the fiscal environment for investment in and by small businesses.

Since May 1997, the smaller companies Corporation Tax rate has been reduced from 23 to 20 per cent., and a new starter rate of Corporation Tax has been introduced which benefits companies with profits of up to £50,000. Small and medium sized companies have also benefited from the abolition of Advance Corporation Tax and the payment of CT in arrears.

To encourage investment by small and medium sized enterprises, the Government have now made permanent at 40 per cent. the enhanced first year capital allowances for plant and machinery, first introduced in the July 1997 Budget. This year the Government are also introducing a 100 per cent. first year allowance for small firms' investment in information and communication technology. This measure is designed to accelerate the take up of new e-commerce practices, and will operate for three years.

To encourage small and medium sized companies to invest in innovation through research and development, this year's Finance Bill introduces a new R&D tax credit. This provides cash flow support to companies investing in R&D even before they are paying CT, and increases the tax allowance for current spending on R&D from 100 to 150 per cent.

To encourage investment in the growth of small businesses, the Government have significantly enhanced the incentives for individuals to make such investments via reforms to Capital Gains Tax. Gains on any shareholdings in unquoted companies will now be taxed as business assets on a shorter four year taper, with the final effective rate for higher rate taxpayers now down to 10 per cent. This year's Finance Bill also introduces improvements to the operation of the Enterprise Investment Scheme and Venture Capital Trust scheme (notably reducing from five to three years the minimum holding period for access to income tax reliefs). These changes will further enhance the incentives for individuals to invest in smaller higher risk trading companies.

The Government are also creating new fiscal incentives for UK companies to invest as corporate venturers in smaller growing companies. This year's Finance Bill introduces a new Corporate Venturing Scheme, which provides relief against Corporation Tax for minority equity investments made in eligible higher risk companies for a minimum of three years.

Finally, to enable smaller higher risk trading companies to recruit and retain more easily the key employees which they need to deliver their growth potential, this year's Finance Bill introduces a new Enterprise Management Incentive scheme. Under this measure, eligible companies

will be able to offer tax-advantaged options over shares worth up to £100,000 (at the time of option grant) to up to 15 employees.

Economic Convergence

37. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his forecast for economic convergence of the British economy with that of those nations in the eurozone. [125863]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Chancellor of the Exchequer has said we will make another assessment of the five economic tests early in the next Parliament.

NMB Group

Mrs. Gordon: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many of the secured loans made by NMB Group plc's fully-owned subsidiary, Consumer Loans Company Limited, were redeemed during the Bank of England's ownership of NMB Group plc from 1994 to February 2000; in what proportion of the redeemed loans a charge for early settlement equal to six months' interest was levied; and in what proportion of the redeemed loans the charge for early settlement was calculated by reference to the Rule of 78. [125946]

Miss Melanie Johnson: During the period of the Bank of England's ownership, NMB was run on an arms length basis under its own board of directors. The overall policy was to run down the business. The Bank does not have details of loans and repayments, but asked NMB to responded positively to any approach by individual borrowers who wished to refinance their loan.

Scottish Parliament Committees

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will outline his policy on *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* officials from his Department accepting invitations to give evidence to committees of the Scottish Parliament in relation to the impact of reserved policy matters on devolved policy areas; and if he will make a statement. [126674]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* Decisions on whether Ministers or officials should accept invitations to give evidence to committees of the Scottish Parliament in relation to the impact of reserved policy matters on devolved policy areas depend on the circumstances of the case.

Voluntary Giving

Dr. Desmond Turner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress he has made following his announcement at the National Council for Voluntary Organisations conference on 9 February concerning the Government's intention to initiate a national campaign to promote the giving of time and money in partnership with the voluntary sector. [126877]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* When the Chancellor addressed the NCVO conference on 9 February, he said that he wanted to bring together all relevant parties to examine proposals for a national campaign based on a partnership with the voluntary sector. The NCVO and the Charities Aid Foundation have made some proposals on a possible campaign, which we are discussing with them.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many parliamentary questions were tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April which requested information, pursuant to previous answers. [127343]

Mr. Timms: Seventy seven.

PRIME MINISTER

Chief Press Secretary

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister under what circumstances the Chief Press Secretary is authorised to speak on his behalf when dealing with ministers. [126503]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* The Chief Press Secretary always acts in accordance with the Prime Minster's wishes.

Charter of Fundamental Rights

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the factors determining the number of delegates each political party was asked to provide for the drafting of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. [127184]

The Prime Minister: For the 30 national parliamentary delegates to Charter Convention, most parliaments, including the United Kingdom's, have selected one representative from each chamber and from each of the main political parties. The 16 members of the European Parliament were selected on a pro rata basis from among the European political groupings.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make it his policy to veto the inclusion of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in any treaty base. [127197]

The Prime Minister: The Government have made clear their view that the Charter should be a declaratory document, not incorporated into the EU Treaties. That position is shared by a significant number of our EU partners.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list by political party the number of UK delegates to the drafting body on the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. [127190]

The Prime Minister: The United Kingdom delegates to the drafting body of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights are:

Lord Goldsmith QC (Labour)—Prime Minister's representative

Win Griffiths MP (Labour)—Parliamentary representative

Lord Bowness (Conservative)—Parliamentary representative

Andrew Duff MEP (Liberal Democrats)—European Parliament representative

David Martin MEP (Labour)—European Parliament representative

Timothy Kirkhope MEP (Conservative)—European Parliament representative.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Young Offenders

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the length of time taken for young offenders' cases to reach a conclusion was in the courts in each metropolitan police authority area in the last year for which figures are available; and what the corresponding figures were for 1997. [126963]

Jane Kennedy: The exact information requested is not available. Information on the time taken in magistrates' courts proceedings is collected by the Lord Chancellor's Department's Time Intervals Survey. Figures on the timeliness of cases dealt with at the Crown Court are not however available separately for adult and youth defendants.

The table shows the average number of days from first listing to case completion at Youth Courts in Metropolitan Police authority areas from June 1997, February 1999, June 1999, October 1999 and February 2000 Time Intervals Surveys. The only survey to cover all Youth Court defendants in 1997 was the June survey, and the most recent results available are from the February 2000 survey. A degree of seasonal variation is believed to affect the figures shown in the table and therefore comparisons over time are best made between figures from surveys which are whole years apart, for example June against June.

Average number of days from first listing to case completion at youth courts[1]

Survey[2]	*Greater Manchester*	*Merseyside*	*Metropolitan*[3]	*Northumbria*	*South Yorkshire*	*West Midlands*	*West Yorkshire*
June 1997[4]	62	67	50	47	50	72	55
February 1999	47	62	35	48	43	86	55
June 1999	48	53	40	43	37	68	39
October 1999	45	53	48	51	49	75	45
February 2000	49	54	51	44	50	74	46

[1] From the start of 1999 analysis of the Time Intervals Survey has included certain longer cases lasting over a year that were previously excluded from the calculations. In this table however the results presented are calculated on the pre-1999 basis for comparability. On the new basis of calculation many of the figures for the February 1999 to February 2000 surveys would be a few days higher.

[2] The first listing to completion period for all youth cases is believed to show some seasonal variation making figures from June surveys slightly lower than the underlying trend, and figures from February surveys a little higher than the trend. For this reason comparisons across time for figures in this table are best made between surveys a whole number of years apart, for example February against February or June against June.

[3] Based on youth courts in the London area. Excludes cases dealt with at youth courts within the Metropolitan Police authority area but outside the London Boroughs. Includes youths apprehended by City of London Police and proceeded against in London Youth Courts (Youth Courts are not held at the magistrates' courts in the City of London).

[4] In the June 1997 survey the sample sizes for Youth Court cases were less then 100 in Merseyside, South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire and due to the small sample sizes these figures should be treated with added caution.

Source:
Lord Chancellor's Department Magistrates' Courts Time Intervals Survey

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000; have not received substantive answers, with commercial or other confidentiality cited as the reason. [127339]

Mr. Lock: In the relevant period, there was one written answer which withheld information requested by an hon. Member on the grounds that it was commercially sensitive.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the *(a)* budgeted and *(b)* actual expenditure of each of the non-departmental public bodies sponsored by his Department for each of the last three years, and the (i) budgeted and (ii) projected expenditure for this year and each of the next three years. [121423]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 9 May 2000]:* The information requested has been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Irish Milk Quota

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his oral statement of 11 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 1031, concerning the Irish milk quota, if he will identify the agreement cited by the Irish Government; and on what basis it bound British negotiators, and those of other parties, to accept Irish demands on milk quota. [122971]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 22 May 2000]:* The agreement that the Irish Government used in the Agenda 2000 negotiations was reached in the Agriculture Council of March 1984. This agreement stated that when distributing quota from the reserve, priority will be given to Ireland.

Ireland was able to cite this agreement, to which the UK Government of the time had been a party, in its argument to negotiate an additional allocation of quota.

Farm Incomes

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what effect the funding arrangements for the expansion of the agri-environment schemes will have on overall farm incomes. [122968]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 22 May 2000]:* Section 7 of the England Rural Development Plan describes the economic impact on farmers of the Rural Development Regulation and the mechanism for funding the measures. Copies of the Plan were placed in the Library of the House.

Rural Development Scheme

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his oral statement of 11 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 1028, concerning the redistributive effects of the England rural development scheme, if he will provide estimates of the projected redistribution in each English region. [122967]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 22 May 2000]:* Each English region is being allocated funds for the Rural Enterprise Scheme, Training measure and processing and Marketing Grants to enable them to identify projects which meet regionally identified priorities. Funds are being apportioned on the basis of objective criteria such as agricultural productivity and labour force.

Crop Contamination

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish the advice he received about the contamination by GMOs of rape seed together with a list of all those who were consulted and the dates on which he first contacted them after 17 April. [123832]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 25 May 2000]:* Since 17 April Ministers have sought advice on this matter from the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE), the Food Standards Agency (FSA) and the Advisory Committee on Animal Feedingstuffs (ACAF). Ministers initially received informal advice from ACRE and the FSA, which was subsequently confirmed in formal advice. That advice has been published. Informal advice has been received from ACAF and formal advice is awaited. This will be published when it is received.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if the Government will restrict the import of crop seeds described as GM-free from countries in which separation distances between GM crops and GM-free crops are less than in the United Kingdom. [124157]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 22 June 2000]:* The marketing of seeds imported into the EC from non-EC countries is governed by EC equivalence arrangements.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what information the Government have obtained from parties other than Advanta UK on the contamination of conventional Advanta rapeseed with genetically modified rapeseed; and when such information was received. [124148]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 5 June 2000]:* Apart from that supplied by Advanta, we have received information on the GM rapeseed inadvertently planted in the UK from the Canadian authorities. On 25 May the Canadian Food Inspection Agency provided preliminary information about the production of the relevant seed in Canada. A Ministry official went to Canada on 26 May to liaise further with the Canadian authorities, who are still investigating how the conventional rapeseed came to be affected. We remain in close touch with them on this.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his oral statement of 18 May 2000, *Official Report*, columns 473–74, what data he has collated on distances between fields that had been used to produce conventional Advanta rapeseed and the GM crops responsible for the cross-pollination of the conventional crop. [124163]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 5 June 2000]:* The Government have no data yet on distances between fields used to produce the conventional Advanta oilseed rape seed stocks and possible sources of cross-pollination. The Canadian authorities are currently investigating which fields were used in the production of the affected Advanta seed. My Department aims to obtain the results of these investigations at the earliest opportunity.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if the crop sites now growing GM oilseed rape as a result of the contamination of Advanta rapeseed with GM rapeseed will be subject to the same controls as crop sites intentionally sown with GM rapeseed for the purposes of a licensed crop trial. [124160]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 5 June 2000]:* All releases of GMOs, whether deliberate or inadvertent, are subject to the provisions of Part VI of the Environmental Protection Act 1990.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had about liability in cases where *(a)* conventional crop seed is contaminated with GM crop seed, *(b)* conventional crops are cross-pollinated by GM crops and *(c)* conventional crops are contaminated with genetic material from GM crops as a result of other forms of gene flow. [124161]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 5 June 2000]:* I have had discussions recently on various issues relating to GM crops. The question of liability is a matter of civil law and liability will depend on the specific circumstances of each case, including where relevant the contractual arrangements that have been entered into by the parties concerned.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans the Government had in place before 18 May to inform farmers of the contamination of conventional Advanta rapeseeds with GM rapeseeds; and what changes have been made to those plans since 18 May. [124167]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 5 June 2000]:* After learning of the problem Ministers established the factual background and took advice on the health, environmental and legal implications, in order to be able to publish appropriate information. This was published on 17 May. Further information was published as soon as we were in a position to do so.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 8 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 359W, which Canadian seeds authority was responsible for ensuring the purity of the rapeseed involved in the Advanta GM contamination incident. [126854]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 22 June 2000]:* Responsibility for the purity of certified seed exported from Canada to the UK rests with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, reporting directly to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-food.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 8 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 359W, if he will list the seeds authorities that have a legal responsibility for ensuring the purity of seeds exported from the UK; and which Government Department is responsible. [126853]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* The following departments are responsible for ensuring the certification of seeds, including those for export, as prescribed by the seeds regulations. The regulations do not prescribe purity standards for the presence of GM material.

For England and Wales—the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (acting in relation to Wales on behalf of the National Assembly for Wales)

For Scotland—the Scottish Executive Rural Affairs Department

For Northern Ireland—the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

British Cattle Movement Service

Mr. Todd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the average *(a)* telephone response time and *(b)* failure rates were of calls to the British Cattle Movement Service in each month of this year to date. [125674]

Ms Quin: The average amount of time that callers to the BCMS helpline have had to wait between making a call and speaking to a operator, and the number of abandoned calls are as follows:

	Average response time (seconds)	*Number of abandoned calls*
January	70	3,210
February	42	1,638
March	36	2,132
April	76	2,967
May	99	4,549

The number of abandoned calls equates to about 15 per cent. of all calls received by the helpline. Most of these calls would have been made during peak periods.

The increase in May corresponds with the Spring calving peak. In addition, some experienced call centre staff have recently had to be re-deployed to other priority work and new staff are currently undergoing training.

The BCMS is considering an industry request for changes to the call centre work patterns with a view to increasing the number of staff during peak hours. This would result in off-setting reductions in opening hours at night and weekends.

Vessels Satellite Monitoring

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the compliance rates are of vessels registered in other EU member states which are obliged to carry operational satellite monitoring equipment. [125699]

Mr. Morley: The Ministry does not have detailed information about the compliance rates of vessels registered in other member states obliged to carry satellite monitoring equipment. Such information would be held by the relevant flag state authorities. However, we understand that the position in other member states is similar to the UK. Compliance by vessels from other member states operating in British Fishery Limits has been good. Action will, and already has been taken against EU vessels fishing in UK waters that are not complying with the directive on satellite monitoring equipment.

Water Level Management

Mr. Brake: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which completed Water Level Management Plans include actions to enhance biodiversity on sites of special scientific interest. [125780]

Mr. Morley: MAFF encourages flood and coastal defence operating authorities to enhance biodiversity where possible when preparing Water Level Management Plans (WLMPs). Operating authorities have not hitherto been required to report biodiversity gains.

MAFF is aware of biodiversity gains at a number of sites where WLMPs have been implemented, but information is not generally available on the sites where there has been a gain.

The High Level Targets issued in November 1999 require operating authorities to report biodiversity losses and gains annually from 1 April 2001. Further information should then be available.

Organophosphates

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what research his Department has *(a)* undertaken and *(b)* evaluated on the relationship between arhythmic heart conditions and the use of organophosphates in sheep dip. [126822]

Mr. Nick Brown: *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* As research relevant to OP sheep dips is published, it is evaluated by the Medical and Scientific Panel, a sub-committee of the Veterinary Products Committee. The Panel considered evidence that exposure to OPs could cause heart problems but concluded that such problems were unlikely to occur at the levels of exposure to OPs experienced during dipping operations. Following a Scientific Workshop on 28 March 2000, which was organised by the Government, we hope shortly to call for proposals for further research which could include the effects of OPs on the heart.

Fur Farming

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what definition he uses of public morality in his policy on banning fur farming in this country. [126862]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* "Public morality" is not susceptible to an absolute definition: it inevitably involves subjective judgment. The expression is relevant to consideration of the proposed ban under Community law. The European Court of Justice

has held that in principle it is for each member state to determine in accordance with its own scale of values the requirements of public morality in its territory.

In the Government's view, fur farming is not consistent with a proper value and respect for animal life. Animal life should not be destroyed in the absence of sufficient justification in terms of public benefit. The Government believe that the rearing of animals solely or primarily for slaughter for their fur fails this test. The position of fur farming is quite distinct from that of food production. Where the primary purpose of keeping an animal is the production of food, that purpose provides a sufficient public benefit to justify breeding the animals for slaughter. This is so even where the production of fur or hide is a secondary purpose of keeping the animal.

For the reasons set out, the Government believe that a total ban on fur farming is justified.

Land Drainage

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on charges for land drainage. [124141]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 5 June 2000]:* Within their districts, internal drainage boards require the payment of *(a)* drainage rates by occupiers of agricultural land (including buildings) and *(b)* special levies by local authorities in respect of developed areas and other non-agricultural land.

The income from the general drainage charge contributes to the costs of the Agency's flood defence functions in the area concerned.

The Environment Agency charges a fee of £50 to persons applying for land drainage consents under section 109 of the Water Resources Act 1991, the sum being prescribed under section 110 of that Act.

Special Advisers

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on how many occasions since 31 March 1999 *(a)* departmental and *(b)* non-departmental special advisers have travelled abroad in an official capacity. [124110]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 5 June 2000]:* Departmental special advisers have travelled abroad in an official capacity on eighteen occasions since 31 March 1999. There has been no occasion when non-departmental advisers have accompanied me on visits abroad.

Farm Production

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment the Government have made of the relationship between level of production per unit of area and farm size in each of the major livestock and arable sectors. [126864]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* The relationship between production per unit area and farm size is monitored through the annual Farm Business Survey. Detailed results of the survey are published in "Farm Incomes in the United Kingdom", available on the Internet at www.maff.gov.uk/esg/.

Interactive Voice Response Systems

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many agencies of his Department use interactive voice response systems when dealing with telephone inquiries from the general public. [127121]

Mr. Morley: As far as I am able to ascertain, without an expensive investigation, no agency of this Department uses interactive voice response systems in their dealings with the public.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many telephone lines to his Department used by the general public are responded to by interactive voice response systems. [127120]

Mr. Morley: As far as I am able to ascertain, without an expensive investigation, none of the telephone lines in the Ministry that are used by the public are equipped with interactive voice response systems.

Fisheries

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the capacity of EU institutional structures to accommodate regional fisheries councils. [127001]

Mr. Morley: The capacity of the EU institutional structure to accommodate regional fisheries councils will depend on the role and powers envisaged for such bodies.

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has held with representatives of the European Commission on initiating consideration at EU level of proposals for zonal fisheries management. [126926]

Mr. Morley: My officials and I regularly discuss with the European Commission and colleagues from other member states ways of improving fisheries management at the regional and zonal level. Most recently, I made clear at the Fisheries Council on 16 June that we welcomed recent moves to enhance the regional dimension of the Common Fisheries Policy through, for example, the extension of regional workshops and the regional consultations on the Irish Sea cod recovery programme. These helpfully bring together fishermen, scientists and administrators to consider together improvements in the management of specific stocks in particular areas.

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has held with the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations and the Scottish Fishermen's Federation on the Hull University report, "Regional Management of European Fisheries". [126924]

Mr. Morley: Neither my right hon. Friend nor I have met the NFFO or SFF to discuss the Hull University report. Officials are to have an initial meeting with the NFFO and SFF on 29 June to discuss their joint document, "Zonal management: a new vision for Europe's fisheries".

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of zonal fisheries management in relation to *(a)* overfished stocks, *(b)* excess fishing capacity and *(c)* discard. [126927]

Mr. Morley: The National Federation of Fishermen's Organisation and the Scottish Fishermen's Federation (NFFO/SFF) document, "Zonal management: a new vision for Europe's fisheries", is now being studied and officials will be meeting the NFFO and SFF on 29 June to discuss it.

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what further meetings he has planned with *(a)* the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations and Scottish Fishermen's Federation, *(b)* European Commission officials, and *(c)* representatives of EU member states to discuss regionalisation of fisheries policy. [126928]

Mr. Morley: Officials will be meeting the NFFO and SFF on 29 June to discuss their joint document, "Zonal management: a new vision for Europe's fisheries".

My right hon. Friend expects to meet Commissioner Fischler shortly to discuss the 2002 CFP review, in the course of which we will make clear the Government's desire to secure a stronger regional dimension for the CFP and to involve fishermen more fully in fisheries management. We will also continue to make the same point in our regular contacts with colleagues in other member states.

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the state of preparations for the 2002 CFP Review; and if he will identify the key issues for the UK. [126925]

Mr. Morley: The European Commission has indicated that it will shortly begin preparing a Green Paper on the 2002 review, to be issued early in 2001. My right hon. Friend expects to meet Commissioner Fischler in the near future to discuss this matter. He will emphasise that the UK wishes to maintain key features of the present arrangements such as national quotas based on relative stability and access restrictions within national 6/12 mile limits; and that we wish to secure improvements to make the CFP a more effective instrument for conserving fish stocks, including enhancing the regional dimension and integrating environmental considerations more fully.

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received from relevant parties on treaty changes required for zonal fisheries management; and if he will publish the external legal opinion he has received in respect of these matters. [126923]

Mr. Morley: Neither my right hon. Friend nor I have received any such representations or external legal opinion.

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of trends in the fishing industry with regard to *(a)* recruitment and retention of staff, *(b)* profitability and *(c)* employment levels. [126930]

Mr. Morley: The Sea Fish Industry Authority published in 1999 a Labour Market Survey National Report, which evaluates employment trends, skill shortages and training needs. The Authority also publishes periodically data on the costs, earnings and profitability of a number of categories of vessels in the UK fishing fleet. Each year, MAFF publishes the United Kingdom Sea Fisheries Statistics, which contains information on numbers of fishermen.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he intends to reply to the letters dated 3 February, 9 March and 13 April from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Ms R. Barraclough. [124465]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 5 June 2000]:* I replied to my right hon. Friend on 21 June, and apologise for the delay.

WALES

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many of the written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April have not received substantive answers, excluding those not answered for reasons of *(a)* disproportionate costs, *(b)* information not available, not held centrally, or not held in the form requested and *(c)* commercial or other confidentiality. [127342]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Five. 97.5 per cent. of written PQs tabled to this Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 have received substantive answers.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 23 June 2000

SOCIAL SECURITY

Social Fund

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the administration cost of recovering *(a)* budgetary loans and *(b)* crisis loans for each year from 1996–97 to 2001–02 shown as (i) total expenditure and (ii) percentage of total expenditure on those benefits. [125288]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Social Fund is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Steve Webb, dated 22 June 2000:

I have been asked to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking the Secretary of State for Social Security, if he will estimate the administration cost of recovering (a) budgetary loans and (b) crisis loans for each year from 1996–97 to 2001–02 shown as (i) total expenditure and (ii) percentage of total expenditure on those benefits.

The total Social Fund administration costs for 1999–2000 are not yet available but will be given in the Departmental Report in spring 2001.

It is not possible to provide a projection for future years as administration costs are based on the level of expenditure in that year.

The breakdown of information requested is not available for earlier years as the cost of some parts of the recovery process were included with other unrelated processes.

I hope this is helpful.

Television Advertisements

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many television advertisements have been commissioned by his Department since 1 May 1997; and, of these, how many were provided with closed caption subtitling. [126896]

Mr. Rooker: There have been 20 television commercials commissioned by the Department since 1 May 1997. All were provided with closed caption subtitling (teletext).

State Pension

Mr. Alan Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what would have been the difference in cost to the Exchequer if the state pension had been linked to earnings since 1 May 1997. [127618]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested is in the table.

£ million

	Gross	*Net of income-related benefits*
1998–99	220	160
1999–2000	790	600
2000–01	2,150	1,640

Notes:

1. Costs assume earnings uprating begins at the next uprating date following 1 May 1997 (April 1998).
2. Figures are rounded to the nearest £10 million and are in 2000–01 price terms.
3. Gross costs estimated by the Government's Actuary's Department. Costs net of income-related benefit savings are estimated using the Policy Simulating Model.
4. Average earnings assumptions are based on an average of seasonally adjusted figures for the three months to July of the previous year, as originally published.

Stakeholder Pensions

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much money was paid by his Department to the Financial Services Authority for its work on stakeholder pension decision trees. [127416]

Mr. Rooker: None.

Written Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many of the written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 have not received substantive answers, excluding those not answered for reasons of *(a)* disproportionate cost, *(b)* information not available, not held centrally or not held in the form requested and *(c)* commercial or other confidentiality. [127442]

Mr. Rooker: None.

CABINET OFFICE

Agenda Computer System

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what were the annual running costs of the Agenda computer system for each year from 1 May 1997 to date. [126505]

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what has been the cost so far of the Government's new Agenda computer system. [127420]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The annual IT running costs of the Agenda computer system, excluding manpower costs, since it became operational in February 1998 are as follows:

£

Financial Year	*Cost*[1]
1997–98	9,166
1998–99	57,736
1999–2000	87,836
2000–01	87,836

[1] Excluding VAT

Written Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many of the written parliamentary questions tabled to her Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 have not received substantive answers, excluding those not answered *(a)* citing disproportionate cost, *(b)* stating that the information is not available, not held centrally or not held in the form requested and *(c)* citing commercial confidentiality or other confidentiality. [127441]

Mr. Stringer: I refer to the answer I gave to the right hon. Member on 22 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 267–68W.

No other written questions tabled between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 did not receive a substantive reply.

HEALTH

Digital Hearing Aids

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many digital hearing aids are currently available on the NHS. [126750]

Mr. Hutton: There are currently no digital hearing aids available via the National Health Service Logistics Authority or any contract arranged by the NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency.

However, all NHS trusts throughout England are free to prescribe the most clinically appropriate product that best meets an individual patient's circumstances and need. Therefore, trusts are free to purchase any digital product that is available from hearing aid suppliers. There are no centrally held figures for the number of digital hearing aids purchased through this route.

In order to evaluate the benefits of digital hearing aids we have recently announced a two-year project involving twenty NHS trusts to evaluate the costs and benefits of digital hearing aids and associated service delivery changes. £4 million is available for the project in 2000–01.

Dental Services

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS dentists were registered in Shrewsbury and Atcham in *(a)* May 1997 and *(b)* for the last available date; and if he will make a statement. [126592]

Mr. Hutton: The number of General Dental Service principals on Shropshire Health Authority's list for the Shrewsbury and Atcham Local Authority District was *(a)* 35 on 31 March 1997 and *(b)* 45 on 31 March 2000. There were no assistants or vocational dental practitioners working in the Shrewsbury and Atcham Local Authority District at these points in time.

Our strategy for National Health Service dentistry was originally proposed in 1998. The current intention is to publish it this summer, in conjunction with the National Plan for the new NHS. It will contain proposals for improving both the availability and quality of NHS dentistry, including the introduction of clinical governance to dentistry and strengthened professional self-regulation.

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reason patients registered with an NHS dentist are struck off the list by the health authority if they do not visit their dentist for 15 months; for what reason this period was reduced; and if he will make a statement. [127013]

Mr. Hutton: Patients who are registered with a National Health Service dentist are not struck off a list by the health authority. Dentists are paid a monthly sum for 15 months for each registered patient. If a patient does not visit their dentist within 15 months of their last attendance to renew their registration, their registration automatically lapses. Also, dentists may themselves terminate a registration arrangement at any time after giving due notice. Dentists are free to re-register their patients who have lapsed. It is up to dentists to decide whether they wish to accept any patient onto their list.

From 1 September 1996, the registration period for both adults and children was harmonised at 15 months to provide a period of continuing dental care following each course of treatment. This streamlined administrative procedures and reduced bureaucracy for dentists. It was also intended to improve value for money by focusing payments on those patients receiving active care.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Milk

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much milk was consumed in the UK in the last year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [126953]

Ms Quin: 1999 is the latest year for which United Kingdom milk production and consumption figures are available. The figures are as follows:

United Kingdom milk production, supply and utilisation: 1999 (provisional)

	Million litres
Gross production of milk	14,594
Imports of raw milk[1]	111
Exports of raw milk[1]	465
Total supply	14,241
Utilisation by dairies for drinking milk[2]	6,854
Utilisation by dairies for manufacturing dairy products[3]	6,988
Dairy wastage and stock change	56
Other uses[4]	343
Total domestic use	14,241

[1] Milk imported or exported as packaged drinking milk is excluded.
[2] Closely represents consumption of drinking milk in the UK as little drinking milk is imported or exported.
[3] A proportion of dairy products manufactured will be exported and not consumed in the UK.
[4] Includes farmhouse consumption, milk fed to stock and on farm waste. Excludes suckled milk.

Subsidies

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the effects of subsidies in the past 30 years on agricultural innovation, competitiveness and diversity; and if he will make a statement. [126321]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* Agricultural innovation, competitiveness and diversity have undoubtedly been affected by the levels of subsidy, support and protection offered by the Common Agricultural Policy. The Government are therefore continuing to press for production-related subsidies to be reduced and to seek reforms which will bring about a more market-orientated Common Agricultural Policy, as well as promoting the Rural Development Regulation as a more effective way of promoting competitive agriculture.

Dairy Farmers (East Sussex)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to help dairy farmers in East Sussex. [126296]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* Following the Prime Minister's Action Plan for Farming, dairy farmers in East Sussex will share in the £22.1 million in agrimonetary compensation being paid to UK dairy farmers in the autumn. Dairy hygiene inspection charges, worth almost £1 million for English dairy farmers, were abolished in the spring. Last autumn's deferral of cattle passport charges was worth some £12 million to dairy farmers.

The Government also facilitated the generic milk promotion campaign. The abolition of the OTMS weight limit also is a significant benefit to dairy farmers.

Organic Farming

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the total amount of money paid under the Common Agricultural Policy to farmers in the UK in the last financial year; and what percentage of this money was paid to organic farmers. [127018]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* Forecast UK and EU expenditure under the CAP and on national grants and subsidies for 1999–2000 was £3,172 million. Most but not all of this sum will be transferred to the farming industry. The farming industry also benefits from higher food prices as a result of the CAP, which are paid for by consumers.

£11.35 million was spent under the Organic Aid Scheme in 1999–2000. However, organic farmers may also benefit from other aid under the CAP, including the following direct aid premium schemes:

Suckler Cow Premium;

Beef Special Premium;

Sheep Annual Premium;

Extensification Premium;

Arable Area Payments.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Best Value

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what representations have been made to his Department on the compliance costs associated with the implementation of Best Value by local authorities; and what account he will take of such representations in deciding funding allocations for local authorities; [126757]

(2) what annual incremental costs he estimates will be incurred over the next five years by local authorities *(a)* on average and *(b)* in total in ensuring compliance with the Best Value programme. [126756]

Ms Armstrong: A minority of local authorities, mostly smaller District councils, have made direct representations about the estimated costs of implementing best value. In any particular case, the actual costs will depend on the existing performance of an authority and the arrangements that are already in place to secure year-on-year improvements. Such costs are being considered as part of the current Spending Review, as are the potential benefits arising from the fundamental reviews of performance which best value requires.

For 2000–01, the Government provided an additional £40 million to cover the costs of audit and inspection, £24.25 million of which was provided through Revenue Support Grant (RSG) and £15.75 million in grant to the Audit Commission. In setting their fees for 2000–01, the Audit Commission were asked by the Government to use grant to equalise the impact on different classes of authority, taking into account average predicted levels of RSG, and the Commission consulted on this basis.

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate his Department has made of the average start-up costs for a local authority of implementing Best Value. [126758]

Ms Armstrong: The start-up costs of best value will depend on local circumstances, including current levels of performance, as well as on authorities' own judgments about the management arrangements needed to support it. The Government will commission a programme of independent research later this year designed to measure the full impact of the new policy, including the subsequent savings on service provision and the improvements to service quality.

West Coast Main Line

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what recent representations he has received with regard to fare increases on West Coast mainline services between Liverpool Lime Street and Euston Station; [127204]

(2) what discussions he had with the Rail Regulator with regard to fare increases on West Coast mainline services between Liverpool Lime Street and Euston Station. [127202]

Mr. Hill: The Franchising Director, not the Rail Regulator, is responsible for fares regulation. The Secretary of State has not had any discussions with the Franchising Director about fare increases on West Coast

Main Line services between Liverpool Lime Street and Euston station, nor has he received any representations about fare increases on these services. On InterCity routes the Franchising Director regulates the Saver fare which between Liverpool and London has fallen from £48.30 in September 1999 to £45 from May 2000. All other fares between these two points are unregulated.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has been the total cost to his Department of the setting up of the Regional Development Agencies. [127432]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) spent £5.138 million in the four months before they were established on 1 April 1999. Some additional set-up costs may have arisen, but these are not separately identified in RDA's administration budgets.

NATS

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with *(a)* Lockheed Martin and *(b)* the New Zealand air traffic control system, Airways Corporation, on the future of air-traffic control; and if he will make a statement. [127213]

Mr. Mullin: The Department has held discussions with a number of companies in connection with the NATS PPP on the future of air traffic control. In accordance with our agreements with those companies, their identities cannot be revealed. Furthermore, in order to maintain a competitive and level playing field, the Department does not intend to release the identities of bidding companies and consortia in future stages of the PPP process.

School Travel Resource Packs

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much his Department has spent on the school travel resource packs launched in May; and what budget is allocated for this publication. [127593]

Mr. Hill: The Department spent £13,500 researching the content of the resource pack and has so far spent £46,500 on production and distribution. The budget allocated for the publication (excluding research) is £110,000.

Transport Plan

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the level of funding necessary to meet the requirements of the 10-year transport plan. [127594]

Mr. Hill: The Ten Year Plan, including the levels of funding, will be published after the Spending Review.

Written Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many written parliamentary questions were tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000; and how many have not received substantive answers, citing disproportionate cost as the reason. [127433]

Ms Beverley Hughes: For the period in question, there have been 36 occasions where my Department has cited disproportionate cost as the reason for not providing substantive answers out of a total of 2,865 parliamentary questions.

British Airways

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the reasons which caused him to overturn the CAA's Decision 4/99 of 23 December 1999 in favour of British Airways. [127366]

Mr. Mullin: The Secretary of State's reasons were set out in full in my Department's Decision Letter issued on 5 April this year, a copy of which has been placed in the Library of the House.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the occasions, since 1 May 1997, on which he has upheld an appeal by British Airways against a CAA route licence decision, setting out, in each case, the route involved and the original CAA decision. [127365]

Mr. Mullin: The only occasion on which the Secretary of State has upheld an appeal by British Airways against a CAA route licensing decision since 1 May 1997 was in respect of CAA Decision 4/99 of 23 December 1999 on the appointment of scarce bilateral capacity between the UK and South Africa. The CAA originally decided in favour of Virgin Atlantic Airways, but the Secretary of State overturned its decision on appeal and directed it to award the available capacity to British Airways.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 10 May on behalf of his constituent Mr. Page. [127367]

Ms Armstrong: I have now responded to the right hon. Member's letter.

Director General of Water Services

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for the post of Director General of Water Services. [127959]

Mr. Prescott: Sir Ian Byatt steps down on 31 July 2000, after 11 years of distinguished service as Director General of Water Services, the head of Ofwat.

Following an open competition, and after consultation with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales, I am pleased to announce I intend to appoint Philip Fletcher as the new Director General with effect from 1 August 2000.

Mr. Fletcher is currently the Receiver for the Metropolitan Police District.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Post Office Users National Council

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of each of the options outlined in the consultation document on the structure of the Post Office Users National Council. [127614]

Dr. Howells: Peter Carr, the new Chair of the Post Office Users National Council, has been asked to consider what structure will best allow the Consumer Council for Postal Services being established under the Postal Services Bill to champion the interests of consumers. The consultation document was issued to help him formulate his recommendations, which I expect to receive shortly. It would not be appropriate to comment until these have been received.

Written Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 have not received substantive answers on the grounds that the information is *(a)* not held centrally, *(b)* not held in the form requested or *(c)* not available. [127096]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* We have answered 1,707 written parliamentary questions between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000. The information requested is as follows: *(a)* six, *(b)* 12 and *(c)* 23.

In some of these answers we were in fact able to provide part of the information requested, while citing the above reasons for not providing all of the information requested.

Low Pay Commission

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Low Pay Commission has been given its new terms of reference; and if any new members have been appointed. [127856]

Mr. Byers: The Government sent new terms of reference to the Low Pay Commission on 15 May and asked it to report by July 2001. I am also pleased to announce the appointment of two new members of the Commission: David Coats and Ian Hay are replacing Bill Callaghan and Laurie Dewar. David Coats is Head of the Economic and Social Affairs Department at the TUC and Ian Hay is the Chief Executive of the Scottish Association of Master Bakers.

Under its new terms of reference, the Commission is asked to:

(i) continue to monitor and evaluate the impact of the National Minimum Wage, with particular reference to:

the effect on pay, employment and competitiveness in low paying sectors and small firms;

the effect on particular groups of workers, such as young people, women, ethnic minorities, homeworkers, people with disabilities and voluntary sector workers;

the effect on pay structures, including the effect on differentials and different pay systems, and the impact of the special rules for output work, unmeasured hours work and salaried hours work;

the interaction between the national minimum wage and the tax and benefit systems; and

the interaction between the national minimum wage and the New Deal 18–24 and the New Deal 25 plus

(ii) recommend whether there is a case for increasing the main national minimum wage rate and the development rate, and if so, by how much, and whether there is a case for making any change to the maximum accommodation offset. In reaching views on these matters, the LPC should take into account movements in earnings and the actual and likely future impact on the economy, on employment and on training, with particular attention on the youth labour market. The recommendations on the rates may include a further examination, in the light of fuller evidence, of the case for changing the age at which workers become entitled to the adult rate.

In making its recommendations, the Commission should have regard to the wider economic and social implications; the likely effect on employment and inflation; the impact on the costs and competitiveness of business, particularly the small firms sector, and the potential costs to industry and the Exchequer.

The Commission is asked to report to the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry by July 2001.

Ministerial Cars

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many cars are used by ministers and officials in his Department and its non-departmental public bodies; and how many of those cars are Rovers. [125690]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 12 June 2000]:* In line with the policy of successive Administrations, contracts for Ministers' cars are entered into with the Government Car and Dispatch Agency. 26 cars are used by Ministers and officials in my Department. Two are presently Rovers, including my own car.

I am currently reviewing this whole area, including the option of giving preference to UK-built cars when this is consistent with securing value for money and meeting our legal obligations.

Gas and Electricity Consumers Council

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement about the regional organisation of the proposed Gas and Electricity Consumers Council. [127855]

Dr. Howells: Following extensive consultation and discussion, I can announce the future organisation of the Gas and Electricity Consumers Council. It will have a head office based in London. It will have offices in Glasgow serving Scotland, in Cardiff serving Wales, and further offices in Manchester, Birmingham, London, Newcastle and Bournemouth serving England.

Single Currency

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will estimate the costs to his Department of switching from the pound to the euro. [126400]

Mr. Byers: Should the UK decide to join the euro, the cost of a changeover would depend on the detailed approach taken to a changeover.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Indonesia and the Moluccas

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to offer *(a)* assistance for managing peacekeeping operations in Indonesia and *(b)* funds for emergency relief assistance to the Moluccas. [126281]

Mr. Battle: We fully support President Wahid in his efforts to bring a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Maluku and other regions. As part of the international effort through the United Nations Development Programme, we have already funded two conferences on reconciliation in Maluku and a BBC seminar on objective conflict reporting for journalists there. We stand ready to help with further conflict prevention projects.

The Department for International Development is helping the United Nations Development Programme to promote reconciliation in Maluku and other areas of conflict in Indonesia. It has also seconded a specialist to work with UNDP to establish mechanisms to manage the UN humanitarian response and that of the international community, within a framework agreed by the Indonesian Government.

Sanctions (Iraq)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of recent research published in *The Lancet* on the number of babies and young children dying in Iraq following the Gulf conflict and the initiation of the United Nations sanctions; and if he will make a statement. [126277]

Mr. Hain: We remain extremely concerned by reports of high rates of infant and child mortality in central and southern Iraq. But we welcome the fact that in northern Iraq—where Saddam Hussein's writ does not run—child mortality rates are now lower than they were before the Gulf War. The UK has always advocated and supported initiatives aimed at better targeting the humanitarian efforts to help the most vulnerable. We led the way over the last year in introducing significant changes to the UN humanitarian programme in Iraq, through the adoption of Security Council resolution 1284 and 1302. Those changes mean that there will be an estimated $10 billion this year alone for the programme. As the UN Secretary-General has concluded, this will put the Government of Iraq in a position to reduce malnutrition levels and to improve the health status of the Iraqi people.

Appearance Bail Guarantees

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on how many occasions in the last two years appearance bail guarantees have been given by the British Embassy to the Saudi authorities in respect of Britons detained in that country. [126250]

Mr. Hain: The British Embassy in Riyadh has given no appearance guarantees on behalf of Britons detained in Saudi Arabia during the past two years. A locally engaged member of staff gave his personal guarantee on one occasion on 8 December 1999 to enable a British Citizen to be released from prison. This was a personal act on the part of the individual and not an official act by the Embassy.

United Nations (Preventive Diplomacy)

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much the United Kingdom's financial contribution to the UN was in each of the last five years; and what proportion of this was spent on preventative diplomacy. [126249]

Mr. Hain: The United Kingdom's total financial contribution (ie comprising total assessed contributions and total voluntary contributions) to the United Nations organisations and peacekeeping for the calendar years 1994 to 1998 has been:

	£
1994	304,969,947
1995	328,855,981
1996	304,577,521
1997	309,260,413
1998	330,058,906

A breakdown of these totals appears in the Departmental Reports of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office from 1995 to 2000, copies of which are in the Library of the House.

Due to difficulties in extracting from the overall budget figures which may be attributed to preventive diplomacy, the United Nations Secretariat has been unable to estimate the proportion of UK contributions that has been spent in this area.

Coptic Christians

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has made to the Egyptian authorities about the rights under Egyptian law of the Coptic Christian minority. [126492]

Mr. Hain: The Egyptian Constitution provides for equal public rights and duties without discrimination because of religion or creed and guarantees the freedom of belief.

We regularly discuss inter-faith issues with the Egyptian authorities; indeed this was one of the focuses of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary's discussions when he visited Cairo in January this year.

Kashmir

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has made to the Governments of India and Pakistan on Kashmir; and if he will make a statement. [126849]

Mr. Hain: We regularly raise the issue of Kashmir with the Governments of India and Pakistan. Both Governments are well aware of our concerns over human rights and external support for terrorism in Kashmir. We have also made clear our view that progress on the issue will only be made through dialogue. Most recently, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State discussed Kashmir with the Indian Government during his visit to India in April.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the *(a)* powers and *(b)* resources made available to the Chairman of the Board of the Commission for the Management of Strategic Resources, National Reconstruction and Development under the Lomé Agreement; and what assessment he has made of the relationship between that appointment and the funding of the Revolutionary United Front. [126889]

Mr. Hain: The Commission for the Management of Strategic Resources, National Reconstruction and Development was created to help the Government of Sierra Leone exercise full control of the exploitation of gold, diamonds and other resources for the benefit of the people of Sierra Leone.

Under the Lomé Peace Agreement, the Chairmanship of the Commission was offered to the leader of the Revolutionary United Front, Foday Sankoh. The Board of the Commission was to comprise two representatives of the Government of Sierra Leone, two from the Revolutionary United Front party, three representatives from civil society, and two representatives from other political parties appointed by Parliament.

Under its bilateral aid programme, the Department for International Development provided the Commission with three Land Rover vehicles, a computer, some office equipment, a satellite telephone and some items of furniture.

We have seen no evidence that any funds which may have been provided to the Commission were used by the Revolutionary United Front party, or that Sankoh's position as Chair of the Commission gave him access to new sources of funding for the Revolutionary United Front.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what training of Revolutionary United Front officials took place as a result of Article III of the Lomé Peace Agreement; and if he will make a statement. [126885]

Mr. Hain: Article III of the Lomé Peace Agreement provides for the transformation of the Revolutionary United Front into a political party, and for training for the RUF in party organisation and functions, in order for it to enter the democratic process in Sierra Leone. No training of officials of the Revolutionary United Front has yet taken place. The holding of free and fair democratic elections remains an essential part of Sierra Leone's efforts to achieve lasting peace and stability.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he made *(a)* to and *(b)* via the Commonwealth Secretariat regarding the release of prisoners and award of amnesty during the period of negotiations of the Lomé Peace Agreement on Sierra Leone. [126891]

Mr. Hain: We remained in regular touch with the Commonwealth Secretariat throughout the Lomé peace negotiations.

The Commonwealth is one of several international moral guarantors of the Lomé Peace Agreement.

FCO Management Board

Ms Ryan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on new appointments to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Management Board. [127854]

Mr. Robin Cook: The Board of Management is chaired by the Permanent Under-Secretary and oversees the administration of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and all its resources at home and overseas. It has in the past been composed of Senior FCO officials together with the Chief Executive of British Trade International. They will now be joined by two non-executive members, Mr. Alan Gormly, Chairman of BPB Industries, and Ms Lucy Neville-Rolfe, Director of Corporate Affairs of Tesco plc. I am sure that the Board will benefit greatly from their experience of private sector management practice.

DEFENCE

SA80

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the current status of the programme to make modifications to the SA80; when he plans to award a contract; if the modifications will be carried out in the United Kingdom; what is the value of contracts to modify the SA80; how many SA80 rifles have been modified to date to correct identified faults; and when the planned modification work to the SA80 will be complete. [126425]

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the current status is of the upgrade programme for the SA80 and the LSW. [127324]

Dr. Moonie: The SA80 is an effective weapon system, we plan to retain in service until 2020. There has, however, been concern expressed over its reliability in certain circumstances. We therefore commissioned Heckler and Koch (H&K), a subsidiary of Royal Ordnance, to assess its reliability and to design potential modifications. H&K identified a number of design problems that affected the weapon's performance, especially in extremes of climate. Their proposed modifications were subjected to extensive trails in Alaska and Kuwait. The final report from H&K demonstrated that significant improvements in the reliability of the SA80 could be achieved to make this weapon system among the best in the world.

Having considered all options, including the procurement of a new weapon system, we have concluded that the modification of the SA80 represents the most cost effective solution to the provision of reliable weapons in all climatic conditions. The Secretary of State has,

therefore, approved, subject to satisfactory contractual negotiations, the award of a contract to H&K to modify some 200,000 SA80 weapons, including both the Individual Weapon and the Light Support Weapon. The overall cost of the modification programme is estimated at around £80 million, taking account of the cost of trials and support. The contract will provide for numbers to be varied, up or down, as our assessment of the overall final requirement for modified weapons evolves over the next few years.

We will apply the principles of Smart Procurement to achieve the earliest possible in-service date. The first modified weapons will be produced next January, with a total of 22,000 weapons to be delivered by the end of next year. The modified weapons will be subject to a rigorous testing and acceptance programme in the hands of troops to ensure that the production weapons are both effective and reliable.

The Ministry of Defence is exploring with the company the scope to maximise the number of UK jobs involved in the modification programme. Early indications are that work on the stripping and refurbishment of weapons prior to modification will be done in the UK. The modifications package itself was designed by H&K at Oberndorf in Germany and it is likely to make sense to conduct most of the modification work there.

Suicides

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the annual suicide rate is of active service members of *(a)* the Army, *(b)* the Royal Navy and *(c)* the Royal Air Force in each year since 1989, stating in each case (i) the number of suicides and (ii) the number of attempted suicides recorded classified by rank; what measures have been taken to improve the armed forces' approach to preventing suicide; and if he will make a statement. [126902]

Dr. Moonie: Since 1 January 1989 there have been 285 recorded suicides in the Armed Forces. A breakdown of this number by Service and rank is given in the tables[1]. Information on the number of attempted suicides is not recorded.

[1] The information is as recorded up to 16 June 2000. Figures are for those cases of self-inflicted death recorded as suicide by a Coroner's Court. The information covers regular Armed Forces personnel including Gurkhas. It does not include Territorial Army, Reserve forces, Foreign Service personnel or the Gibraltar Regiment.

Royal Navy/Royal Marines

Rank	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*19960*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*Total*
Commander	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Lieutenant (RM)	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Midshipman	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Warrant Officer (RM)	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Charge Chief Petty Officer	0	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
Chief Petty Officer	4	4	1	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	14
Colour Sergeant (RM)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Petty Officer	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Sergeant (RM)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Leading Rate	0	1	0	3	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	5
Corporal (RM)	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Ableseaman	0	1	0	0	0	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	6
Marine 1 (RM)	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	2
Ordinary Rate	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2
Total	4	8	5	6	1	6	1	5	2	0	4	0	43
Rate per 1,000 Strength	0.06	0.13	0.10	0.10	0.02	0.11	0.02	0.11	0.04	0.00	0.09	—	—
Average Strength (thousands)	64.2	62.7	62.3	61.5	58.4	54.4	50.2	47.2	44.8	44.2	43.5	—	—

Army

Rank	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*Total*
Lieutenant Colonel	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Major	0	0	2	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	4
Captain	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
Lieutenant	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
2nd Lieutenant	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Warrant Officer 1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Warrant Officer 2	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	2	0	0	7
Staff Sergeant	1	1	1	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	7
Sergeant	3	1	4	0	1	0	2	2	3	0	0	1	17
Corporal	1	5	4	4	1	3	0	3	1	2	0	0	24
Lance Corporal	6	1	2	2	1	4	4	4	1	1	1	0	27
Private	10	10	7	13	10	12	7	6	8	3	3	0	89
Junior	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total	22	20	22	19	18	19	16	17	15	9	5	1	183
Rate per 1,000 Strength	0.14	0.13	0.14	0.13	0.13	0.15	0.14	0.15	0.13	0.08	0.04	—	
Average Strength (thousands)	161.8	159.1	155.3	150.9	138.6	125.7	114.8	113.5	113.0	113.4	112.9	—	

RAF

Rank	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	Total
Wing Commander	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Squadron Leader	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Flight Lieutenant	0	1	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	4
Pilot Officer	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Chief Technician	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Flight Sergeant	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Sergeant	0	4	3	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	10
Corporal	3	2	0	1	3	3	1	2	0	0	1	0	16
Junior Technician	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2
Senior Aircraftsman	2	3	4	1	4	2	1	0	1	0	0	0	18
Leading Aircraftsman	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Aircraftsman	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total	5	14	8	7	9	6	3	2	4	0	1	0	59
Rate per 1,000 Strength	0.06	0.16	0.09	0.08	0.11	0.08	0.04	0.03	0.07	0.00	0.02	—	—
Average Strength (thousands)	90.6	89.3	87.8	84.5	79.4	74.1	70.0	63.6	57.2	55.7	55.0	—	—

For most age groups (including the vulnerable group of single males below the age of 25) rates of intentionally self-inflicted death (ISID) are no higher than in the civilian population. All three Services take the problem seriously and have measures in place, both within and independently of the chain of command, to enable vulnerable individuals to seek help. These include procedures for putting people in touch with voluntary organisations and access to help lines (including the Samaritans). Service personnel can also seek help and advice from unit welfare officers, the Defence Medical Service, and from their chaplain.

Commanders and managers are provided with awareness training, so that they are aware of the various sources of advice and help available for vulnerable people under their command. All three Services convene formal Boards of Inquiry following self-inflicted deaths to examine the circumstances and to assess whether steps can be taken to prevent similar occurrences in the future.

Compensation

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much money he has paid in compensation to service personnel in each of the last five years; how many personnel received payments; and if he will make a statement. [127175]

Dr. Moonie: The amount and number of common law compensation paid to Service personnel or their dependants for injuries sustained or death during service in each of the past five financial years is as follows:

Year	£ million	Cases settled
1995–96	12.1	235
1996–97	14.5	348
1997–98	25.3	369
1998–99	26.7	412
1999–2000	31.0	490

In addition to the increase year on year in the number of claims settled, the general level of payments has increased in accordance with case law above the rate of inflation.

Departmental Land

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he is taking to open up his Department's land for recreational use by the general public. [127230]

Dr. Moonie: There is already a presumption in favour of public access to the Defence Estate, subject to operational safety, security and conservation considerations. The recently published Defence Estate Strategy, "In Trust and on Trust", which was launched by the Secretary of State for Defence on 7 June, both reiterates this presumption and our commitment to future public access. Furthermore, it includes an assurance that the byelaws in force under the Military Lands Act 1892 and 1900 will be kept under review to ensure that access opportunities are not restricted unnecessarily. A copy of the strategy was placed in the Library of the House. The Ministry of Defence has also published a booklet entitled "Walks on MOD Land". This has recently been revised, and I anticipate that an expanded edition will be issued around the end of this year.

Written Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many written parliamentary questions were tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000; and how many have not received substantive answers, citing disproportionate cost as the reason. [127440]

Dr. Moonie: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Dome

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will publish the correspondence between the Millennium Commission and his Department relating to the latest grant of additional funds to the Millennium Dome. [124386]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 5 June 2000]:* I wrote to the hon. Member on 7 June in my capacity as Chairman of the Millennium Commission on this issue. Copies of the letter have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Television Licences

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the television licence *(a)* schemes and *(b)* fees that are available to retired people. [125984]

Mr. Chris Smith: Under the Accommodation for Residential Care concessionary licence scheme, pensioners and disabled people living in residential homes and in qualifying sheltered accommodation are entitled to a £5 television licence. In order to qualify for the concessionary scheme, sheltered accommodation must.

(a) form part of a group of at least four dwellings within a common and exclusive boundary (though up to 25 per cent. of units in a scheme can be properties purchased under the 'right to buy' legislation);

(b) be specially provided for occupation by disabled people or retired people aged 60 years or over.

(c) be provided or managed by a local authority, a housing association or a development corporation; and

(d) have a person (e.g. a warden) whose function is to care for the needs of the residents and who either lives on site or works there for at least 30 hours a week.

Approximately 650,000 people qualify for the £5 concessionary licence. From November this year, people aged 75 or over will be entitled to a free television licence. Approximately 3.5 million households will benefit from this concession.

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the number of pensioners who will be eligible for the concessionary free television licence. [127611]

Janet Anderson: Everyone aged 75 or over will be eligible for a free television licence from 1 November this year, but television licences cover households rather than individuals. Approximately 3.5 million households will benefit from the concession.

BBC (Advertisements)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if it is his policy to prohibit the introduction of commercial advertisements on BBC1 and BBC2. [126301]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* Under the Charter and Agreement the BBC is unable to introduce commercial advertisements on any of its public services without my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's approval. We would not permit commercial advertisements on licence fee-funded services.

Television Arts

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what steps he is taking to encourage national training schemes for television and film scriptwriters; [127107]

(2) if he will make a statement on the future funding of the Television Arts Performance Showcase. [127108]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* I am aware of the work of the Television Arts Performance Showcase and the significant contribution to television and film by writers who have participated in the scheme. It is at present largely for the industry to determine which training schemes to support and we have asked the Audio-Visual Industries Training Group, which we established to consider how to meet broadcasting industry skills needs to include scriptwriting in its considerations. The Group is due to report towards the end of the year. The new Film Council has identified training for scriptwriters as a priority area for funds which will be available from the autumn to support training.

Dunkirk (Little Ships)

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received concerning proposals to preserve for posterity a number of the little ships which took part in the Dunkirk evacuation in 1940; and if he will make a statement. [127305]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 22 June 2000]:* My Department has received a number of letters about the Dunkirk Little Ships Restoration Trust's application to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) for support of a project involving the restoration of four vessels and the acquisition of a fifth for use as a visitor centre. The application was rejected last October, but the HLF has since then been in discussion with the Trust to offer advice on how best to submit a further application. I understand that the Imperial War Museum and the National Maritime Museum are prepared to offer professional support to the Trust with a view to ensuring a viable future for these historic vessels.

Battle of Britain Memorial

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received concerning proposals to erect a Battle of Britain memorial on the Thames Embankment; and if he will make a statement. [127304]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 22 June 2000]:* My Department has received correspondence about the proposal to erect a memorial on the Thames Embankment by the Battle of Britain Historical Society, though matters have yet to reach a stage where we are officially involved. Westminster City Council has identified a potential site for a monument but as yet no application for planning permission has been received from the Society. Large outdoor monuments to the Battle of Britain already exist in Folkestone and Croydon, and the Imperial War Museum last week opened a major permanent exhibition at Duxford which will educate and inform future generations and act as a continuing commemoration of The Few.

Interactive Voice Response Systems

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many agencies of his Department use interactive voice response systems when dealing with telephone inquiries from the general public. [127549]

Mr. Chris Smith: The only agency of my Department is the Royal Parks Agency, who do not use any interactive voice response systems for public telephone lines.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many departmental telephone lines used by the general public are responded to by interactive voice response systems. [127550]

Mr. Chris Smith: My Department does not use any interactive voice response systems for public telephone lines.

Written Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many written parliamentary questions were tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000; and how many of them have not received substantive answers, with disproportionate cost cited as the reason. [127335]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 22 June 2000]:* 1,044 written parliamentary questions were tabled to my Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000.

Seven questions were answered in which disproportionate cost was cited as the reason for not providing all the information requested.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Magistrates

Dr. Cable: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the *(a)* ethnic background and *(b)* gender of (i) lay magistrates, (ii) stipendiary magistrates and (iii) recorders in (1) numerical and (2) percentage terms. [127144]

Jane Kennedy: The following tables set out the ethnic background and gender of (i) lay magistrates (ii) stipendiary magistrates and (iii) recorders. The trends are changing, however. For example, the table shows that 4.5 per cent. of lay magistrates are of ethnic minority origin. In 1997 and 1998, however, 6.5 per cent. of new appointments were of ethnic minority origin and in 1999 7.6 per cent. of new appointments were of ethnic minority origin.

The information on lay magistrates is held on a relatively new database. The information on ethnic origin was taken from a survey conducted in 1997 and, since then, from declarations made by new appointees. The information held in the database has not yet been validated. It is expected that this will take place in the autumn.

Post	*Total*	*Of ethnic minority origin*	*Percentage*
Lay magistrates	25,917	1,157	4.5
Stipendiary magistrates	96	2	2.1
Acting stipendiary magistrates	146	4	2.7
Recorders	1,352	35	2.6

Post	*Total*	*Male*	*Female*
Lay magistrates	25,917	13,218 (51.0%)	12,699 (49.0%)
Stipendiary magistrates	96	82 (85.4%)	14 (14.6%)
Acting stipendiary magistrates	146	121 (82.9%)	25 (17.1%)
Recorders	1,352	1,188 (87.9%)	164 (12.1%)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many magistrates have been recommended for removal from sitting on the bench by a local advisory committee and how many have been removed in each of the last three years. [127146]

Jane Kennedy: No information is kept on the number of recommendations for removal received from Advisory Committees. In each of the last three years the numbers of magistrates removed from the bench were as follows:

Year	*Number*
1997	13
1998	11
1999	15

Dr. Cable: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what information he collates on the number of magistrates referred to local advisory committees for failing to attain required competencies. [127145]

Jane Kennedy: Since the Magistrates New Training Initiative came into force in 1998 there have been no such referrals.

Warrants of Possession

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many warrants of possession were issued in respect of residential properties in *(a)* Great Britain and *(b)* each county court, in each year since 1990 to date. [127206]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor's Department is responsible for the courts in England and Wales. The number of warrants of possession issued on residential properties in each year since 1990 is as follows:

Year	*Number of warrants issued*
1990	106,980
1991	133,101
1992	124,209
1993	124,271
1994	115,577
1995	117,301
1996	111,473
1997	115,646
1998	129,961
1999	136,718

A table, setting out, for each county court, the number of warrants of possession issued on residential properties in each year since 1990, will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

PRIME MINISTER

Performance and Innovation Unit

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the topics which have been considered by the Performance and Innovation Unit since its inception. [126501]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* The PIU has published the following project reports:

Encryption and Law Enforcement (May 1999);

e-commerce@its.best.uk (September 1999);

Rural Economies (December 1999);

Wiring it up: Whitehall's Management of Cross-cutting Policies and Services (January 2000);

Adding it up: Improving Analysis and Modelling in Central Government (January 2000);

Reaching Out: The role of Central Government at Regional and Local Level (February 2000);

Winning the Generation Game: Improving Opportunities for People aged 50–65 in Work and Community Activity (April 2000);

Recovering the Proceeds of Crime (June 2000).

The Unit has also considered the key long-term Strategic Challenges that government will have to face. A Paper on "The Future And How To Think About It" has been published on the PIU website.

The following projects have been announced, but have not yet published their reports:

The future of the Post Office Network;

Trade, Social, Health and Environmental Objectives on the Global Stage;

Electronic Delivery of Government Services; and

Effective Leadership in Delivering Public Services.

The PIU is also providing support to the Prime Minister's current review of adoption.

Ministerial Residences

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 5 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 50W, if he will list in respect of council tax liabilities for each residence *(a)* which Ministers have council tax paid for them from Government funds and *(b)* which Ministers declare these properties to be their (i) main and (ii) secondary residence. [126467]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* The Deputy Prime Minister, the Chancellor, the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment have the council tax on their official residences paid for by their Departments, as their primary residences are elsewhere.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and myself declare our official residences as our main residences.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister how many times he met President Clinton outside the UK and the United States of America between 1 May 1997 and 1 July 1998; and what were the *(a)* dates, *(b)* locations and *(c)* purpose of each meeting. [127129]

The Prime Minister: On 26–27 May 1997 I attended the NATO/Russia summit in Paris at which President Clinton was also present, although no formal meeting took place.

Neill Committee's

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister for what reason he has not yet responded to the Neill Committee's Sixth report into Standards in Public Life. [127093]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* The Government response to the report has not been delayed. The report deals with serious issues across a wide range of subjects, some with constitutional implications. The Government intend to respond to Parliament by the summer recess.

Official Spokesmen

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the role of his Official Spokesman in relation to party political activities. [127428]

The Prime Minister: Alastair Campbell is the Government's Chief Press Secretary. He does this on my behalf and on the Government's behalf. He is bound by the Model Contract for Special Advisers and his role is entirely in accordance with that contract.

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Prime Minister if he plans changes to the *(a)* contract and *(b)* salary of his Chief Press Spokesman. [127429]

The Prime Minister: No.

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Prime Minister what changes have been made to the duties and responsibilities of his Chief Press Secretary. [127421]

The Prime Minister: None.

Strategic Communications Unit

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Prime Minister to whom the Strategic Communications Unit is answerable. [127423]

The Prime Minister: The Strategic Communications Unit is managed by the Chief Press Secretary and is answerable to me.

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Prime Minister (1) if the Strategic Communications Unit has the power to veto announcements from Government Departments; [127424]

(2) if he will make a statement on the work of the Strategic Communications Unit; and what plans he has to review its work. [127422]

The Prime Minister: The background to the decision to establish the Strategic Communications Unit was set out in my answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett), on 14 January 1998, *Official Report*, columns 233–34W. Since its inception, the Strategic Communications Unit has provided general advice to me and is responsible for the co-ordination of announcements across government. It has also worked on specific projects such as preparing the Government's Annual Reports and is responsible for the No.10 website.

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Prime Minister what safeguards have been put in place to ensure that the Strategic Communications Unit is not engaged in party political activities. [127427]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to his hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) on 15 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 701W.

Prisoners of War

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Prime Minister (1) if he will have another meeting with the Royal British Legion over compensation for former prisoners of war held by the Japanese; [127626]

(2) if the final decision to pay compensation to former prisoners of war held by the Japanese will be made by him; [127629]

(3) which Departments are involved in considering whether compensation should be paid to former prisoners of war held by the Japanese; [127628]

(4) when he will make a decision concerning compensation to former prisoners of war who were held by the Japanese. [127627]

The Prime Minister: No further meetings with the Royal British Legion are anticipated at this stage, as a decision is expected shortly. The final decision will be taken in consultation with colleagues in the Departments listed in the answer given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence to the hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten) on 13 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 568W.

SCOTLAND

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many parliamentary questions were tabled to his Department between the 19 October 1999 and the 20 April 2000 which requested information, pursuant to his previous answers. [127443]

Dr. Reid: Six, of which three were from the right hon. Member.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

University Admissions

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pupils on assisted places at independent schools have obtained places at *(a)* Oxford University, *(b)* Cambridge University, *(c)* universities which are members of the Russell Group and *(d)* other universities, in each year for the last five years; and, in each case, what proportion this number represented of all pupils obtaining places at those institutions. [125303]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 9 June 2000]:* The information requested on pupils on assisted places is not centrally available.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of candidates obtaining places at *(a)* Oxford University, *(b)* Cambridge University and *(c)* universities which are members of the Russell Group came from (i) grant-maintained and former grant-maintained schools and (ii) grammar schools in each of the last five years. [125304]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 9 June 2000]:* The available information is given in the following table, based on students gaining places on full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses through UCAS. Because of a change in classification of school types in UCAS statistics in 1998, comparative figures for Grant-Maintained schools and grammar schools are not available for earlier years.

UCAS UK-domiciled acceptances to higher education institutions by previous education establishment
Accepted applicants

Percentage

	Year of entry	
Institution/school type[1]	*1998*	*1999*
Oxford		
Grant Maintained	14.2	14.7
Grammar schools	5.5	5.8
Others	80.3	79.5
Total known	100.0	100.0
(Numbers incl. not known)	3,044	2,964
Cambridge		
Grant Maintained	14.8	15.1
Grammar schools	6.9	7.6
Others	78.2	77.3
Total known	100.0	100.0
(Numbers incl. not known)	2,982	2,985
Russell Group[2] *(excluding Oxford and Cambridge)*		
Grant Maintained	12.7	13.1
Grammar schools	5.2	5.1
Others	82.0	81.8
Total known	100.0	100.0
(Numbers incl. not known)	49,974	52,618
All institutions		
Grant Maintained	9.8	10.2
Grammar schools	4.7	4.7
Others	85.5	85.1
Total known	100.0	100.0
(Numbers incl. not known)	298,220	303,065

[1] Classification of school type as designated at the conclusion of the acceptance cycle.
[2] Russell Group institutions comprise the universities of Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, King's College, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Sheffield, Southampton and Warwick together with Imperial College, London School of Economics and University College London.

Connexions Service

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what safeguards will be put in place in respect of the new Connexions Service to ensure that personal advisers, learning mentors and Connexions advisers will provide impartial advice and guidance to learners to the standard and level of competence of careers service organisations. [125866]

Mr. Wicks: The Connexions Service will offer at least the same level of impartial careers information, advice and guidance for 13 to 19 year olds as is currently provided by careers services. Local managers from the Connexions Service will agree with schools how personal advisers operating on their premises will be deployed and managed. This agreement will show how careers advice and guidance will be delivered in the institution, and ensure that students know which individuals can offer

advice which is impartial. However, in order to remove the significant barriers to learning that many young people face, the range of information, advice and guidance provided by the Connexions Service will be extended to cover matters relating to, for example, housing and health.

Learning Mentors and personal advisers will work side by side in schools in order to provide coherent advice, support and guidance to pupils.

Learning Mentors will work closely with the pastoral and other staff of the school with the individual achievement of the pupil as the common focus. They also provide one stop access to specialist support services where necessary.

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what safeguards will be in place to ensure that personal advisers in schools with sixth forms, appointed and managed by headteachers, will deliver impartial, independent careers advice to pupils. [125867]

Mr. Wicks: The provision of impartial careers information, advice and guidance will be a core function of the Connexions Service. Connexions Service Personal Advisers will bring essential knowledge of the range of post-16 and career opportunities to school pupils, their parents and teachers. Local managers from the Connexions Service will agree with schools how personal advisers operating on their premises will be deployed and managed. This agreement will show how careers advice and guidance will be delivered in the institution, and ensure that students know which individuals can offer advice which is impartial.

University Funding

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment which universities have received support from the *(a)* Higher Education Reach Out to Business and Community Fund, *(b)* the University Challenge Fund and *(c)* Science Enterprise Challenge Initiative; what is the value of each award; and for what period of time each award has been allocated. [126585]

Mr. Wicks: The following tables provide details of support universities and colleges have received from the *(a)* Higher Education Reach Out to Business and Community Fund, *(b)* the University Challenge Fund and *(c)* Science Enterprise Challenge Initiative.

(a) Higher Education Reach Out to Business and the Community Fund

Institution	*Total funding allocation (£000)*	*Time period of award*
Anglia Polytechnic University	550	2000 to 2003
Aston University	1,100	2000 to 2003
University of Bath	1,100	2000 to 2003
Bath Spa University College	275	2000 to 2003
Birkbeck College	466	2000 to 2003
University of Birmingham	1,100	2000 to 2003
Bolton Institute of HE	550	2000 to 2003
Bournemouth University	550	2000 to 2003
University of Bradford	550	2000 to 2003
University of Brighton	550	2000 to 2003
University of Bristol	1,100	2000 to 2003
Brunel University	1,100	2000 to 2003
University of Cambridge	1,100	2000 to 2003
Canterbury Christ Church University College	275	2000 to 2003
University of Central England	550	2000 to 2003
Central School of Speech and Drama	275	2000 to 2003
City University	550	2000 to 2003
City University—Collaborative	550	2000 to 2003
De Montfort University	1,100	2000 to 2003
University of Derby	1,100	2000 to 2003
University of Durham	1,008	2000 to 2003
University of East Anglia	550	2000 to 2003
University of East London	550	2000 to 2003
Edge Hill College of HE	275	2000 to 2003
University of Essex	536	2000 to 2003
University of Exeter	1,092	2000 to 2003
Falmouth College of Arts	25	2000
Harper Adams University College	550	2000 to 2003
University of Hertfordshire	1,100	2000 to 2003
Imperial College	1,100	2000 to 2003
Keele University	550	2000 to 2003
Kingston University	550	2000 to 2003
King's College London	1,100	2000 to 2003
University of Leeds	1,098	2000 to 2003
University of Leeds—Collaborative	98	2000 to 2002
Leeds Metropolitan University	550	2000 to 2003
University of Leicester	1,100	2000 to 2003
University of Lincolnshire and Humberside	550	2000 to 2003
London School of Economics	100	2000
London Guildhall University	550	2000 to 2003
London Guildhall—Collaborative	425	2000 to 2002
Loughborough University	1,100	2000 to 2003
University of Manchester	1,100	2000 to 2003
UMIST	1,100	2000 to 2003
Manchester Metropolitan University	1,100	2000 to 2003
Manchester Metropolitan University—Collaborative	550	2000 to 2003
Middlesex University	550	2000 to 2003
University College Northampton	25	2000
University of Newcastle upon Tyne	1,100	2000 to 2003
Newman College—Collaborative	185	2000 to 2003
North Riding College	147	2000 to 2003
University of Nottingham	1,100	2000 to 2003
The Nottingham Trent University	1,100	2000 to 2003
The Open University	1,100	2000 to 2003
University of Oxford	1,001	2000 to 2003
Oxford Brookes University	550	2000 to 2003
University of Plymouth	1,100	2000 to 2003
University of Portsmouth	550	2000 to 2003
University of Reading	1,100	2000 to 2003
Royal College of Art	275	2000 to 2003
Royal Holloway	480	2000 to 2003
Royal Veterinary College	550	2000 to 2003
College of St. Mark and St. John	275	2000 to 2003
St. Martin's College	275	2000 to 2003
St. Mary's College	147	2000 to 2003
University of Salford	1,100	2000 to 2003
University of Sheffield	1,100	2000 to 2003
Sheffield Hallam University	1,093	2000 to 2003
University of Southampton	1,100	2000 to 2003
Southampton Institute	550	2000 to 2003
South Bank University	966	2000 to 2003
Staffordshire University	1,100	2000 to 2003
University of Sunderland	550	2000 to 2003
University of Surrey	1,099	2000 to 2003
Surrey Institute of Art and Design	147	2000 to 2003
University of Sussex	1,100	2000 to 2003
University of Teesside	550	2000 to 2003
Thames Valley University	550	2000 to 2003
Trinity and All Saints	147	2000 to 2003
University College London	1,100	2000 to 2003
University of Warwick	1,005	2000 to 2003
University of Westminster	550	2000 to 2003
University of the West of England	1,100	2000 to 2003
University of Wolverhampton	550	2000 to 2003
University College Worcester	275	2000 to 2003
The Queen's University of Belfast	1,100	2000 to 2003
University of Ulster	1,100	2000 to 2003
Total	62,353	

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A second round of proposals to the Higher Education Reach Out to Business and the Community Fund were invited in February 2000, the results of which are due to be announced in July 2000.

(b) University Challenge Fund

	£ million
University of Leeds/University of Sheffield/University of York[1]	4.5
University of Manchester/UMIST	4.5
University of Bath/University of Bristol	3.75
University of Birmingham/University of Warwick	3.0
University of Cambridge/The Babraham Institute	3.0
University of Cardiff/University of Wales College of Medicine	3.0
Imperial College, London	3.0
King's College London/Queen Mary and Westfield College London	3.0
London Business School/King's College London/Queen Mary and Westfield College/University College London	3.0
University of Oxford	3.0
University of Strathclyde/University of Glasgow	3.0
University College London/Institute of Cancer Research/Cancer Research Campaign Technologies Ltd./School of Pharmacy London/Imperial Cancer Research Fund/Royal Veterinary College	3.0
University of Edinburgh/The Moredun Foundation/The Roslin Biotechnology Centre/The UK Astronomy Technology Centre of PPARC/Edinburgh Station of the British Geological Survey	2.25
Queen's University Belfast/University of Ulster	2.0
University of Aberystwyth/The Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research (IGER)	1.0
Total	45.0

[1] White Rose Consortium

Details of how the University Challenge Fund operates are set out in "The University Challenge Fund Guidelines 1998–99", a copy of which is in the House Library.

My noble Friend Lord Sainsbury of Turville announced on 10 March 1999 that there will be a second University Challenge competition in due course.

(c) Science Enterprise Challenge Initiative

	£ million	Time period of award
Bristol	2.6	1999–2004
Cambridge[1]	2.9	1999–2004
Glasgow	4.0	1999–2004
Imperial College of Science and Technology	2.0	1999–2004
London Business School	4.6	1999–2004
UMIST	3.2	1999–2004
Nottingham	2.5	1999–2004
Sheffield	2.9	1999–2004
Total	24.7	

[1] Cambridge will have an enterprise centre, but funded out of the money made available for the Cambridge-MIT Institute, not out of Science Enterprise Challenge money.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what criteria are used to assess the success of the Higher Education Reach Out to Business & Community Fund awards. [126586]

Mr. Wicks: The Higher Education Reach Out to Business and the Community Fund is a new fund. The first activities supported under the fund started in January this year. Annex B of the Higher Education Funding Council for England's invitation to bid (HEFCE Circular 99/40) provided details of the monitoring and evaluation arrangements. This document is available in the Library and on the Council's website.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will reply substantively to the question from the hon. Member for Dudley, South (Ref. 122261). [126598]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to my answer of 22 May 2000, *Official Report*, columns 332–33W.

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many parliamentary questions were tabled to his Department between the 19 October 1999 and the 20 April 2000 which requested information, pursuant to his previous answers. [127444]

Mr. Wills: Thirty questions were tabled to the Department between these dates requesting information pursuant to replies given to Parliamentary questions.

Student Support (Disregards)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the disregard for bursaries and other payments for students against their assessment of income for the purpose of student support; and what plans he has to amend them. [126769]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* For the 2000–01 academic year, students can receive bursaries of up to £1,025 a year, plus any amount of other payments that are made for specific educational purposes, such as books and other equipment, before entitlement to support is affected. For most younger students other income of up to £840 a year is also disregarded. The sum disregarded is higher for most mature and independent students at £7,500 a year.

From 2001–02 we plan to change these arrangements to enable low-income students to retain in full the higher bursaries which some colleges are now intending to

award, without losing any part of the support they receive for fees and the loan to which they are entitled. Further details will be announced in the Autumn.

Vocational Training

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will take steps to compensate students for the loss of tax relief on the costs of vocational training. [126807]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* The Government aim to widen participation in work-related learning by helping people overcome the financial barriers. New financial benefits for adult learners have been introduced through Individual Learning Accounts which will become available on learning starting from September. Individual Learning Accounts provide discounts of 20 per cent. on a wide range of work-related learning and discounts of 80 per cent. on a number of specified key courses in Information Technology and Maths. There is also a contribution of £150 towards the cost of learning for the first million people to use their Individual Learning Accounts. At the same time employers will receive tax relief on their contributions to their employees' learning costs and employees will not have to pay tax or national insurance on their employees' contributions.

Sure Start

Dr. Desmond Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the voluntary sector organisations involved in trailblazer Sure Start areas. [126878]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* I have been asked to reply.

Eleven of the 60 trailblazers are led by voluntary organisations. A total of 51 voluntary organisations are members of local Sure Start partnerships. Several of these are members of more than one local partnership. The organisations are as follows:

National Childrens Homes Action for Children
National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)
Parent and Toddler Care at Home (PATCH)
Council for Voluntary Service
Francis Scott Trust
Home Start
National Childminders Association
Priory House—St. Basil's Hostel
Barnardos
National Childminding Association
Barnardos Inclusion Project
Voluntary Action Camden
Youth and Community Leader
Enfield Temporary Accommodation Play Project
Voluntary Action Sheffield
Great Yarmouth Young Women's Project
Wealden Federation of Voluntary Organisations
West Green Playgroup
1066 Housing Association
Voluntary Sector Forum
Education Services for Travelling Children
Telford and Wrekin Council for Voluntary Services
The Childrens Society
Blackpool Art Gallery
Credit Union
Relate
Victim Support
Citizens Advice Bureau
Home Housing
CTR Triangle Ltd. Tenant Management Association
National and Newham Newpin
Toynbee Housing Association
Hull Childcare Network and Information Service
Newpin
National Association of Care and Resettlement of Offenders
Thorney Close Nursery Centre
Norwich and Norfolk Voluntary Services
Family Services Unit
SEHA Health Promotion
Thurrock Council for Voluntary Service
Voluntary Action Waltham Forrest
Penwith Housing Association
Penzance Housing Association
Ormiston Children and Families Trust
Royal Society of Mentally Handicapped Children and Adults (MENCAP)
Brook Advisory Centre
Pre-School Learning Alliance
Stoke on Trent and District Gingerbread Centre
Council for Voluntary Service.

Class Sizes

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the average class size was for classes taught by one teacher in *(a)* 1979 and *(b)* 1992, for (i) pupils in Key Stage 1, (ii) pupils in Key Stage 2, (iii) primary schools and (iv) secondary schools in each parliamentary constituency. [127211]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information is not held in the form requested. Information on class sizes by Parliamentary constituency is only available from 1996 onwards. Class size figures by key stage in maintained primary schools have only been collected since 1996.

Information on class sizes by Parliamentary constituency for January 2000 has been placed in the Library.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children have been turned down for their first choice of school, as a result of the limit on infant class sizes set out in the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, who *(a)* have applied for a place at a denominational school, *(b)* have a sibling in that school, *(c)* are new to the area and *(d)* are in any other category. [127487]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Department does not hold this information. The admissions framework we have established aims to ensure that local admission arrangements accommodate parental preference wherever possible, but there have always been cases where this cannot be met. Our infant class size initiative, which is being pursued in such a way that popular schools are able to expand, enables more parents to obtain a place for their

child at their preferred school. A net gain of 12,000 places at popular schools is being provided as a result of the policy.

We are well on course to deliver our pledge to limit infant classes to 30 pupils. £620 million is available to support the pledge, and allocations so far to Trafford LEA amount to some £2 million. This has helped to reduce the size of the average Key Stage 1 class in the Altrincham and Sale, West parliamentary constituency to 25.9. The figure in January 1997 was 29.6.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 11 May on behalf of his constituent Mrs. Morgan. [127371]

Mr. Wills: A reply to the right hon. Member's letter was issued on 21 June.

Agricultural Wages Board

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received in favour of retaining the Agricultural Wages Board; and if he will make a statement. [127070]

Ms Quin: I have been asked to reply.

I refer to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr. Sawford) on 12 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 456W.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Sex Offenders

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners subject to the provisions of the Sex Offenders Act 1997 have been released on the Home Detention Curfew Scheme to date; what offences they committed; what was the sentence *(a)* received and *(b)* served in each case; and if he will make a statement. [117718]

Mr. Straw *[pursuant to his reply, 6 April 2000, c. 599–600W]:* I stated that as of 3 April 2000, only one prisoner subject to the provisions of the Sex Offenders Act 1997 had been granted Home Detention Curfew. I was recently informed on 20 June that a second sex offender subject to the 1997 Act has been placed on the scheme.

The offender—a female aged 18 with no previous convictions—was convicted of indecent assault against a 14-year-old, and was sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment. She was considered as a candidate for Home Detention Curfew in view of the exceptional circumstance that she was imminently due to give birth. She had a suitable address with her mother and was judged at an enhanced risk assessment board to pose a low risk of reoffending. She was placed on the scheme on 5 August 1999 until her conditional release date of 30 August. She successfully completed the curfew and is not known to have been arrested, charged or convicted of any further offence since.

Under existing arrangements, sex offenders subject to the 1997 Act may be released only in exceptional circumstances and then only with the personal authorisation of the Director General of the Prison Service. In this case, as in the other case previously notified, I regret that this requirement was not followed by the establishment. Although I am satisfied in this particular case that there was no risk to the public, I have asked the Director General for a report into the circumstances of the release.

The original Prison Service Instruction which set out the Home Detention Curfew policy and procedures did not contain the requirement to seek the Director General's consent. Establishments were first informed of the requirement just before the scheme commenced, in a letter of 26 January 1999 from the then Director of Regimes. In October 1999, the Director General wrote to remind all establishments of the requirement, and in January 2000 a consolidated Prison Service Order which incorporated and highlighted the requirement.

In both these cases, the releases occurred last August, before the Director General's letter of reminder and the consolidated Prison Service Order. No sex offenders subject to the 1997 Act have been placed on the Home Detention Curfew scheme since, and I am confident that all establishments are now fully aware of the requirement to seek the consent of the Director General before allowing any such offender onto the scheme.

Under the amendment to the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill, which the Government brought forward on 12 June 2000, sex offenders subject to the Sex Offenders Act 1997 will be excluded from the Home Detention Curfew scheme altogether.

Asylum Seekers

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what specifications have been drawn up to identify accommodation for asylum seekers under the Government's dispersal policy. [126436]

Mrs. Roche: Contracted providers from both the private and public sector were and are responsible for identifying suitable accommodation for asylum seekers. They work to specifications drawn up by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) in consultation with other organisations, including the Refugee Council.

The requirements for the provision of accommodation are set out in model contracts for the provision of accommodation and related services to asylum seekers—one for private sector providers and one for local authority regional consortia. I am arranging for copies of these to be placed in the Library.

Criminal Injuries (Compensation)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many victims of crime have been paid compensation by the Criminal Injuries Board *(a)* in 2000 and *(b)* in 1999; and how many suffered deductions because they sought to defend themselves when assaulted and were thereby deemed to have contributed to their injuries. [126569]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The figures relate to awards made by both the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority (which administers the tariff-based scheme effective from 1 April 1996) and the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board (which administered the old scheme effective prior to 1 April 1996).

Awards under the schemes are unlikely to be reduced in the case of a blameless victim who acted entirely in self-defence. A reduction on grounds of conduct is made when it is considered that the applicant's own behaviour contributed to the incident in which he or she was injured.

	1998–99	*1999–2000*
Total cases settled	74,859	75,917
Total money awards	40,164	39,700
Total cases rejected	34,695	36,217
Total reduced awards	2,453	2,711
Reduced due to conduct	732	792
Rejected due to conduct	4,123	3,838

The reductions and rejections due to conduct are included in the totals. The total number of reduced awards is also included in the money awards total.

Anti-social Behaviour

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what response he has received from Gedling Borough Council on improvements to the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 following his letter to local authorities on 15 October 1999 and subsequent requests for councils' views on tackling anti-social behaviour. [126789]

Mr. Charles Clarke: None.

Immigration

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made in the case of Mr. A. S. A (reference A1012793/8(s)). [126962]

Mrs. Roche: Mr. A. S. A.'s application has now been resolved and the Integrated Casework Directorate wrote to him on 20 June.

Written Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 have not received substantive answers on the grounds that the information is *(a)* not held centrally, *(b)* not held in the form requested and *(c)* not available. [127099]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* My Department answered a total of 2,751 written parliamentary questions between 19 October 1999–20 April 2000. Sixty non-substantive replies were given to hon. and right hon. Members where information was 'not held centrally', one where the information was 'not held in the form requested' and 20 where the information was 'not available'.

It is my practice to provide as full a reply as possible to all parliamentary questions, and to provide all relevant information even where that specifically requested is not available.

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on how many occasions he has deposited papers in the Library in response to parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000. [127438]

Mr. Straw: I deposited papers in the Library in response to parliamentary questions on 150 occasions between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000.

Humberside Police

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of the 5,000 extra police he has announced will be allocated to Humberside Police Force; and how many are already in post in Humberside. [127393]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Humberside have been allocated 74 additional recruits from the Crime Fighting Fund: 47 in 2000–01 and 27 in 2001–02.

All forces in England and Wales have been asked to profile their planned recruitment over the 12 months of 2000–01. Based on the profile provided by Humberside police, the table shows the number of officers recruited, or planned to be recruited, by Humberside police that will be deemed to be Crime Fighting Fund officers.

Humberside police

Recruitment dates	*Officers deemed to be crime fighting fund recruits*
6 April 2000	8
15 June 2000	11
20 July 2000	7
25 August 2000	12
28 September 2000	9
Total	47

Crime Clear-up Rate

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the total clear-up rate of recorded crimes in each police force in England and Wales and in total in *(a)* 1979, *(b)* 1987 and *(c)* in each year since 1992. [127210]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The requested details are given in the table.

Percentage clear-up rate by police force and in total[1,2]

Police force area	*1979*	*1987*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*[3]
Avon and Somerset	43	30	17	17	21	23	24	26	26	24
Bedfordshire	48	29	20	21	22	22	33	35	35	33
Cambridgeshire	47	35	27	25	25	19	24	27	28	29
Cheshire	58	40	29	26	30	31	34	36	34	37
Cleveland	51	34	32	27	19	25	24	25	23	23
Cumbria	56	46	37	38	37	40	36	40	41	44
Derbyshire	50	45	22	21	21	20	21	25	26	31

Percentage clear-up rate by police force and in total[1,2]

Police force area	*1979*	*1987*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*[3]
Devon and Cornwall	46	39	18	25	27	27	30	32	34	36
Dorset	46	36	32	33	30	28	27	29	30	31
Durham	52	42	30	30	32	30	30	31	30	33
Essex	42	35	29	32	36	33	29	27	28	29
Gloucestershire	51	38	24	20	24	27	23	24	26	31
Greater Manchester	45	27	35	34	34	24	17	20	20	25
Hampshire	46	34	26	26	27	28	28	30	30	35
Hertfordshire	54	44	26	21	24	28	30	32	33	34
Humberside	45	32	23	16	17	19	20	20	21	22
Kent	50	33	27	25	29	26	32	31	31	34
Lancashire	56	46	37	35	33	34	33	29	29	34
Leicestershire	54	45	30	28	30	29	31	34	34	34
Lincolnshire	60	37	39	37	32	39	42	48	46	40
London, City of	21	19	20	22	27	23	27	26	28	33
Merseyside	42	43	42	39	33	27	29	31	31	31
Metropolitan Police	21	16	16	17	23	25	23	26	25	22
Norfolk	47	36	34	28	34	31	32	37	36	37
Northamptonshire	48	41	30	27	31	28	34	35	35	33
Northumbria	53	44	17	20	22	23	24	26	26	30
North Yorkshire	51	34	33	30	25	23	25	26	26	33
Nottinghamshire	51	34	26	29	28	23	28	28	26	25
South Yorkshire	51	43	26	20	24	24	23	29	32	32
Staffordshire	51	42	30	29	31	32	34	35	34	32
Suffolk	57	45	39	37	35	34	33	37	39	41
Surrey	47	34	22	20	30	31	29	33	35	40
Sussex	53	32	23	24	24	28	29	26	26	25
Thames Valley	45	31	19	21	22	23	25	24	25	25
Warwickshire	46	34	23	21	24	25	24	27	29	26
West Mercia	49	42	34	29	29	28	26	28	27	34
West Midlands	37	36	27	27	25	24	23	24	25	30
West Yorkshire	37	39	25	18	20	21	24	27	27	27
Wiltshire	42	36	37	35	36	32	29	32	32	38
Dyfed-Powys	62	51	53	50	53	57	58	61	62	69
Gwent	60	53	44	45	47	50	50	51	51	55
North Wales	59	43	33	36	39	32	33	34	36	43
South Wales	46	39	30	28	24	29	32	36	36	39
England and Wales	41	33	26	25	26	26	26	28	28	29

[1] 1979 to 1997 figures are for calendar years, and 1997–98 and 1998–99 are years ending 31 March.
[2] Figures up to 1997–98 are based on the recorded crime counting rules in use up to 31 March 1998. They also exclude offences of criminal damage under £20.
[3] The figures are based on the number of crimes recorded in the financial year using the expanded offence coverage and revised counting rules which came into effect on 1 April 1998, and including all offences of criminal damage. Owing to these changes, these clear-up rates cannot be compared directly with previous years.

Police Officers

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the number of police officers in each police force in England and Wales and in total on *(a)* 31 March 1979, *(b)* 31 March 1987 and *(c)* 31 March in each year since 1992. [127212]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested for March 1979 and March 1987 is set out in the table. For 1992 and subsequent years, I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) on 10 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 590W.

Police numbers for 1979 and 1987

Force	*Police numbers as at 31 March 1979*	*Police numbers as at 31 March 1987*
Avon and Somerset	2,825	3,009
Bedfordshire	902	984
Cambridgeshire	1,064	1,142
Cheshire	1,778	1,830
City of London	829	771
Cleveland	1,334	1,462

Police numbers for 1979 and 1987

Force	*Police numbers as at 31 March 1979*	*Police numbers as at 31 March 1987*
Cumbria	1,056	1,118
Derbyshire	1,563	1,777
Devon and Cornwall	2,660	2,774
Dorset	1,128	1,202
Durham	1,312	1,307
Dyfed-Powys	910	932
Essex	2,461	2,718
Gloucestershire	1,076	1,152
Greater Manchester	6,419	6,780
Gwent	965	973
Hampshire	2,949	3,098
Hertfordshire	1,462	1,579
Humberside	1,849	1,964
Kent	2,724	2,879
Lancashire	3,097	3,134
Leicestershire	1,701	1,712
Lincolnshire	1,171	1,173
Merseyside	4,427	4,598
Metropolitan Police	22,214	26,890
Norfolk	1,223	1,312
Northamptonshire	905	1,047
Northumbria	3,272	3,402

Police numbers for 1979 and 1987

Force	*Police numbers as at 31 March 1979*	*Police numbers as at 31 March 1987*
North Wales	1,268	1,286
North Yorkshire	1,342	1,353
Nottinghamshire	2,117	2,226
South Wales	2,936	3,100
South Yorkshire	2,546	2,862
Staffordshire	1,978	2,113
Suffolk	1,064	1,166
Surrey	1,440	1,609
Sussex	2,758	2,830
Thames Valley	2,639	3,421
Warwickshire	841	965
West Mercia	1,743	1,929
West Midlands	5,981	6,656
West Yorkshire	4,727	5,142
Wiltshire	997	1,044
Total police force strength	109,653	120,421

Compulsory Voting

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent representations he has received concerning the introduction of compulsory voting; and if he will make a statement. [127831]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have recently been sent a copy of a Fabian Society pamphlet making the case for compulsory voting. In addition, we continue to receive a small number of letters both in favour of and against compulsory voting.

We have no plans to introduce compulsory voting.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 20 May on behalf of his constituent Mr. Berisha. [127369]

Mr. Straw: I wrote to the right hon. Member today. I am sorry for the delay in replying.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 9 May on behalf of his constituent Mrs. Djukic. [127375]

Mr. Straw: I wrote to the right hon. Gentleman today. I am sorry for the delay in replying.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 26 April on behalf of his constituent Mr. Jones. [127372]

Mr. Straw: I wrote to the right hon. Member on 22 June in response to his letter of 26 April on behalf of his constituent, Mr. Jones. I am very sorry that I was unable to do so sooner, and would like, through the right hon. Member, to extend my apology to Mr. Jones for the delay.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 13 April on behalf of his constituent Mr. South. [127377]

Mr. Straw: I wrote to the right hon. Member on 23 June, in response to his letter of 13 April on behalf of his constituent, Mr. South. I am very sorry that I was unable to do so sooner and would like, through the right hon. Member, to extend my apology to Mr. South for the delay.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 14 April on behalf of his constituent Mr. Meakins. [127370]

Mr. Straw: I wrote to the right hon. Member on 23 June in response to his letter of 14 April on behalf of his constituent, Mr. Meakins. I am very sorry that I was unable to do so sooner and would like, through the right hon. Member, to extend my apology to Mr. Meakins for the delay.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 9 May on behalf of his constituent Mrs. Putaj. [127376]

Mr. Straw: I replied to the right hon. Member's letter of 9 May on 23 June.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 11 May on behalf of his constituent Mr. Block. [127368]

Mr. Straw: I wrote to the right hon. Member on 22 June.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 2 May on behalf of his constituent Mr. Harris. [127373]

Mr. Straw: I wrote to the right hon. Member on 23 June in response to his letter of 2 May on behalf of his constituent, Mr. Harris. I am very sorry that I was unable to do so sooner and would like, through the right hon. Member, to extend my apology to Mr. Harris for the delay.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 26 June 2000

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Public Lending Right

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent representations he has received concerning the level of remuneration received by authors through public lending right. [127824]

Mr. Chris Smith: I have seen the case for increased funding produced by the Public Lending Right Advisory Committee; I have also received around 160 letters, mainly from authors via their MPs. I am considering these representations carefully as part of the Department's current spending review.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what was the value of his Department's funding of public lending right in *(a)* 1983 and *(b)* 2000 in (i) cash and (ii) real terms. [127828]

Mr. Chris Smith: Public Lending Right (PLR) received grant-in-aid funding of £2 million in 1983–84, which would equal £3.921 million in real terms. My Department provided funding of £5.15 million for PLR in 2000–01.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what proportion of library book withdrawals is represented by children's books; and if he will make a statement. [127826]

Mr. Chris Smith: Information about the number of book withdrawals is not collected centrally. The annual CIPFA Public Library Statistics, which are held in the House Library and are likely to be available in the larger public library reference libraries, provide information about the total bookstock, including children's books, at 31 March each year. At 31 March 1999, children's bookstock was 19.3 million compared with 19.2 million at 31 March 1998.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what proportion of his departmental budget was spent on Public Lending Right in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999 and *(d)* 2000. [127827]

Mr. Chris Smith: The following table shows the proportion of the Department's budget allocation to Public Lending Right as grant-in-aid:

Financial year	*DCMS PES total £000*	*Public Lending Right grant in aid £000*	*PLR grant in aid as a proportion of DCMS PES total Percentage*
1997–98	904,790	4,921	0.54
1998–99	924,478	5,000	0.54
1999–2000	1,002,139	5,051	0.50
2000–01	1,014,886	5,150	0.50

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much Public Lending Right money was paid to authors of children's books in the last year for which figures are available; and what proportion this represented of total spending on Public Lending Right. [127825]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Public Lending Right (PLR) computer system does not break down payments to authors by the type of book that they write. However, children's books represented 28 per cent. of registered books borrowed last year, an increase of 30 per cent. in the last ten years. It is therefore estimated that 28 per cent. of payments went to children's writers, which in the last payment round would have amounted to £1.2 million—23 per cent. of the whole PLR fund.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding the level of funding available for Public Lending Right payments. [127823]

Mr. Chris Smith: We have no scope at present to raise further the allocation to Public Lending Right (PLR) beyond the increases already announced as part of PLR's current three-year funding agreement. However, we have agreed to consider the case for an increase in funding as part of our current Spending Review which will deal with funding for the next three years.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Debt Relief Programme

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the countries which have had their debts to the United Kingdom cancelled as part of the debt relief programme for the poorest countries; and what the cost of the programme to the UK has been to date. [126970]

Clare Short: To date, the Government have provided approximately £450 million on export credit debt relief to the following countries, which are classified as Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC):

Benin;
Bolivia;
Burkina Faso;
Central African Republic;
Cameroon;
Cote d'Ivoire;
Ethiopia;
Guyana;
Mali;
Mauritania;
Mozambique;
Nicaragua;
Niger;
Senegal;
Sierra Leone;
Tanzania;
Togo;
Uganda;

Vietnam;
Yemen; and
Zambia.

These countries, along with the rest of the HIPC countries, will have the majority of their debt cancelled when they qualify under the revised HIPC framework. In addition, the Government are unilaterally providing 100 per cent. relief for qualifying HIPCs on any remaining export credit debt.

So far, Bolivia, Mauritania, Mozambique, Tanzania and Uganda have reached Decision Point, the first milestone under the enhanced HIPC framework at which debt relief starts to flow. Between them, these countries still owe the Export Credits Guarantee Department some £140 million. This will be cancelled when they complete the HIPC process.

Aid debts to the poorest countries have already been cancelled.

Sexual and Reproductive Health Projects

Ms McCafferty: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, pursuant to her answer of 23 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 408W, on sexual and reproductive health projects, what proportion of the UK bilateral aid contributions for reproductive health care for the years *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999 were for (i) HIV/AIDS and (ii) family planning and reproductive health. [127214]

Clare Short: In many cases it is not practical to distinguish between the sexual and the reproductive health/family planning elements. There is also often no clear distinction between assisting with work in HIV/AIDS and in other sexual health issues. However, the following is an approximate breakdown of my Department's bilateral contributions to health/family planning and HIV/AIDS in 1997–99:

£ million

	Reproductive health/ family planning	*HIV/AIDS*
1997	38	15
1998	42	16
1999	40	17

SOCIAL SECURITY

Vibration White Finger

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many men in South Wales were diagnosed by his Department and agencies as suffering from vibration induced white finger in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999 and *(d)* 2000 to date. [126655]

Mr. Bayley: I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer I gave my hon. Friend on 14 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 651W.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how he identified the two million men aged between 60 and 64 years whom he deemed likely to be newly eligible for winter fuel payments resulting from the European Court ruling. [126875]

Angela Eagle: We do not hold up to date records for all of those who do not receive any pension or benefit at the moment—especially men aged 60–64 who have no need to contact the Department. Therefore, to ensure that the right money is paid to the right person in respect of each year a Winter Fuel Payment is due, it was necessary to develop a claims process.

We wrote to around 24,000 people in April who had already registered their details with the Department, enclosing a claim form for completion. During May and early June we also wrote to around 1.7 million newly eligible people who we could identify through the departmental central index. Again, in each case we enclosed a claim form and invited a claim.

For those who we are not able to identify, our information and advertising campaign will continue to help ensure that they are fully aware of how to claim. In addition, people can download claim forms from the Department's own website www.dss.gov.uk or they can obtain claim forms on request from the Winter Fuel Payment helpline.

Pensions

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the amount of pension which would be received on retirement by *(a)* a person who leaves school in 2000–01, who earns average earnings throughout their working life and who remains a member of the state pension scheme throughout, and *(b)* a man and *(c)* a woman, who leaves school in 2000–01, who earns average earnings through his or her working life, and who immediately takes out a stakeholder pension into which he or she puts only the value of the National Insurance rebates. [126628]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table. The figures are in 1999 earnings terms. In 1999 price terms the figures would be more than double the amounts shown.

Estimated basic and compulsory second tier pension for someone on average earnings throughout their working life and who reaches pensionable age in 2050

£

	Basic pension	*Additional pension*	*Total pension*
All—State scheme *(a)*	31.00	56.00	87.00
All—Stakeholder	31.00	71.00	102.00
Man—State scheme	31.00	57.00	88.00
Man—Stakeholder *(b)*	31.00	73.00	103.00
Woman—State scheme	31.00	55.00	86.00
Woman—Stakeholder *(c)*	31.00	67.00	98.00

Notes:
1. Figures, which are in 1999 earnings terms, are rounded to the nearest £ and may not sum as a result.
2. The estimates are based on average earnings of (i) all full-time employees; (ii) all male full-time employees; and (iii) all female full-time employees (whose average earnings are 74 per cent. of the average earnings of male employees).
3. The estimates are based on a person beginning work at 16 and working for 49 years until age 65.
4. The estimates for stakeholder pension schemes are based on the amount of state scheme pension foregone, which determines the level of at which the National Insurance rebates are set by the

Government Actuary's Department. However, when the State Second Pension becomes a flat-rate scheme for those who remain in it, the rebates will continue to be earnings-related, and so will be based on the state scheme pension which would be foregone if the scheme were fully earnings-related.

5. The final amount from a funded stakeholder pension will depend on investment returns, market performance and annuity rates oat pensionable age, together with the value of any voluntary contributions. (Annuity rates for a rebate-only stakeholder pension will be the same for both men and women).

6. The estimates are based on the Department's Lifepen model and the following assumptions:

Stakeholder pensions state April 2001; State Second Pension starts April 2002; State Second Pension becomes flat-rate from April 2006; earnings grow 1.5 per cent. a year faster than prices; basic State pension is uprated in line with prices.

Widows' Benefit

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many widowers have applied for compensation following the recent European Court of Human Rights ruling on Widows' Benefit. [127325]

Angela Eagle: We are aware of 13 such applications including the two cases on which the European Court of Human Rights have published judgments. These two cases have been struck out following acceptance of the Government's offer by way of friendly settlement.

Recycled Waste

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 19 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 87W, on recycled waste, what plans he has to increase the percentage of paper waste recycled; and what percentage of non-paper waste produced by his Department is *(a)* re-used and *(b)* recycled. [127687]

Mr. Bayley: The Department in conjunction with its estates partners is working towards recycling all recyclable paper. Information on non-paper waste is not available but waste baselines are being developed.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Administrative Services Vote

Mrs. Roe: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, if he will make a statement on the proposal to set up an Audit Committee for the Administrative Services Vote. [127789]

Mr. Kirkwood: Among the conclusions of the Braithwaite Review of Management Services which reported to the Commission in June 1999 was a recommendation (paragraphs 15.69 to 15.75 of the Braithwaite Report) that the House should establish an Audit Committee with the aim of improving the process of internal audit and review, and providing support to the Clerk of the House in his responsibilities as Accounting Officer.

As part of their continuing consideration of Braithwaite recommendations, on 15 May 2000 the House of Commons Commission formally constituted the Audit Committee, with the following terms of reference:

to have general oversight of the work of internal audit and review, with particular emphasis on promoting economy, efficiency and effectiveness, on value-for-money studies, and on risk assessment and control assurance;

to receive and consider reports from the Internal Review Service, together with management letters and other external audit material;

to advise the Accounting Officer in the exercise of his responsibilities;

to consider and recommend to the Accounting Officer the internal review programme;

to encourage best financial practice, use of resources and governance in the House administration; and

to report annually, the report to be published with the Commission's Annual Report.

The Commission also appointed members of the Committee, along the lines recommended in the Braithwaite Report, as follows:

Two Members of the Commission:

The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) (Chairman)

The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood)

The Clerk of the House:

Mr. William McKay, CB

The Director of Finance and Administration:

Mr. Andrew Walker

A member from outside the House:

Sir Thomas Legg, KCB, QC, formerly Permanent Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department.

The Committee held its first meeting on 20 June. Its annual Report will be published with the Annual Report of the House of Commons Commission.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Police Service

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what contacts he has had with the Quebec authorities on instances of a police service changing its name for operational purposes, but retaining its previous name in the description of the police service. [127662]

Mr. Ingram: None. Neither the Secretary of State nor I have had any contact with the Quebec authorities regarding police name changes. But I have made inquiries through the British High Commission in Ottawa as a result of the contribution made by the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) during the Opposition Day debate on 6 April. A copy of my resulting letter of 9 May to the right hon. and learned Gentleman was placed in the Library of the House.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

New Technologies

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if it is his policy that the legal framework of internet transmission and caching services for new technologies, with particular reference to Wireless Application Protocol and web TV, will be protected in the UK legislation incorporating the EU Electronic Commerce Directive by ensuring that, in addition to the limitations specified in Articles 12 to 15, the intermediary only becomes liable for illegal material selected or modified during the transmission process when the said transmission alters the integrity of the material in question, in line with recital 43 of the Directive. [125365]

Ms Hewitt: National legislation implementing the E-Commerce Directive will ensure that the liability of intermediaries is limited in accordance with Articles 12 to 15 of the Directive, and takes account of the Recitals of the Directive. The Government intend to consult widely on the options for implementing the directive later in 2000.

Mobile Phone Transmitter Masts

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many mobile phone transmitter masts there are in the UK; how many carry equipment from more than one mobile phone company; and how many are used exclusively by one company. [126411]

Ms Hewitt: This information is not held centrally. I shall write once the necessary information has been obtained.

Cryptography

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many times *(a)* ministers and *(b)* officials in his Department have held meetings with the United States Special Envoy for Cryptography since 20 October 1999 on (i) encryption and (ii) other issues; what were the dates and locations of each of these meetings; and what other (1) British and (2) United States Government departments took part in each meeting. [127130]

Ms Hewitt: Since October 1999 neither Ministers nor officials have met the United States Special Envoy for Cryptography on encryption or other issues.

Corruption and Bribery

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what formal procedures the ECGD has for screening for evidence of corruption when underwriting contracts. [127081]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* ECGD requires applicants for cover to provide details of the amount of commission payable under their contracts including to whom the repayment arrangements are made. Cases are investigated where the level of commission appears excessive for the particular contract or the payment procedures appear unusual. Cover can be refused where the exporter cannot provide proper justification for the levels of commission involved.

Nuclear Safety (Transfrontier Co-operation)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what actions he has taken in respect of recommendation 71 (1999) on model agreements on transfrontier co-operation in the field of nuclear safety, agreed by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in Europe in November 1999. [127571]

Mrs. Liddell: The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe considered Recommendation 71 (1999), "Model Agreements on Transfrontier Co-operation in the Field of Nuclear Safety", at its meeting on 3 May. It concluded that nuclear power-related issues did not fall within the competence of the Council of Europe and that Model Agreements in this field should therefore not be appended to the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities.

Energy Policy

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will publish a draft of the Renewables Obligation statutory instrument. [127478]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government plan to publish the details of a proposed Order in the autumn, as a basis for consultation.

Internet Access

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the measures the Telecommunications Regulator has taken to reduce the cost of internet access. [127630]

Ms Hewitt: The Government believe that the best way to ensure sustainable lower costs for internet access is through promoting competition. Through measures such as the introduction of an effective Calls & Access product and Carrier Pre-Selection Oftel is promoting competition to drive down general call charges. For narrow band internet access Oftel has promoted greater flexibility in internet tariffing through the introduction of the Number Translation Service (NTS) formula that allowed the call origination charged to be shared with other operators who also carry the call. Oftel has recently made a determination that requires BT to provide a flat rate internet interconnection product to competing operators. Oftel has negotiated a range of schemes offering reduced price internet access for schools.

For broadband access, Oftel is requiring BT to open up its local loop to other operators so that they can compete in the provision of broadband access. Also, once BT has installed ADSL on local lines, it will be required to give other operators access to its upgraded system on non-discriminatory terms. A recent study produced for Oftel showed that of the five large markets studied the UK had on average the lowest prices for residential access at both peak and off-peak times.

Community Finance Initiatives

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the community finance initiatives operating in England and Wales; what consultation has taken place regarding the Phoenix fund; what criteria must

be met for CFI's applying to administer the funds that make up the Phoenix fund; and if he will make a statement. [127839]

Ms Hewitt: There is no single definition of CFIs and therefore no comprehensive list of those operating in England and Wales. CFIs can take a variety of forms, including community loan funds, community investment trusts and micro-finance providers. The largest category of CFIs presently operating in the UK is credit unions, of which there are over 450.

The Phoenix Fund addresses certain recommendations of the Policy Action Team Report on Enterprise and Financial Exclusion, which was the subject of widespread consultation. Although no formal consultation has taken place on the Phoenix Fund, officials did hold extensive discussions with interested parties before drawing up the recently published bidding guidance for organisations wishing to apply for Phoenix Fund Support.

Copies of the bidding guidance are held in the Library of the House.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many of the written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April have not received substantive answers, for the reason that the information is *(a)* not held centrally, *(b)* not held in the form requested and *(c)* not available. [127679]

Mr. Caborn: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave on 23 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 313W.

Organisation Internationale de Métrologie Légale

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what standard for the determination of hydrocarbon oil bulk volume is recommended by the Organisation Internationale de Métrologie Légale; [127363]

(2) if the recommendations of the Organisation Internationale de Métrologie Légale for standard temperature measurement are adopted throughout the marketing chain for the sale of petrol and diesel. [127364]

Mrs. Liddell: OIML publishes documents which mainly take the form of International Recommendations which cover many aspects of measurement of hydrocarbon oil bulk volume, and in particular Recommendation R117 covers Measuring Systems for Liquids other than Water. They do not lay down requirements for standard temperature measurement. They do (as appropriate to the context) specify provisions for conversion devices for temperature compensation. However, these are for optional application, as OIML member states may decide. They have not been made a requirement of weights and measures legislation in the UK.

Standard temperature accounting is not adopted throughout the marketing chain for sales of petrol and diesel. The National Weights and Measures Laboratory commissioned a study on the Temperature Compensation of Liquid Fuels which produced several recommendations. These recommendations have been made the subject of an industry consultation. The responses to this consultation are currently being analysed by NWML.

Assisted Areas Map

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much money has been received by the Highlands and Islands as a result of being included on the Assisted Areas Map in each of the last three financial years; and what proportion of this funding has been received by Inverness. [127012]

Dr. Reid: I have been asked to reply.

Responsibility for aid provided to areas as a result of being included on the Assisted Areas Map in Scotland is a matter for the Scottish Executive.

HEALTH

Hospital Cleaning

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to ensure that hospital wards are kept clean and tidy at all times and that bed linen is changed frequently and whenever soiled. [124219]

Mr. Denham: National Health Service trust chief executives are responsible for standards of cleanliness in hospitals. All acute trusts have the assistance of an infection control team. The Infection Control Nurses Association and the Association of Domestic Managers have published "Standards for Environmental Cleanliness in Hospitals" which NHS Estates has distributed to NHS trusts.

In wards it is for the qualified nurse responsible for the patient's care to decide when a linen change is necessary, but this should occur whenever it is soiled.

The NHS controls assurance framework published in November 1999 includes a standard on infection control in NHS trusts. A section on cleanliness is being developed.

Both clinical and organisational systems for monitoring and assuring standards of care will be looked at annually as part of NHS performance monitoring arrangements. The standards for hospital cleanliness and infection control will be subject to independent inspections by the Commission for Health Improvement and the Audit Commission.

National Duplicate Registration Initiative

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the work of the National Duplicate Registration Initiative; and what his estimate is of the number of ghost patients in each health authority area removed from local medical lists since its establishment and the consequential saving to the NHS. [125665]

Mr. Denham: The National Duplicate Registration Initiative exercise is being carried out as part of the annual audit of health authorities, under statutory powers available to the Audit Commission. To date some 16,000 duplicate registrations have been identified and removed from general practitioners' lists. There are no consequential savings to the NHS because the payment

GPs receive per patient (capitation fee) comes from within the profession's total pay entitlement. Removing list inflation means that payments will be redistributed within the profession on a more legitimate basis but there will be no overall saving.

Clinical Waste Disposal

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to implement a London-wide strategy for clinical waste disposal. [126083]

Mr. Denham: There are no plans, at present, for a London-wide strategy for clinical waste disposal. However, I am informed that this will be reviewed by National Health Service Estates, as part of their facilities management agenda.

Meat Inspection

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans he has to meet Commissioner Byrne regarding the future basis of meat inspection; [R] [126195]

(2) what discussions he has had with his counterparts in other EU countries regarding the future basis of meat inspection; [R] [126194]

(3) what representations he has made to the European Commission regarding the future basis of meat inspection. [R] [126196]

Ms Stuart: My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture met Commissioner Byrne on 6 March and pressed hard for a change in meat inspection arrangements to one based on risk assessment. The Commissioner acknowledged that a review of the legislation was overdue. The subject was also raised last year at a number of European Union Agriculture Councils. Since then this has become a matter for the Food Standards Agency and the chairman of the agency has also had a meeting with Commissioner Byrne.

In line with the recommendations of the Pooley report and the Government's action plan for farming, we are continuing to press the Commission to bring forward proposals for updating Community legislation on meat hygiene to bring in a risk-based system of controls. I understand that the first of these, a new Regulation on hygiene, is expected to be issued later this month. This will set out operator responsibilities, including the implementation of hazard analysis and critical control points in abattoirs.

Percutaneous Vertebroplasty Operation

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the effectiveness of the percutaneous vertebroplasty operation; and if he will make a statement. [126266]

Mr. Denham: The Department is not funding any research into the effectiveness of the percutaneous vertebroplasty operation. Priorities for departmental research and development support for the development of policy are determined through discussion with policy colleagues, the Departmental Research Committee and Ministers. In the National Health Service research and development programme, priorities take account of widespread consultation with those using, delivering and managing services, within a framework overseen by the Central Research and Development Committee for the NHS. In all cases, priorities for our budgets reflect analysis of the burden of disease, potential benefits, our priorities and take account of the responsibilities and work of other funders.

General Medical Council

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will introduce legislation to remove from the General Medical Council its current responsibilities for regulating the conduct and monitoring the competence of members of the medical profession. [126414]

Mr. Denham: We have no plans at present to remove functions from the General Medical Council. Indeed, we have recently consulted on proposals to strengthen its fitness to practise procedures and the Order amending the Medical Act 1983 will be laid before Parliament soon.

The General Medical Council is undertaking a "Structural and Legal Review" of its fitness to practise procedures. The GMC must not delay in publishing its proposals for modernisation. We will need to consider how far they meet the rising expectations of the public and Parliament for fundamental changes to the way the GMC deals with doctors who do not meet the expected standards of conduct and performance set by the profession.

TV Advertisements

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many television advertisements have been commissioned by his Department since 1 May 1997; and, of these, how many were provided with closed caption subtitling. [126897]

Ms Stuart: The Department has commissioned 35 advertisements which have been transmitted on television since 1 May 1997. 29 of these have been provided with closed caption subtitling.

Information Campaigns

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what national health information campaigns his Department *(a)* ran in (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99 and (iii) 1999–2000 and *(b)* will run in 2000–01; and what issues have been covered by, and what the costs are, for each campaign. [126101]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* The Department runs a number of publicity campaigns which have provided information for all. The table shows the areas covered, financial years and the expenditure to date.

Campaign	*Cost (£)*
1997–98	
Cot Death	108,759
Learning Disabilities	152,980
Emergency Services Helpline	173,560
Health Care Abroad for UK Travellers	985,000
Health Care Industry Sponsorship—Health Promotion	413,000
Health of the Nation (HOTN)—Accident Prevention	104,022
Health of the Nation (HOTN)—Avoidance of Unwanted Pregnancy	792,309
Health of the Nation—Our Healthier Nation—(OHN)	762,403

Campaign	Cost (£)
Central Publicity	
Keep Warm, Keep Well—Elderly Health Promotion	459,260
Mental Illness Public Information	937,034
National Blood Service Publicity	1,306,620
NHS Performance Tables	401,687
NHS Professions Recruitment into Training, Retention and Return	2,210,000
Organ Donation	446,327
Patient's Charter	154,528
Strategy for Health (Health of the Young Nation)	2,350
The National Confidential Inquiry Into Suicide and Homicide by People with Mental Illness	5,281
The New NHS: Modern, Dependable White Paper	358,245 and 47,721
Travel Safe	122,244
1998–99	
Mental Health—Impact Strategy	530,650
NHS Direct	1,055,787
Organ and Tissue Donation	1,530,020
Hospital and Ambulance Performance Tables	387,091
NHS Charter	137,780
Food Safety	150,957
Our Healthier Nation—Health Strategy	428,831
Reducing Teenage Conceptions (Sexwise)	845,158
Tobacco Control	459,855
National Blood Service Publicity	1,027,610
Help With NHS Costs	185,698
NHS 50th Anniversary	108,654
Prescription Fraud	1,035,189
Blood—Waiting List Initiative	2,556,198
Health Care Export Sponsorship	277,241
Health Care Abroad for UK Travellers	712,036
Community Care—Direct Payments/Newsletters	107,676
HB6 Booklet—Disabled People	126,848
Health Promotion for Older People	393,907
Social Services White Paper	183,167
Health Professionals Recruitment	329,736
Nursing Midwifery and Health Visiting Recruitment	6,162,598
DH Corporate Stand	458,005
1999–2000	
Mental Health—Green Paper	134,753
Mental Health Impact Strategy	811,508
National Service Frameworks	437,671
Antibiotic Resistance	510,213
Nutrition	154,720
Food Safety	113,931
Infectious/Communicable Diseases	155,398
Injury Prevention—Our Healthier Nation	760,569
Teenage Pregnancies—Our Healthier Nation	798,353
National Blood Service	594,878
Fraud	946,286
Drugs—Policy Funded	437,348
Keep Warm Keep Well	291,053
Long Term Care Charter	209,202
HB6—Practical Guide for Disabled People	123,778
Childrens Personal Social Services	151,000
Quality Protects	277,770
Health Care Abroad for Travellers	837,129
Health Care Industry Sponsorship	152,121
Nurses Midwives and Health Visitors Strategy	242,904
Nurse Recruitment	5,361,707
Recruitment and Retention	158,906
NHS Careers Call Centre	738,617
Human Resources—NHS Communications	102,216
Employment/Service Equality	115,297
Violence Against NHS Staff	180,383
Quality—NHS Communications	142,800
Winter 2000—Emergency Pressures	1,501,151
NHS Direct	1,887,151
Tobacco Education Strategy	6,338,327

Expenditure

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for *(a)* Great Britain and *(b)* each health authority area, the expenditure on health per head of population, expressed in real terms, for (i) 1979, (ii) 1990 and (iii) each year since 1995; and if he will make a statement. [126588]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* Expenditure on health per head of population for England from 1995–96 to 1998–99, and for each health authority area in England from 1996–97 to 1998–99, expressed in real terms, is shown in the tables. Information relating to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland is a matter for the devolved Administrations.

Information on a comparable basis is not available for England in 1979 and 1990 and by health authority area for 1979, 1990 and 1995–96.

Table 1: Health authority areas in England—Expenditure on health by weighted head of population expressed in real terms

£

Health authority	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99
Avon	604.10	608.45	648.12
Barking and Havering	568.42	599.95	609.86
Barnet	617.52	645.96	643.54
Barnsley	533.55	534.57	541.74
Bedfordshire	555.50	559.89	590.57
Berkshire	590.77	585.69	626.01
Bexley and Greenwich	590.08	620.13	651.66
Birmingham	626.21	643.25	657.24
Bradford	592.57	600.26	592.18
Brent and Harrow	626.83	647.74	685.59
Bromley	531.39	568.71	594.66
Buckinghamshire	591.14	598.67	623.29
Bury and Rochdale	635.04	601.40	590.18
Calderdale and Kirklees	545.89	560.51	568.26
Cambridge and Huntingdon	562.83	579.96	626.05
Camden and Islington	679.56	646.10	715.85
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	562.08	581.08	594.33
County Durham	560.23	560.95	577.59
Coventry	564.20	576.37	573.88
Croydon	558.88	580.04	627.01
Doncaster	566.86	589.19	590.50
Dorset	566.65	588.45	616.76
Dudley	556.55	568.79	596.54
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	639.29	635.11	648.62
East and North Hertfordshire	612.06	627.86	672.45
East Kent	541.81	563.49	599.58
East Lancashire	579.46	597.33	600.28
East London and The City	637.65	617.78	611.10
East Norfolk	600.55	609.48	622.62
East Riding	586.16	588.83	595.26
East Surrey	673.78	682.91	732.28
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	533.12	575.76	591.85
Enfield and Haringey	563.94	572.60	598.76
Gateshead and South Tyneside	575.88	588.81	585.34
Gloucestershire	591.10	604.05	620.19
Herefordshire	609.73	629.95	632.66
Hillingdon	593.55	588.22	620.76
Isle of Wight	610.92	653.43	673.11
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	689.84	665.97	678.73
Kingston and Richmond	657.53	671.98	705.85
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	605.93	614.46	631.66
Leeds	603.51	623.83	620.30
Leicestershire	594.36	611.33	610.51
Lincolnshire	595.31	616.80	620.69
Liverpool	576.42	606.37	614.80
Manchester	610.93	634.15	664.00
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	622.72	632.15	666.83
Morecambe Bay	626.92	640.65	657.00
Newcastle and North Tyneside	587.30	608.90	592.44

Table 1: Health authority areas in England—Expenditure on health by weighted head of population expressed in real terms

£

Health authority	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99
North and East Devon	595.69	610.93	623.70
North and Mid Hampshire	599.30	620.27	649.02
North Cheshire	593.24	599.10	611.63
North Cumbria	580.99	587.68	595.97
North Derbyshire	580.62	603.47	626.54
North Essex	562.72	577.67	598.50
North Nottinghamshire	554.17	576.26	581.66
North Staffordshire	553.94	578.04	580.76
North West Anglia	556.21	561.76	577.90
North West Lancashire	570.98	572.27	572.27
North Yorkshire	582.69	599.91	644.63
Northamptonshire	561.50	569.54	598.71
Northumberland	606.71	624.60	635.69
Nottingham	554.46	571.01	606.90
Oxfordshire	570.18	584.42	606.26
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	523.13	544.27	568.35
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	592.98	624.80	667.85
Rotherham	537.60	549.62	561.32
Salford and Trafford	579.14	583.01	596.22
Sandwell	590.45	599.90	612.04
Sefton	601.08	596.69	611.08
Sheffield	626.16	613.48	617.17
Shropshire	554.35	571.40	586.95
Solihull	653.53	650.66	675.33
Somerset	573.64	589.71	606.92
South and West Devon	569.52	593.84	604.73
South Cheshire	599.18	601.79	638.29
South Derbyshire	609.03	612.72	612.57
South Essex	520.90	566.06	585.05
South Humber	585.14	628.20	640.48
South Lancashire	576.69	615.99	651.03
South Staffordshire	576.37	586.55	598.75
Southampton and South West Hampshire	561.96	607.09	637.42
St. Helens and Knowsley	571.01	582.04	594.03
Stockport	570.65	579.48	597.21
Suffolk	568.51	576.67	607.46
Sunderland	557.71	572.61	565.45
Tees	549.75	556.70	571.18
Wakefield	641.81	678.28	680.48
Walsall	557.93	571.77	573.81
Warwickshire	624.07	654.64	648.76
West Hertfordshire	637.38	629.70	656.64
West Kent	569.34	589.59	606.13
West Pennine	532.03	546.29	553.70
West Surrey	659.55	631.78	662.70
West Sussex	557.06	578.93	622.23
Wigan and Bolton	533.68	549.89	561.70
Wiltshire	616.88	620.53	657.37
Wirral	548.21	558.69	610.88
Wolverhampton	559.93	571.70	591.12
Worcestershire	610.38	646.17	668.52

Notes:

1. Figures for 1996–97 and 1997–98 have been shown in real terms, with 1998–99 as the baseline, using the GDP deflator.

2. Expenditure is taken from HA Annual Accounts which are prepared on a resource basis and therefore differ from cash allocations in each year (These are not the total amounts spent on healthcare. General Dental Services expenditure is separately accounted for and cannot be analysed by health authority over the three years). Since 1997–98 drugs expenditure has been mainly accounted for by the Prescription Pricing Authority. For consistency figures have been reduced by the amount of non-cash limited prescribing expenditure accounted for by the health authority in each year.)

Sources:

1. Health Authority accounts for 1996–97, 1997–98 and 1998–99.

2. Weighted population estimates for 1996–97, 1997–98, and 1998–99.

3. GDP Deflator: 1963–64 to 1998–99 calculated from ONS data for GDP (YBHA and ABMI)

Table 2: Expenditure on health by weighted head of population expressed in real terms

	£
1995–96	665.08
1996–97	658.66
1997–98	676.22
1998–99	688.59

Notes:

1. Figures for 1995–96, 1996–97 and 1997–98 have been shown in real terms, with 1998–99 as the baseline, using the GDP deflator.

2. Expenditure is taken from the HA summarised accounts which are prepared on a resource basis and therefore differ from cash allocations in each year, and from the accounts of the General Dental Services and Prescription Pricing Authority.

Sources:

1. Weighted population estimates for 1995–96, 1996–97, 1997–98, and 1998–99.

2. GDP Deflator: 1963–64 to 1998–99 calculated from ONS data for GDP (YBHA and ABMI).

3. Summarised account of the health authorities 1996–97, 1997–98, and 1998–99.

4. Summarised account of the regional and district health authorities and special health authorities for the London postgraduate teaching hospitals 1995–96.

5. Summarised account of the family health services authorities 1995–96.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the per capita spend on health in *(a)* the Yorkshire and Humber region, *(b)* Scotland and *(c)* Wales. [126650]

Mr. Hutton: The per capita spend on health by health authorities in the Yorkshire and Humber region during 1998–99 was:

£605.84

Information relating to Wales and Scotland is a matter for the devolved Administrations.

Sources:

Weighted population estimates for 1998–99.

The accounts of the following health authorities for 1998–99:

Barnsley HA

Bradford HA

Calderdale and Kirklees HA

Doncaster HA

East Riding HA

Leeds HA

North Yorkshire HA

Rotherham HA

Sheffield HA

Wakefield HA.

Genito-urinary Services

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many doctors, nurses and other NHS staff were employed in genito-urinary medicine in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980, *(c)* 1990 and *(d)* 1999; and how much their employment cost in each of these years. [126799]

Mr. Denham: Information about the number of medical staff employed in genito-urinary medicine in 1970, 1980, 1990 and 1999 is shown in the table. Specialty specific information about numbers of nurses and other National Health Service staff and employment costs is not collected centrally.

Hospital medical staff, in the specialty Genito-urinary medicine England at 30 September each year

Year	Number
1970[1]	240
1980	360
1990	580
1999	780

[1] 1970 figures are for England and Wales—it is not possible to separate only medical staff working in England

Note:

Figures are rounded to the nearest 10

Source:

Department of Health medical and dental workforce census

GPs

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what the average cost was of one hour of a GP's working time, excluding seniority payments but including supporting staff and premises, in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980, *(c)* 1990 and *(d)* 1999 at constant prices; [126829]

(2) what the average cost of a GP was, excluding seniority payments but including supporting staff and premises, in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980, *(c)* 1990 and *(d)* 1999. [126749]

Mr. Denham: The latest available data are for the financial year 1998–99. Expenditure on General Medical Services and Personal Medical Services per general practitioner unrestricted principle or equivalent was as follows:

Year	£
1970–71	7,808
1980–81	28,608
1990–91	61,232
1998–99	101,191

Expenditure at 1998–99 prices (based on gross domestic product and GDP deflators) was as follows:

Year	£
1970–71	68,710
1980–81	67,035
1990–91	78,868
1998–99	101,191

Expenditure per GP in 1998–99 excluding seniority payments was £99,540. Seniority payments are not centrally identifiable for the previous years. Information on GPs' working time is not available for the years in question.

District Nurses

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the cost was of the district nurse service in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980, *(c)* 1990 and *(d)* 1999; and how many were employed in each of those years. [126827]

Mr. Denham: Numbers of district nurses employed in the service are shown in the table. The cost of the district nurse service in this series of years cannot be disaggregated from general expenditure on community nursing and medicine.

NHS Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS): All district nursing staff employed by the NHS, in England as at 30 September each year

	Whole time equivalent	Numbers (headcount)
1970	[1]—	[1]—
1980[2]	12,861	[1]—
1990	10,390	11,650
1999	11,380	14,260

[1] Not available

[2] Includes staff with and without district training and staff assisting district nursing. A new classification of the non-medical workforce was introduced in 1995. Information based on this classification is not directly comparable with earlier years.

Notes:

1. Figures are rounded to the nearest ten.
2. Due to rounding totals may not equal the sum of component parts.
3. Figures exclude learners and agency staff.

Source:

Department of Health Non-Medical Workforce Census.

Health Visitors

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the cost was of the health visitor service in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980, *(c)* 1990 and *(d)* 1999 and how many people were employed in the service in each of those years. [126831]

Mr. Denham: Numbers of health visitors employed in the service are shown in the table. The cost of the health visitor service in this series of years cannot be disaggregated from general expenditure on community nursing and medicine.

NHS hospital and community health services (HCHS): all health visiting staff employed by the NHS, in England as at 30 September each year

	Whole-time equivalent	Numbers (headcount)
1970[1]	5,910	[2]—
1980	8,760	[2]—
1990	10,580	12,200
1999	10,160	12,800

[1] England and Wales figure

[2] Not available

Notes:

1. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10
2. Figures exclude learners and agency staff
3. A new classification of the non-medical workforce was introduced in 1995. Information based on this classification is not directly comparable with earlier years.

Source:

Department of Health Non-Medical Workforce Census

Dental Services

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps the Government are taking to increase the number of NHS dentists *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the North-West; and if he will make a statement. [127069]

Ms Stuart: There are currently 17,821 dentists working in the General Dental Services in England and 2,261 in the north west region, more than ever before. Problems have arisen because more dentists are devoting more time to private dental work, working part-time and there are some areas where dentists seem reluctant to practice. We have accepted the Doctors' and Dentists' Review Body

recommendation for a commitment scheme rewarding loyalty to the National Health Service. The scheme will cost £17 million per annum for England. The personal dental services pilot scheme, including dental access centres, is encouraging health authorities to be locally responsive and contribute to make NHS dentistry more widely available. Investing in dentistry saw £10 million in grants given to NHS dentists in return for promises of up to 900,000 new NHS registrations. Further measures will be contained in our dental strategy, due to be published this summer.

Note:

Expenditure is taken from health authority annual accounts which are prepared on a resource basis and therefore differ from cash allocations in each year. (These are not the total amounts spent on healthcare. General Dental Services expenditure is separately accounted for and cannot be analysed by health authority over the three years). Since 1997–98 drugs expenditure has been mainly accounted for by the Prescription Pricing Authority. For consistency figures have been reduced by the amount of non-cash limited prescribing expenditure accounted for by the health authority in each year.

Parkinson's Disease

Mr. Garnier: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the guidance given to medical practitioners by the NICE with regard to the treatment of Parkinson's Disease. [127297]

Mr. Denham: At present National Institute for Clinical Excellence has not issued any guidance to medical practitioners with regard to the treatment of Parkinson's Disease. However, we are currently considering a number of possible additional topics for appraisal by NICE during the remainder of the current year and in later years. Announcements will be made in due course.

Child Abuse

Dr. Desmond Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many cases of child abuse *(a)* allegations and *(b)* convictions there were in the five years (i) before and (ii) after the changes in court procedures following the implementation of the Children Act 1989. [127548]

Mr. Hutton: The Children Act 1989 was implemented in October 1991. However, although the Children Act 1989 changed the private and public functions of the civil law relating to the welfare of children, it did not change the criminal law in respect of offences against children.

In terms of allegations of child abuse, no statistics are available on the number of referrals to social services departments for the five-year period (1986–87 to 1990–91), prior to the implementation of the Act. However, "Child Protection: Messages from Research" (Department of Health, 1995) indicates that there are about 160,000 cases referred to social services departments per annum.

Statistics relating to convictions for offences against children, as set out in Section 1 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933, are shown in the table.

The number of persons convicted at all courts under the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 (Section 1), England and Wales, 1987–1996, is as follows:

Offence: Cruelty or neglect of children

Year	*Number*
1987	143
1988	164
1989	211
1990	247
1991	234
1992	208
1993	205
1994	236
1995	302
1996	293

Medication

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will review the obligations on general practitioners to carry out tests and examinations as recommended by drug manufacturers *(a)* prior to placing patients on medication and *(b)* during treatment; [127482]

(2) if he will review the obligations on general practitioners and chemists to provide patients with dosage for prescription-only medicines. [127481]

Ms Stuart: General practitioners should carry out a proper assessment before initiating a patient on any treatment and thereafter review the patient's treatment at regular intervals.

The British National Formulary, which is issued twice a year to all GPs and pharmacists, recommends that the dose and the dose frequency should be stated on a prescription, which will then be put on the label by the pharmacist.

Hospital Readmissions

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients in each NHS region were readmitted to hospital within one month of their discharge in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [127165]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 22 June 2000]:* Information on the number of patients readmitted to hospital within one month of discharge was originally published in June 1999 in "Quality and Performance in the NHS: Clinical Indicators, Technical Supplement". This document contains data for 1996–97 and 1997–98 and is available in the Library.

Primary Care Trusts

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many primary care groups have made representations against conversion into primary care trusts. [127488]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 23 June 2000]:* All 22 primary care trusts (PCTs) already operating or announced enjoy the full support of their predecessor primary care groups (PCGs).

We have made clear that the move to PCT status should be locally driven and determined by the preferences of the PCG(s) and other local stakeholders. Any proposal which enjoys PCG support automatically goes to public consultation and PCGs may also express a view on PCT proposals prepared by others.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many of the written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 have not received substantive answers, citing as the reason that the information is *(a)* not held centrally, *(b)* not held in the form requested and *(c)* not available. [127434]

Ms Stuart: Out of the 2,797 Parliamentary Questions tabled to the Department in the period between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000, we were unable to give substantive answers to 82 because the information was either not held centrally or not available. Substantive answers to a further two Questions could not be given because the information was not held in the form requested.

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many parliamentary questions were tabled to his Department between the 19 October 1999 and the 20 April, which requested information, pursuant to his previous answers. [127672]

Ms Stuart: Of the 2,797 questions tabled to this Department in the period between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000, 79 were pursuant to previous answers.

Cystic Fibrosis

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* children and *(b)* adults in (i) Coventry, (ii) the West Midlands and (iii) the United Kingdom receive treatment for cystic fibrosis and conditions resulting from cystic fibrosis. [127449]

Mr. Denham: It is estimated from the incidence data in the Morbidity Study of General Practice for 1991–92 and data from the mid-1992 census estimates, that 3,725 patients in England and Wales consulted their general practice with cystic fibrosis. These figures are the latest available. This information cannot be used to estimate the number of general practice consultations in the West Midlands region or Coventry.

The figures in the table show the number of hospital admissions in 1998–99 in Coventry, the West Midlands region and England, where the primary diagnosis was cystic fibrosis. Information about hospital admissions in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales is a matter for the devolved administrations.

Area of residence	*Children (Aged 0–17)*	*Adults (18+)*	*Total*
Coventry	24	7	31
West Midlands	460	257	717
England (area of treatment)	5,065	4,109	9,164

The databases available to the Department do not record whether one particular condition has resulted from another, and figures about other conditions caused by cystic fibrosis are therefore not available.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what advice he has issued to hospitals on dealing with patients who receive treatment as children but have it discontinued when they reach adulthood due to insufficient resources; [127445]

(2) what provision is made for young adults with cystic fibrosis when they cease to qualify for treatment in children's wards; [127447]

(3) if he will make a statement on the treatment received by people with cystic fibrosis when they cease to qualify for treatment in children's wards. [127446]

Mr. Denham: For health care to be effective National Health Service commissioners will need to ensure that there are clear pathways to provide a continuity of care taking patients from childhood, into adolescence and beyond. This is particularly important in chronic conditions such as cystic fibrosis which have benefited from advances in medical science and where patients now survive into adulthood. The new arrangements for commissioning specialised services will develop a more systematic approach to commissioning that will ensure there are properly co-ordinated arrangements for the delivery of services for all cystic fibrosis patients.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what resources are available for the treatment of cystic fibrosis and conditions resulting from cystic fibrosis for *(a)* children and *(b)* adults in (i) Coventry, (ii) the West Midlands and (iii) the United Kingdom; [127450]

(2) what assessment he has made of a reasonable distance to travel for treatment for people with cystic fibrosis; [127448]

Mr. Denham: Patients with cystic fibrosis and conditions resulting from cystic fibrosis have access to an extensive range of diagnostic and remedial resources both in hospitals and in primary care. For some treatments patients may need access to specialist skills or equipment that are best provided in a smaller number of centres where clinicians can regularly see a large number of patients. In these circumstances patients may need to travel to gain access to that expertise. The Hospital Travel Costs Scheme, which is part of the National Health Service Low Income Scheme, is available to assist those who are in receipt of a qualifying benefit.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Crop Contamination

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what powers his Department has to prevent crop contamination. [123920]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 5 June 2000]:* In respect of possible transfer of pollen from GM crops to conventional or organic crops, my Department has wide

powers under the Environmental Protection Act 1990 to prevent the marketing or planting of GMOs without a valid consent.

The Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment assesses the safety implications of all forms of possible gene transfer from GM crops and only those which present no adverse implications to public health or the environment are granted approval to be grown.

My Department has recently announced that checks for the presence of GM material will commence on imported conventional seed. In addition, the Ministry of Agriculture has launched a review of GM crop separation distances.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on which date he requested the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment Department to give advice on whether the crops of GM contaminated Hyola oilseed rape were safe for the environment, when he received the advice; and what it was. [124323]

Mr. Meacher: The information given by Advanta, at their meeting with officials from my Department and MAFF, on 17 April was extremely sketchy. At that stage, Advanta had been warned by the German authorities that some GM contamination in some supplies of seeds might have occurred. They did not at that stage know for sure whether a GM had been involved, or which GM it was, or which seed batches had been affected, to which countries those seed batches had been dispatched, or in which years. Advanta informed my Department at that time that they were initiating urgent inquires. However, it took until 10 May to obtain sufficient information, particularly on which GM was involved to be able to provide ACRE with a basis for their decision, and in some respects the investigation is still going on.

ACRE's advice is that there are no adverse implications for human health or the environment.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what basis he and his advisers concluded that there was no environmental risk arising out of the contamination of Advanta rapeseeds. [124155]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 5 June 2000]:* The first step was to identify the types of genetically modified seeds present in the affected batches of oil seed rape.

The affected seeds were in fact a well-known herbicide-tolerant rape line grown commercially in North America. This line has also been grown in field trials in the UK and there are currently 12 consents for field trials of these plants. On each occasion, the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE) had considered a full dossier on information about the GM rapeseed and its possible environmental impact, before consent was granted.

Therefore, when ACRE were consulted about the Advanta seeds, they were able to give advice about the possible environmental risks from growing oilseed rape containing a small proportion of these seeds.

No-smoking Policy

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on *(a)* the effectiveness of his Department's no-smoking policy and *(b)* the proportion of his Department's offices that do not allow smoking. [125155]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My Department operates a no-smoking policy in all of its buildings with smoking permitted only in designated rooms. The policy is considered to be effective. My Department will review this policy when the Health and Safety Executive issues the new Approved Code of Practice on Smoking.

Combined Heat and Power

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will define the phrase quality combined heat and power plant in relation to the climate change levy in respect of the greenhouse industry. [125722]

Mr. Meacher: Good Quality combined heat and power is generation which delivers a high level of useful heat and electricity from the same fuel input. Good Quality CHP will achieve efficiencies significantly above those of conventional generation, where the waste heat is simply vented away.

I announced key decisions on the detailed methodology for assessing the quality of CHP, and the operation of the mechanism for assessing existing and proposed schemes, in my statement to the House on 17 May 2000, *Official Report*, columns 137–381. Use of the mechanism will be implemented by statutory orders under the Finance Bill currently under discussion.

The decisions follow consultation with operators and users of combined heat and power schemes, including those used in the greenhouse industry. The proposed CHP Quality Assurance programme provides a practical, reliable method for determining the quality of all sizes and types of CHP scheme for a range of purposes, including eligibility for exemption from the climate change levy.

Public Telephones and IT Kiosks

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how long a local authority planning department has in which to object to the proposed installation of *(a)* telephone booths, *(b)* telephone boxes and *(c)* information kiosks; [126283]

(2) what planning powers are available to local authorities in respect of work by telecommunications operators to convert public telephones to IT kiosks. [126285]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Certain telecommunications operators licensed by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry under the Telecommunications Act 1984 (the 1984 Act) are granted special rights to assist in the installation and maintenance of their systems. These powers, which are set out in Schedule 2 to the 1984 Act—the "Telecommunications Code"—are further governed by provisions in operators' licences and Town and Country Planning legislation, which impose exceptions and conditions on the use of these powers.

Under the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995, as amended, (GPDO) code system operators have permitted development rights for the installation, alteration or replacement of a range of telecommunication apparatus.

As regards the installation of public call boxes, which include telephone booths and telephone boxes, these PDRs are subject to a prior approval procedure under the GPDO. Operators must give the local planning authority the opportunity to say whether they wish to approve, within 28 days, details of the siting and appearance of the installation. An authority may refuse such approval, if they consider this to be justified.

As regards information kiosks, their installation by operators licensed to do so would enjoy permitted development rights under the GPDO. However, where it is intended that the kiosk included a voice telephony service it is likely that it would be treated as a public call box for the purposes of the GPDO and the prior approval procedure outlined above would apply.

A local authority has the power to withdraw permitted development rights by making a Direction under Article 4 of the GPDO. These powers should be used only in exceptional circumstances and are intended for use where there is a real and specific threat to the proper planning or amenities of a limited area.

Under the terms of its licence, an operator wishing to install an information kiosk which did not include a voice telephony service would have to give the local planning authority 28 days' notice of their intention to do so.

As regards the conversion of public call boxes to information kiosks, alteration or replacement of such boxes by a code system operator would require prior approval under the 28 day procedure outlined above. Whether conversion to an information kiosk constituted alteration or replacement would depend on the circumstances of the case. If it did not do so, permitted development rights would apply without a requirement for prior approval.

If a company has not had the Telecommunications Code applied to it under the 1984 Act they will not have the associated permitted development rights under the GPDO. If such a company wishes to install a telephone booth, a telephone box or information kiosk they would be required to submit an application for planning permission to the local planning authority.

HFCs

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what evidence his Department has based its view that HFCs are not sustainable technology in the long term. [127002]

Mr. Meacher: The Government's draft climate change programme includes a new policy statement on HFCs because they are powerful greenhouse gases and are included in the basket of gases controlled under the Kyoto Protocol. We recognise that HFCs are necessary replacements for ozone-depleting substances in some applications, but we are concerned that emissions from these sources are forecast to grow strongly in the near future. This trend is unsustainable in the longer term and action needs to be taken to limit the projected growth.

Our position would allow HFCs to continue to be used where they are necessary, but we recognise that the successful phase out of ozone-depleting substances is being achieved with a range of technologies. We believe that continued technological developments will mean that HFCs may eventually be able to be replaced in applications where they are currently necessary. We therefore believe it is right to give a clear signal to industry and users to look closely at these alternatives and to select those that are more environmentally acceptable where they do exist. Of course safety, technical feasibility and cost effectiveness should be taken into account before investment decisions are taken.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the occasions in the last 12 months on which Ministers in his Department have met *(a)* Greenpeace, *(b)* other environmental groups and *(c)* representatives of the refrigeration industry to discuss the future use of HFCs. [126976]

Mr. Meacher: There have been no meetings between DETR Ministers and any group to discuss specifically the future use of HFCs. However, in January I met representatives from Greenpeace and EnvirosMarch consultancy to discuss the report "UK Emissions of HFCs, PFCs and SF_6 and Potential Emission Reduction Options" which was prepared for the DETR by EnvirosMarch.

Incinerators

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the applications that are outstanding by type and capacity for the construction of incinerators. [126761]

Mr. Meacher: In England and Wales the Environment Agency is responsible for regulating waste incineration processes described in part A of sections 1.3(C) and 5.1 of the Environmental Protection (Prescribed Processes and Substances) Regulation SI19991/No. 472.

The operators set out have made an application to the Agency for an IPC authorisation, or for a variation to conditions attached to their current authorisation. The list also incorporates any variations to conditions that have been initiated by the Agency. The lists do not include applications made for incinerator units acting as abatement equipment (e.g. chemical manufacturing plant), or for the incineration of waste in plant whose primary purpose is some other purpose (e.g. cement works). The capacity of each individual incinerator application is not held centrally by the Agency.

Information on land-use planning applications is held by local planning authorities.

Section 1.3 (C)—burning waste oil, recovered oil or fuel manufactured from or comprising waste

Solrec Ltd.

Jaguar Cars Ltd.

Fibrogen Ltd.

Section 5.1 (a)—destruction by burning in an incinerator of waste plastics, chemicals or wastes arising from chemicals or plastics manufacture

Thames Water Utilities Ltd. (two applications)

White Rose Environment Ltd.

Eurocare Environmental Services Ltd.

Section 5.1 (b)—destruction by burning of bromine, cadmium, chlorine, fluorine, iodine, lead, mercury, nitrogen, phosphorus, sulphur and zinc containing wastes

Merck Sharp and Dohme Ltd.
Medipower Services Ltd.
The BOC Group

Section 5.1 (C)—destruction by burning of any other waste, including animal remains, where the plant is designed to incinerate in excess of 1tph (including municipal waste)

Kent Enviropower Ltd.
Yorkshire Water Services Ltd. (four applications)
WRE Services Ltd.
Onyx Hampshire Ltd.
Shanks Chemical Services Ltd.
Northwick Park Hospital
White Rose Environmental Ltd.
RMC Tilbury Aggregates Ltd.

Waste Management

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received about the SBS system of aerobic degradation and municipal waste; and what responses he has made. [126764]

Mr. Meacher: I am not aware of any representations made to my Department about the application of the anaerobic Sludge Blanketing System to municipal waste.

Dioxins

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) of 24 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 539W, on dioxins, what levels of dioxins have been identified in the environment of East Sussex for each year since 1991; and if he will make a statement. [126261]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* The Government have made no measurements for dioxins specifically in the environment of East Sussex since 1991.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to implement the recommendations of the Stewart Inquiry relating to planning regulations affecting mobile phone telecommunications masts. [127154]

Ms Beverley Hughes: In their response to the report of the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones, issued on 11 May 2000, the Government said that they were minded to introduce a requirement for full planning permission for all new telecommunications masts, but would need to consult widely before doing so, including on the purpose and precise scope of any new arrangements. We shall issue a consultation paper on this and related guidance as soon as practicable.

Greenhouse Gases

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out the monitoring arrangements for levels of greenhouse gas production in the UK. [127147]

Mr. Meacher: My Department compiles and publishes an annual inventory of UK greenhouse gas emissions by sources and removals by sinks to fulfil international reporting requirements of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the European Union Monitoring Mechanism. Separate greenhouse gas inventories are also published for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The inventories are produced according to guidelines published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and conform to internationally agreed good practice.

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for *(a)* Scotland, *(b)* England and Wales and *(c)* the UK the changes in the levels of production of the six greenhouse gases in each year since 1990; and what the forecast reduction is for the following 10 years. [127148]

Mr. Meacher: UK emissions of the "basket" of six greenhouse gases, weighted by their global warming potential (GWP), fell by 8.7 per cent. between 1990 and 1998. UK emissions of carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas, fell by 7 per cent. over the same period. The changes in the levels of emissions of the six greenhouse gases in each year from 1990 to 1998 for the UK are given in Table 1. 1998 is the latest year for which we have complete data. Disaggregated data are only available for the years 1990 and 1995 for Scotland and England and Wales at present (Table 2) but data for 1998 will be available later this year.

Table 3 shows projected changes in UK emissions of the six greenhouse gases between 1990 (the baseline year for our climate change targets) and 2010, before the impact of the measures set out in the UK's draft climate change programme, published in March. There are currently no disaggregated projections for England and Wales and Scotland although my Department is funding a research contract to provide disaggregated projections of the non-carbon dioxide greenhouse gases which will be available later this year.

Table 1: UK Greenhouse gas emissions, percentage change on previous year

Percentage

Gas	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
CO_2	0.6	−2.4	−2.6	−0.5	−1.5	3.3	−4.4	0.4
CH_4	−1.4	−2.6	−10.0	−7.4	−0.9	−2.2	−3.2	−4.6
N_2O	−2.8	−11.2	−6.6	8.8	−4.3	3.4	2.7	−4.2
HFCs	4.3	4.1	4.5	7.1	10.1	7.2	13.3	9.6
PFCs	−22.1	−48.7	−15.2	25.5	14.2	−17.8	−28.2	−1.7
SF_6	0.8	0.7	0.7	11.2	1.9	9.3	−2.0	0.5
Total GWP	0.1	−3.2	−3.5	−0.2	−1.4	2.9	−3.4	−0.1
Change on 1990 levels	0.1	−3.0	−6.5	−6.7	−8.0	−5.3	−8.5	−8.7

Table 2: Greenhouse gas emissions for Scotland and England and Wales, percentage change from 1990 to 1995

Percentage

Greenhouse Gas	*Scotland*	*England and Wales*
CO_2	0.5	−9
CH_4	−9.5	−23
N_2O	−12.5	−17
HFCs	0	32
PFCs	100	−74
SF_6	0	53
Total GWP	−0.9	−10

Table 3: Projected greenhouse gas emissions for UK, percentage change from 1990 to 2010

Percentage

Greenhouse Gas	*UK*
CO_2	−7
CH_4	−45
N_2O	−35
HFCs	10
PFCs	−83
SF_6	35
Total GWP	−13

Countryside and Rights of Way Bill

Mr. Garnier: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the sources other than his Department's own legal service, from which he took legal advice with regard to the implications of the European Convention on Human Rights for the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill. [127314]

Mr. Mullin: It is not the practice of the Government to disclose the legal advice which they have received on any matter, nor the source of such advice.

Waterloo/Exeter Line

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what reasons underlay the decision of the Franchising Director of the Shadow Strategic Rail Authority concerning of the amount of notice given between the announcement of a possible new micro franchise on the Waterloo/Exeter rail line and the pre-qualification date for bidders; if he will instruct the Regulator to extend this deadline; and if he will make a statement. [126689]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 22 June 2000]:* The Secretary of State has asked the Franchising Director to write to the right hon. Member explaining the history of this decision and the future proposals for both the Waterloo/Exeter railway line and replacement plans for South West Trains franchise and other franchise in the area. This letter will be placed in the Library.

Radioactive Waste

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will obtain from Greenpeace their evidence on radioactive waste in the Hurd Deep. [127567]

Mr. Meacher: I am not aware of the video referred to. I expect Greenpeace will send me a copy if they consider it contains material of interest to my Department.

Land Reclamation

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, what recent discussions he has had with the European Commission about its ruling on the investment of Government money in derelict land reclamation. [127570]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I refer my hon. Friend to my answer of 24 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 536W. My right hon. Friend, the Minister for Local Government and the Regions met Commissioner Monti on 2 March to discuss the problems we face in partnership working with the private sector in regeneration since the Commission's decision that the Partnership Investment Programme breached the state aid rules. These discussions continue at official level.

Cap de la Hague

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his reply to the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) of 7 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 244W, on Cap de la Hague, if he will request information from *(a)* the French nuclear authorities and *(b)* Greenpeace France on nuclear waste liquid discharges and atmospheric radioactive discharges from the Cap de la Hague nuclear waste processing site. [127612]

Mr. Meacher: The operators of the La Hague site, Cogema, regularly publish details of their liquid and aerial radioactive discharges. Such discharges are closely controlled by the French regulatory authority and comply with international limits for doses to the public. If there are specific reasons why my hon. Friend believes extra information is needed related to specific accidents I would be interested for my hon. Friend to let me know.

Noise Control

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the total expenditure of UK local authorities on noise control in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [127651]

Ms Beverley Hughes: This information is not centrally available.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions his Department has had with parties other than Dome Europe and Legacy plc and their affiliates concerning the future use of the Dome since the final shortlist was announced. [127822]

Ms Armstrong: Since the final shortlist announcement neither my Department nor the competition team has had any discussions about the future use of the Dome site with any parties interested in purchasing it other than the two bidders. The Competition Team has received a small

number of new expressions of interest, but has made it clear that no new bids can be accepted into the competition process at this advanced stage.

Energy (Office Buildings)

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the effect of the freehold tenant relationship on energy use in office buildings. [127453]

Mr. Raynsford: None. However, in 1998 my Department's Property Advisory Group published a report "Sustainable Development and Buildings" commending the use of all-inclusive occupation agreements in commercial buildings as a means of reducing energy consumption. Under such arrangements, the landlord provides a comprehensive range of services besides letting the property—for example, energy, insurance, repairs and maintenance—for an all-inclusive charge. The Property Advisory Group saw these as giving landlord and tenant a mutual interest in reducing occupation costs, including energy costs.

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his estimate of the increase in energy consumption in commercial buildings, including the office sector, in the last 15 years for which figures are available. [127452]

Mrs. Liddell: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 23 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 313W.

Heathrow Airport (Night Flights)

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will call for a report from the British Airports Authority listing all flights with airline designation, departure point and departure time from that point, arriving at Heathrow Airport before 6 am each day and the approximate time of each arrival. [127665]

Mr. Mullin: I will write to my hon. Friend.

Wandsworth School Planning Application

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will make a decision on the planning application by the London Borough of Wandsworth for a new secondary school on the site of Wandsworth School, Sutherland Grove, London SW18. [127732]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Secretary of State has today issued a decision to the London Borough of Wandsworth refusing Conservation Area Consent for their application to demolish buildings on this site.

Aviation Agreements

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what recent representations he has received on the liberalisation of the London-US transatlantic aviation agreement through Heathrow; and if he will make a statement; [127246]

(2) if he will make a statement on the Open Skies agreements between EU countries and the US; and what progress has been made in securing a similar agreement between the UK and the US. [127247]

Mr. Mullin: I have received representations on matters relating to the liberalisation of the UK/US aviation market from all sectors of the UK aviation industry, from consumer interests and from other sources.

A number of EU countries have concluded Open Skies agreements with the US. The UK's goal is a liberalised aviation agreement which goes further than the US template and secures access for UK carriers to the US domestic market.

Inland Waterways

Mr. Pound: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish the report on the inland waterways referred to in the White Paper, A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone; and if he will make a statement. [128006]

Mr. Prescott: The report, entitled "Waterways for Tomorrow", will be published tomorrow. Copies will be available from the House of Commons Library and the Vote Office on Tuesday 27 June.

"Waterways for Tomorrow" takes a comprehensive look at the inland waterways of England and Wales and sets out our proposals for their future. We intend to promote the inland waterways and encourage a modern, integrated and sustainable approach to their use. We want to protect and conserve the waterways as an important part of the country's national heritage while, at the same time, encouraging their best and, where appropriate, innovative use, maximising the opportunities they offer for leisure and recreation; as a catalyst for urban and rural regeneration; for education; and for freight transport.

We believe that the measures set out in "Waterways for Tomorrow" will pave the way for a new, revitalised inland waterways system which can be fully, imaginatively and adventurously used by all. This is good news for the environment, the community and the economy.

GM Crops

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what account was taken of the outbreak of rhizomania disease at Sunnymead Farm in Essex when permission was granted to hold a GM crop trial there; what contact he has had with MAFF regarding the outbreak of this disease at this site; and if he will make a statement. [127595]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 23 June 2000]:* Rhizomania is a disease of sugar beet and its presence on a farm has no implications for trials of GM maize under the farm-scale evaluation programme. MAFF apply controls on farms affected by the disease to limit its spread. These include the adoption of routine hygiene measures by people visiting the farm.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the circumstances in which the Government have a duty to make public the location of crop sites accidentally sown with GM-contaminated seeds. [126817]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* A request for this information to be released could be made under the Environmental Information Regulations 1992 (as amended by the Environmental Information (Amendment) Regulations 1998), which place a statutory obligation on

relevant persons who hold specified information relating to the environment to make that information available to every person who requests it. The statutory obligation is subject to a number of exceptions as set out in the regulations. My Department does not, however, hold information on the location of the sites sown with GM-contaminated seeds.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Home Detention Curfew Scheme

13. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many drug dealers and traffickers have been released on the Home Detention Curfew Scheme. [126131]

Mr. Boateng: As of 31 May 2000, the number of prisoners convicted of the following drugs-related offences have been placed on the Home Detention Curfew scheme:

122 convicted of production;

1,156 convicted of supply;

1,476 convicted of possession with intent; and

222 convicted of unlawful import or export.

16. **Miss Kirkbride:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many child sex offenders have been released on the Home Detention Curfew Scheme. [126134]

Mr. Boateng: As of 31 May 2000, two prisoners subject to the Sex Offenders Act 1997 have been released in this way. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has previously informed the House that both successfully completed their curfew period and have not been known to reoffend since.

The Government amendment to the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill will mean that sex offenders subject to the 1997 Act will be excluded from the home detention curfew scheme altogether.

Crime and Disorder Act 1998

14. **Mr. Leigh:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the impact of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. [126132]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 has been widely hailed as one of the most progressive pieces of legislation in the criminal justice field for many decades, and good progress is being made with its implementation .

17. **Mr. Darvill:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he is taking to encourage local partnerships to make use of the Orders made available to them in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. [126135]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Tackling disorderly behaviour is among the Government's highest priorities, and I have therefore taken special steps to promote the use of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders. An action group was set up under Lord Warner to consider issues relating to their use, 10 regional seminars were held to promote best practice, and guidance in the form of model partnership agreements will be issued later this month.

Proportional Representation

15. **Mr. Curry:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he had made of the use of proportional representation at elections in the United Kingdom. [126133]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government believe that an electoral system should be appropriate to the body being elected. The proportional voting systems used to elect the European Parliament, Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and Greater London Authority have resulted in those bodies being broadly representative of the people they serve.

Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill

18. **Mr. Michael:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had with the police and magistrates on the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill. [126136]

Mrs. Roche: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has received considerable support from all three police associations and the Magistrates Association for the measures which are in the Bill.

Asylum Seekers

19. **Dr. Palmer:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress is being made in speeding up decisions on applications from asylum seekers. [126137]

Mrs. Roche: We are committing substantial new resources to speed up the asylum system. We have recently recruited 270 extra asylum decision-makers and a further 350 are due to be recruited this year. We are thoroughly overhauling processes across the system from end-to-end and across directorate and departmental boundaries. Decisions are currently well exceeding the number of new applications.

The number of decisions has significantly increased since the beginning of the year reaching over 11,000 in March, the highest monthly total ever recorded.

21. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons are registered as asylum seekers in the United Kingdom; and how many were registered *(a)* five and *(b)* 10 years ago; and if he will make a statement. [126139]

Mrs. Roche: The number of asylum applicants awaiting an initial decision at the end of April was 94,540. The comparable figure for the end of December 1994 was 55,255 and at the end of December 1989 was 12,240. The backlog of asylum cases is being progressively reduced and we are on course to make a substantial reduction by April 2001.

28. **Ms Glenda Jackson:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers, while in detention, *(a)* attempted suicide and *(b)* committed suicide in (i) 1996–97, (ii) 1997–98 and (iii) 1998–99. [126147]

Mrs. Roche: While the overwhelming majority of immigration detainees have claimed asylum at some point, it would be possible to distinguish them from non-asylum seeking detainees only at a disproportionate cost by examination of individual case records.

The number of recorded attempts at self-harm by immigration detainees are as follows:

(i) April 1996-March 1997: 14 attempts

(ii) April 1997-March 1998: 20 attempts

(iii) April 1998-March 1999: 23 attempts.

There were no incidents of suicide by immigration detainees between 1996 and 1999.

30. **Maria Eagle:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what checks are made on private landlords seeking to house asylum seekers. [126149]

37. **Miss Geraldine Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what checks are made on private landlords seeking to house asylum seekers. [126156]

Mrs. Roche: Both private and public housing providers were invited to participate in the tendering process for providing accommodation for asylum seekers. With regard to private sector companies, we conducted thorough reviews which included an assessment of the potential provider's financial standing, suitability and quality of accommodation and support service infrastructure. In addition, we consulted the relevant regional consortia to ensure that local circumstances were taken into account and that the provider was suitable.

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what priority will be given to cluster areas with *(a)* less than 1 per cent. ethnic minority populations and *(b)* low levels of public housing in the dispersal of asylum seekers. [127235]

Mrs. Roche: In researching cluster areas and deciding where asylum seekers might best be dispersed, the National Asylum Support Service has drawn on a number of sources for information about towns and cities across the United Kingdom. This includes census information and population data. Ethnic minority population and communities are taken into account in decisions on cluster areas, although there is no requirement to take account of a population of less than 1 per cent. specifically. The availability of accommodation is clearly a prime factor in the development of cluster areas. This may be either public housing or private housing.

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what account will be taken of seasonal factors that affect the availability of accommodation in seaside resorts when determining the dispersal of asylum seekers; and if he will make a statement. [127236]

Mrs. Roche: A number of factors in cluster areas affect the availability of accommodation and its suitability. The National Asylum Support Service aims to take all these factors into account when considering cluster areas and dispersal. As regards seaside resorts, the Home Office is in touch with relevant local authorities and with the British Resorts Association to look at the account that needs to be taken of specific characteristics of seaside areas.

Sir John Stanley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the average number of dependants per asylum seeker included in new asylum applications received in the UK. [126814]

Mrs. Roche: Applications for asylum to the United Kingdom are recorded on behalf of the principal applicant only and totalled 71,160 in 1999. It is estimated that the total was 91,200, including dependants.

Virtual Police Stations

20. **Mr. Wyatt:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will introduce virtual police stations across the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [126138]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have no plans to introduce virtual police stations. Two research projects are being undertaken by the police with the assistance of the Home Office Research Award Scheme. One project is an examination of the mechanics for delivering police service on the internet and its likely impact. The other project is assessing the strategy of development of the use of electronic communication to increase police, and other agencies, contact with the public.

Most forces maintain informative websites on the internet.

Police Human Resources Policies

22. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent guidance he has given to chief officers of police in relation to human resource policies within the forces. [126140]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Guidance on human resource policies has recently been issued on: Police Training: The Way Forward (May 2000); Crime Fighting Fund recruitment scheme (May 2000); Pensions (two circulars in March 2000); Tenure of police officers seconded to the National Crime Squad (May 2000); Police Health and Safety (May 2000); Auditing Organisational Culture within the Police Service Police (April 2000); and, Special Constables: Eligibility for recruitment (April 2000).

Hunting with Dogs

23. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his Department's estimate of the impact on police resources as a result of an introduction of a ban on hunting with dogs. [126141]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We will be consulting with the police on the implications to them of the legislative options contained in the proposed Bill on hunting with dogs.

Prison Population

24. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners there are per 100,000 of the population in *(a)* the United Kingdom, *(b)* France, *(c)* Germany and *(d)* the Netherlands; and if he will make a statement. [126142]

Mr. Boateng: The available information is given in the table. It should be noted, however, that comparisons between penal statistics from different countries may be misleading due to differences in criminal justice systems.

the types of sanctions available to the judicial authorities and the length of prison sentences imposed by the courts and served by offenders.

International prison population comparisons: rate per 100,000 population in 1999

Country	Rate[1] per 100,000 population in 1999
United Kingdom	123
England and Wales[2]	125
Scotland[3]	118
Northern Ireland	69
France	89
Germany[4]	95
Netherlands	75

[1] Based on estimates of national populations
[2] At 31 August
[3] Average daily population
[4] 1998 figures

Police Manpower

25. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will conduct a review of police strength in each police authority area in England and Wales prior to the Government's second comprehensive spending review; and if he will make a statement. [126144]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have no plans to undertake such a review. Under the Police Act 1996, it is for individual chief constables to determine the number of police officers in their force from within their available resources.

I work closely with the police and their representative bodies on a number of issues about resourcing and crime reduction, including their concerns about police numbers. I have responded to those concerns with the Crime Fighting Fund, which will allow for the recruitment of 5,000 more officers over the next two years, over and above those that forces already planned to recruit. The future resourcing of the police service is, of course, a matter for Spending Review 2000, and I have taken careful account of the views of the police service on their needs.

Restorative Justice

26. **Mr. Hilary Benn:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the progress of restorative justice schemes. [126145]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The final warning scheme, reparation order and action plan order under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, were implemented across England and Wales on 1 June 2000; the referral order under the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999 will be piloted in seven areas from summer 2000 ahead of national implementation. All these measures reflect the restorative justice principles of responsibility, reparation and reintegration in tackling offending and requiring offenders to make amends for their actions. For adults, community service orders provide the opportunity for offenders to undertake work for the benefit of the community.

Jury Trial

27. **Mr. Mates:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his plans to amend the right to elect trial by jury. [126146]

29. **Mr. Breed:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his plans to change the right of defendants to elect a jury trial; and if he will make a statement. [126148]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No.2) Bill is part of our programme to modernise the justice system and to make it more responsive to the needs of victims, witnesses and the public at large. Giving the courts, rather than defendants, the power to decide whether either-way offences should be heard in the Crown Court would reduce delay and secure a more efficient system of justice.

Corpus Juris

31. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his policy is with respect to corpus juris. [126150]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill), on 15 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 51W.

Door Supervisors

32. **Dr. Starkey:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his plans for regulating door supervisors. [126151]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We issued a White Paper last year proposing that a new authority should be set up to license those who work in the private security field, and to improve standards in the industry. We proposed that the scheme should apply to door supervisors. Legislation will be introduced as soon as Parliamentary time permits.

As my hon. Friend is aware, we are also considering other issues relating to the regulation of door supervisors, in consultation with local authority, police and other interests.

Burglary

33. **Mr. Corbett:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress he has made in reducing the incidence of burglary. [126152]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The reported crime figures for 1999 show a fall in the total numbers of burglaries of over 15 per cent. in the last two years (down from 1,127,000 in the year ending March 1997 to 953,000 in the year ending March 1999). While econometric models predict upward pressure on the level of burglary, we are committed to reducing crime and all police authorities have set five year targets for reducing the number of domestic burglaries. Nationally, these amount to a 25 per cent. reduction by March 2005.

Under the Reducing Burglary Initiative (part of our £400 million Crime Reduction Programme), we plan to invest over £50 million by 2002 in projects covering over two million households in high crime areas, with the aim of preventing 15,000 burglaries by March 2002 and 25,000 in the longer term. The projects are being

evaluated and the lessons learned about what works, and is most cost-effective, in different circumstances will be of wider benefit to all local crime and disorder partnerships seeking to improve their own anti-burglary strategies.

So far, 224 local anti-burglary projects, covering around 800,000 households, have been approved at a total cost of nearly £16 million.

As part of the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions' New Home Energy Efficiency Scheme (HEES), we have also committed up to £12 million to improve home security for low income pensioners living in high crime areas in England and Wales. New HEES started earlier this month.

In April 2000, we launched a Distraction Burglary Taskforce to combat the problem of burglary by bogus callers which predominantly affects very vulnerable members of the community. Pilot schemes across the country, spearheaded by the National Neighbourhood Watch Association, will try out different community based methods of tackling this crime

We have also launched a Property Crime Reduction Action Team to take forward work at a national level to reduce property crime, including ways of designing out crime. And we have also set ambitious targets for tackling drugs misuse, which is strongly connected to property crime, and have launched a number of related initiatives, including new Drug Treatment and Testing Orders and arrest referral schemes.

Finally, we are also funding several related projects under the Targeted Policing Initiative, including schemes to disrupt the stolen goods markets and to tackle drug related crime.

Victim Support

36. **Mr. McWalter:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much money central Government have made available for victim support in the last five financial years. [126155]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The annual grant paid to Victim Support in the last five years is as follows:

£ million

Financial year	*Grant*
1995–96	10.817
1996–97	11.682
1997–98	12.682
1998–99	12.682
1999–2000	17.500

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many anti-social behaviour orders have been issued; and if he will make a statement. [126153]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Figures for the number of orders granted are being collected centrally with effect from 1 June. From a trawl of police forces carried out by the Association of Chief Police Officers, we have been able to establish that 79 orders were granted between the period 1 April 1999 and 31 May 2000.

Police Recruitment

Mr. Fraser: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had with chief constables regarding police recruitment. [126154]

Mr. Straw: My officials have had discussions recently with the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Association of Police Authorities regarding the accelerated recruitment scheme of the Crime Fighting Fund and the national police recruitment campaign.

Cycles

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many fixed penalties have been issued to cyclists for the offence of *(a)* carrying another person and *(b)* cycling on pavements, broken down by police force areas for the latest six month period for which figures are available; and how many of the penalties were issued to cyclists aged under 14 years. [126419]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The table gives the available information which relates to the period 1 August to 31 December 1999.

New fixed penalty offences—Number of substantive tickets issued, England and Wales, August to December 1999

Police force	*Carrying more than one person on pedal cycle*	*Cycling on footway (pavement)*	*Registration mark defective*	*Overtaking at pelican, zebra or puffin crossing*	*Driving on footway (pavement)*	*Total*
Avon and Somerset	—	19	127	7	16	169
Bedfordshire	—	—	—	—	—	—
Cambridgeshire	—	—	—	—	—	—
Cheshire	—	6	87	50	2	165
Cleveland	1	5	4	4	—	14
Cumbria	2	12	32	—	4	50
Derbyshire	—	3	5	—	3	11
Devon and Cornwall	1	28	20	—	4	53
Dorset	1	7	92	4	7	111
Durham	—	7	14	—	1	22
Essex	—	—	—	—	—	—
Gloucestershire	—	25	31	—	6	62
Greater Manchester	2	38	126	5	—	171
Hampshire	1	52	92	2	—	147
Hertfordshire	—	11	114	2	3	130
Humberside	—	—	—	—	—	—
Kent	2	48	84	2	39	175
Lancashire	2	8	65	—	41	116

New fixed penalty offences—Number of substantive tickets issued, England and Wales, August to December 1999

Police force	Carrying more than one person on pedal cycle	Cycling on footway (pavement)	Registration mark defective	Overtaking at pelican, zebra or puffin crossing	Driving on footway (pavement)	Total
Leicestershire	1	13	30	—	2	46
Lincolnshire	9	15	118	1	3	146
London, City of	—	10	5	—	10	25
Merseyside	1	18	3	—	5	27
Metropolitan Police	—	29	109	22	8	168
Norfolk[2]	—	8	1	1	1	11
Northamptonshire	—	2	36	—	—	38
Northumbria	1	21	32	3	9	66
North Yorkshire	—	18	33	2	53	106
Nottinghamshire	—	5	146	—	2	153
South Yorkshire	—	11	219	12	61	303
Staffordshire[2]	—	3	27	4	—	34
Suffolk	2	53	30	—	—	85
Surrey	—	13	78	1	4	96
Sussex	—	15	5	—	—	20
Thames Valley	1	8	—	—	2	11
Warwickshire	—	2	16	—	2	20
West Mercia	1	36	87	4	5	133
West Midlands	—	4	12	1	1	18
West Yorkshire[1]	—	—	—	—	—	—
Wiltshire	—	6	17	—	1	24
Dyfed-Powys	—	7	—	—	1	8
Gwent	—	—	29	1	1	31
North Wales	n/a	n/a	—	—	34	34
South Wales	—	4	11	—	38	53
Total (39 forces)	28	570	1,937	138	369	3,042

[1] Figures not yet available
[2] October to December only
[3] Included in column 2

Child Road Casualties

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many child road casualties there have been in the last year for which figures are available in Stoke-on-Trent North; and if he will make a statement on progress towards meeting his 2010 target for reducing such casualties. [127071]

Mr. Hill: I have been asked to reply.

Data for Stoke-on-Trent North are not available. The number of child road casualties for Stoke-on-Trent Unitary Authority are given in the table:

Child (aged 0–15) road casualties by severity for Stoke-on-Trent: 1998

Severity of casualty	
Fatal	2
Serious	27
Slight	188
Total	217

The new road safety strategy "Tomorrow's roads—safer for everyone", published in March, sets out a range of measures to meet the target of halving the number of children killed or seriously injured in road accidents by 2010, compared with the average for 1994–98. Many of these measures are now being taken forward but it is too soon to quantify any casualty savings.

Young Offender Units

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to end the practice in young offender units of holding two prisoners in cells designed for one; and when he expects this practice to end. [127143]

Mr. Boateng: Due to current population pressures there are no immediate plans to end the practice of holding two prisoners in cells designed for one at some young offender units.

Dartmoor Prison

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department who is the Chair of the Board of Visitors at Dartmoor Prison. [127166]

Mr. Boateng: The Chairman of the Board of Visitors at Her Majesty's Prison Dartmoor for the period 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2000 is Mr. Michael Long.

Internet (Interception)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department under what circumstances the Government will require internet service providers to contribute to *(a)* capital and *(b)* recruitment costs of security surveillance; and what the charging principles will be. [127328]

Mr. Straw: I have published a detailed report into the technical and financial considerations involved in interception on the internet, on Home Office website, www.homeoffice.gov.uk/oicd/ripbill.htm. Comments have been received from the Internet Service Providers Association and my officials have started a dialogue with

wider industry representatives under the auspices of the Alliance for Electronic Business. There is agreement to set up a body, with industry participation, to advise on the technical, functional and procedural implementation of Clause 12 of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill. Depending on detailed discussions in that group and outside, and bearing in mind the need for equity across the entire communications industry, the Government will take a view on what contribution from internet service providers will be appropriate for capital costs. That process will also inform decisions on recruitment costs.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what are the estimates of *(a)* the capital costs and *(b)* the running costs of internet service providers, establishing a surveillance capability as required under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill. [127331]

Mr. Straw: Our estimate of the total costs to communication service providers, not currently classified as public telecommunications operators, of establishing an intercept capability under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill is that it will not exceed £20 million in aggregate over the first three years. I have published a report on the Home Office website detailing some cost and technical implications of interception on the internet. My officials have been in contact with The Alliance for Electronic Business and the Internet Service Providers Association over the establishment of an advisory board to consider further the technical, functional and procedural implementation of Clause 12 of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill.

Fire Service (London)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his estimate is for planning purposes of net pension fund obligations, pensions less contribution, for *(a)* the London Fire Service and *(b)* all UK fire services in financial years *(a)* 2000–01, *(b)* 2001–02, *(c)* 2005–06 and *(d)* 2010–11; and how these obligations will be financed. [127322]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The available figures, provided by the Local Government Association's Fire Service Expenditure Forecasting Group, are:

£ million

	2000–01	*2001–02*
London	65.3	73.5
England	250	275

Under the Central Local Partnership the Home Office works closely with the Forecasting Group to assess future resource demands for the following three years. The Group does not prepare longer range projections. Its assessments of future funding pressures, including pensions, are taken into account by the Government in the Spending Review process.

The provision of revenue funding for the fire services in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is the responsibility of the devolved Administrations.

Metropolitan Police

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what were the monthly changes in each of the last two years in Metropolitan police manpower figures, resulting from *(a)* recruitment and *(b)* resignation and retirement. [127346]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The requested details are not available. Details for the four six-month periods up to September 1999 are given in the tables.

Police strength for Metropolitan police

	Police strength for ordinary duty[1]
30 September 1997	26,677
31 March 1998	26,094
30 September 1998	26,106
31 March 1999	26,073
30 September 1999	25,884

[1] Full-time equivalents

Recruitment and wastage for six month period ending

	1998		*1999*	
	31 March	*30 September*	*31 March*	*30 September*
Recruitment[1]	503	866	763	566
Wastage[1]				
Resignation	118	174	147	182
Retirement	528	592	473	409
Other	176	170	169	124

[1] Number of Officers

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* new recruits, *(b)* graduate recruits and *(c)* graduate recruits with first or upper second class degrees to the Metropolitan Police in each of the last five years. [127329]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The table shows the number of new recruits and graduate recruits into the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) for the last five years:

Year	*Appointments on probation*	*Graduates on probation*
1994–95	1,209	[1]—
1995–96	1,212	141
1996–97	670	[1]—
1997–98	1,164	46
1998–99	1,586	81

[1] Information for these years is not available

Information on graduates with first or upper second class degrees is not held centrally or by the MPS.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what real terms changes there have been on an annual basis since 1990 in the funding of the Metropolitan Police Service. [127238]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 22 June 2000]:* The information set out has been provided by the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis.

Funding (grant + precept) for the Metropolitan Police 1990–91 to 2000–01

Year	Cash terms (£ million)	Percentage change in real terms
1990–91	1,240	8.0
1991–92	1,374	4.3
1992–93	1,491	5.0
1993–94	1,561	2.0
1994–95	1,624	2.6
1995–96	1,660	–0.7
1996–97	1,664	–2.9
1997–98	1,717	0.4
1998–99	1,792	1.0
1999–2000[1]	1,827	–0.5
1999–2000[2]	1,778	—
2000–2001	1,844	[3]-1.3

[1] Actual

[2] Notional

[3] Funding for 1999–2000 is not directly comparable with 2000–01 and previous years since with effect from 1 April 2000 the territory of the Metropolitan Police Service was redrawn to increase the Greater London Area only. Responsibility for policing about one third of Surrey and smaller parts of Hertfordshire and Essex has now been transferred to the respective county forces. Taking account of these, funding has increased in real terms by 1.4 per cent. in 2000–01. Excluding £8.5 million for the CFF and £4 million for PNC charges, funding for 2000–01 would be £1,832 million. This is the equivalent of a 3 per cent cash increase/1 per cent. real terms increase of 1999–2000 after allowing for the boundary changes (and 1.9 per cent in cash terms over funding and the use of reserves in 1999–2000). Percentage changes in real terms have been calculated at 1998–99 prices using GDP deflators (March 2000).

Date Rape Drugs

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) when he plans to make a statement on his policy on Gammahydroxybutyrate following the publication of the Metropolitan police report on drug-assisted rape on 21 June; [127296]

(2) what assessment he has made of the extent to which GHB is used as a date rape drug by groups of males acting in collaboration; [127201]

(3) what recent reports he has received on the use of drugs in date rape cases; [127200]

(4) what recent assessment he has made of the extent of use of *(a)* Rohypnol and *(b)* GHB as date rape drugs. [127203]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Metropolitan police research initiative published on 21 June is the only recent report I have received on the use of drugs in rape cases. The evidence in respect of the use of Gammahydroxybutyrate and Rohypnol and its findings will be reported to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, the statutory body the Government rely on for providing expert advice on drug misuse matters.

European Refugee Fund

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make statement on his policy towards the European Refugee Fund. [127194]

Mrs. Roche: The Government's policy concerning the European Refugee Fund is set out in the Home Office Explanatory Memorandum of 28 February, copies of which were deposited in the Library. Since the Explanatory Memorandum, the United Kingdom has opted in to this proposal under the terms of our protocol to the Treaty of Amsterdam.

Police Salaries

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will reinstate the rent allowance element of serving police officers' salary packages; and if he will make a statement; [127359]

(2) what assessment he has made of the impact of the withdrawal of the rent allowance element of salary packages on the recruitment and retention of police officers; [127357]

(3) what the average reduction is in serving police officers' remuneration following the withdrawal of the rent allowance element of salary packages. [127358]

Mr. Charles Clarke: No assessment has been made of the withdrawal of rent or housing allowances on the recruitment and retention of officers. Outside the Metropolitan Police Service, very few forces report a recruitment problem. Average total wastage in the police service in 1998–99 was seven per cent., which is low by standards outside the police service.

Rent allowance was replaced by housing allowance on 1 April 1990, although some officers still receive transitional rent allowance. Following the recommendations of the Sheehy Inquiry, housing allowance was abolished for new recruits and frozen for serving officers from 1 September 1994, because police officers were no longer required to live in a particular location. Entitlement to provided accommodation also ceased and the structure of starting salaries changed.

Under the Police Act 1996, the Police Negotiating Board (PNB) considers issues relating to police pay and allowances. There are no plans to reinstate rent or housing allowances but the PNB has recommended an increase in London Allowance of £3,327, from 1 July 2000, for those officers appointed on or after 1 September 1994 and not in receipt of housing allowance. On 23 June my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced that he has accepted this recommendation.

It is not possible to provide a meaningful average reduction in serving police officers' remuneration following the abolition of housing allowance. Allowances paid vary between rank and force. The tables show the rates payable for housing allowance and transitional rent allowance.

Maximum limits of transitional rent allowance—police forces in England and Wales
Rates frozen from 1 April 1990

£ per annum

	Federated Ranks[1]	*Superintendents and Chief Superintendents*	*Assistant and Deputy Chief Constables*	*Chief Constables*
Avon and Somerset	3,164.04	3,670.29	4,271.45	4,935.90
Bedfordshire	3,917.76	4,545.07	5,271.49	6,115.67
Cambridgeshire	3,191.69	3,702.36	4,294.74	4,981.90
Cheshire	4,039.36	4,685.66	5,435.37	6,305.03
Cleveland	3,275.02	3,799.01	4,406.86	5,111.96
Cumbria	2,869.20	3,328.32	3,860.76	4,478.52
Derbyshire	4,816.00	5,586.00	6,480.00	7,516.00
Devon and Cornwall	4,022.00	4,666.00	5,412.00	6,278.00
Dorset	3,476.43	4,032.66	4,677.88	5,426.34
Durham	2,667.00	3,093.72	3,588.72	4,162.92
Dyfed-Powys	2,322.53	2,694.13	3,125.19	3,625.22
Essex	4,867.63	5,646.45	6,549.88	7,597.86
Gloucestershire	4,130.64	4,791.24	5,557.80	6,447.12
Greater Manchester	3,571.00	4,143.00	4,821.00	5,571.00
Gwent	3,651.00	4,235.16	4,912.80	5,698.92
Hampshire	4,329.00	5,052.00	5,825.00	6,757.00
Hertfordshire	4,269.99	4,953.18	5,745.69	6,665.00
Humberside	3,752.44	4,352.90	5,049.34	5,856.90
Kent	4,438.79	5,149.00	5,972.84	6,928.49
Lancashire	3,145.20	3,648.43	4,246.02	4,906.51
Leicestershire	3,350.00	3,886.00	4,508.00	5,229.00
Lincolnshire	3,162.87	3,668.88	4,256.28	4,937.05
Merseyside	3,239.00	3,759.00	4,358.00	5,054.00
Norfolk	3,769.56	4,373.13	5,072.17	5,884.40
Northamptonshire	3,956.18	4,588.70	5,322.94	6,175.08
Northumbria	2,425.75	2,814.43	3,264.54	3,786.87
North Wales	3,153.00	3,657.00	4,242.00	4,921.00
North Yorkshire	3,212.43	3,726.53	4,322.27	5,013.74
Nottinghamshire	3,194.65	3,705.79	4,298.76	4,986.61
South Wales	3,814.30	4,424.59	5,132.52	5,953.73
South Yorkshire	3,134.69	3,636.53	4,218.19	4,893.23
Staffordshire	3,127.70	3,628.56	4,222.44	4,879.32
Suffolk	4,220.04	4,895.24	5,678.48	6,587.04
Surrey	3,911.52	4,537.32	5,280.48	6,101.88
Sussex	3,703.00	4,295.00	4,982.00	5,779.00
Thames Valley	4,687.18	5,437.34	6,306.43	7,316.38
Warwickshire	4,199.45	4,871.35	5,650.77	6,554.89
West Mercia	3,962.34	4,996.31	5,331.72	6,184.80
West Midlands	3,410.42	3,956.09	4,589.06	5,323.31
West Yorkshire	3,540.68	4,106.95	4,764.12	5,526.41
Wiltshire	4,589.88	5,324.16	6,176.04	7,164.24

[1] Constable to Chief Inspector

Maximum limits of transitional rent allowance—police forces in England and Wales
Rates frozen from 1 April 1990

£ per annum

	Federated Ranks[1]	*Superintendents and Chief Superintendents*	*Deputy Assistant Commissioner and Commander*	*Deputy and Assistant Commissioner*
Metropolitan	5,863.65	6,802.00	7,890.00	9,153.00
City of London	5,864.00	6,802.00	7,890.00	9,153.00

[1] Constable to Chief Inspector

Standard rate housing allowance—police forces in England and Wales
As at 1 April 1994 and frozen from 1 September 1994

£ per annum

	Federated Ranks[1]	*Superintendents*	*Assistant Chief Constables*	*Chief Constables*
Avon and Somerset	2,374.80	2,754.76	3,206.04	3,704.64
Bedfordshire	2,876.88	3,337.20	3,883.80	4,487.93
Cambridgeshire	2,319.17	2,674.00	3,186.17	3,633.75
Cheshire	2,952.43	3,424.74	3,985.70	4,605.69
Cleveland	2,375.36	3,676.72	3,215.35	4,997.79
Cumbria	2,425.36	2,855.17	3,375.11	3,756.72

Standard rate housing allowance—police forces in England and Wales
As at 1 April 1994 and frozen from 1 September 1994

£ per annum

	Federated Ranks[1]	*Superintendents*	*Assistant Chief Constables*	*Chief Constables*
Derbyshire	3,667.20	4,254.00	4,934.64	5,724.24
Devon and Cornwall	3,144.36	3,647.52	4,244.76	4,905.12
Dorset	2,582.01	2,995.13	3,485.71	4,027.93
Durham	2,072.04	2,403.60	2,797.20	3,232.32
Dyfed-Powys	2,161.34	2,507.15	2,917.79	3,371.67
Essex	4,275.60	4,867.56	6,549.84	7,543.68
Gloucestershire	3,190.40	3,700.86	4,307.04	4,977.02
Greater Manchester	2,371.98	2,751.06	3,202.09	3,700.58
Gwent	3,006.52	3,487.56	4,045.57	4,692.86
Hampshire	3,882.00	4,503.12	5,223.72	6,059.40
Hertfordshire	3,379.96	3,920.75	4,562.95	5,272.74
Humberside	2,860.24	3,317.88	3,861.34	4,461.92
Kent	3,865.85	4,484.54	5,219.33	6,030.99
Lancashire	2,096.40	2,431.92	2,830.14	3,270.38
Leicestershire	2,311.00	3,477.11	4,112.00	4,770.00
Lincolnshire	2,733.73	3,215.18	375.77	4,372.17
Merseyside	2,133.00	2,474.00	2,880.00	3,328.00
Norfolk	3,025.67	3,510.82	4,092.71	4,729.35
Northamptonshire	3,187.90	3,697.96	4,303.66	4,973.12
Northumbria	1,777.66	2,062.10	2,399.85	2,773.16
North Wales	2,361.00	2,739.00	3,187.00	3,683.00
North Yorkshire	2,510.30	2,911.96	3,388.92	3,916.08
Nottinghamshire	2,632.80	3,054.00	3,554.28	4,197.16
South Wales	3,535.10	4,100.73	4,772.38	5,514.76
South Yorkshire	2,344.89	2,719.97	3,165.47	3,657.92
Staffordshire	2,264.08	2,626.33	3,056.51	3,531.96
Suffolk	3,735.72	4,329.96	5,022.72	5,826.36
Surrey	3,438.24	3,988.32	4,641.60	5,357.28
Sussex	2,626.56	3,047.04	3,545.88	4,097.40
Thames Valley	4,022.46	4,666.04	5,430.32	6,275.05
Warwickshire	3,643.33	4,226.25	4,918.48	5,683.59
West Mercia	3,176.91	3,685.01	4,288.95	4,955.25
West Midlands	2,950.00	3,423.15	3,983.84	4,603.54
West Yorkshire	2,691.55	3,122.19	3,633.55	4,198.26
Wiltshire	3,769.44	4,372.44	5,088.60	5,880.24

[1] Constable to Chief Inspector

Standard rate housing allowance—police forces in England and Wales
As at 1 April 1994 and frozen from 1 September 1994

£ per annum

	Federated Ranks[1]	*Superintendents*	*Commander*	*Assistant Commissioner*
Metropolitan	5,126.70	5,947.91	6,921.06	7,997.65
City of London	5,095.93	5,911.28	6,879.51	7,949.65

[1] Constable to Chief Inspector

Police Time

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the estimated average time required is for a police officer to complete the formal documentation of criminal evidence following an arrest for *(a)* burglary, *(b)* car theft and *(c)* criminal damage; and what steps he has taken to monitor the time spent on procedural rather than operational tasks and to reduce it. [127344]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Manual of Guidance for the preparation, processing and submission of files, which is issued by the Trials Issues Group, sets out what information the police must supply to the Crown Prosecution Service (CRS) to ensure a successful prosecution. The number of documents required depends on the nature of the individual case, as does the time it takes to complete them; an average time would not be meaningful and has not been estimated. In straightforward cases in which a guilty plea is expected (which accounted for more than half the cases in the pilot last year of the Narey measures for reducing delay) it is sufficient to prepare an 'expedited file' consisting of no more than five or six forms. The national introduction of those measures in November 1999 is expected to reduce the volume of cases requiring full files, and should also lead to an improvement in the timely delivery of case files to the CPS. Getting the file right first time, and on time, significantly reduces administrative burdens.

The Home Office is committed to looking at ways of reducing administrative burdens on the police where it is possible to do so consistently with the interests of justice, and will continue to collaborate with forces to that end.

Portland Young Offenders Institution

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many staff who work in the juvenile wing at Portland Young Offenders Institution have training in dealing with adolescents. [127426]

Mr. Boateng: There are 48 staff who work in the under 18 unit at Portland. Of these, 46 have been trained in dealing with adolescents. The two remaining staff will be trained in September.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if slopping out has been ended in Portland Young Offenders Institution. [127415]

Mr. Boateng: Slopping out has ended at Portland. There are two wings in which the cells are too small to accommodate integral sanitation. An electronic unlocking system gives prisoners access to toilet facilities during the night. They are provided with chamber pots in case a fault occurs with the electronic system.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many juveniles have been sent to Portland Young Offenders Institute since 1 April. [127419]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 23 June 2000]:* Since 1 April this year, a total of 93 prisoners aged under 18 have been sent to Portland.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reasons the number of places designated for juveniles in Portland Young Offenders Institute was reduced in May. [127418]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 23 June 2000]:* Since 1 April this year, Portland has provided 130 places for prisoners aged under 18. This has not changed. It was originally proposed to provide 134 places, but this was reduced to provide four "calming rooms" where refractory young prisoners could be placed in preference to moving them to the segregation unit.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many fully trained prison officers are on duty at night in Portland Young Offenders Institute. [127417]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 23 June 2000]:* There are a total of 11 staff on night duty at Portland; one senior officer and two officers, who are supported by eight operational support staff. All staff on duty at night are fully trained according to the requirements of their respective grades.

Sex Offenders

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review the provisions of Part 1 of the Sex Offenders Act 1997; what form the review will take; and over what period it will take place. [127846]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I am happy to be able to announce that the Government are establishing a review of Part 1 of the Sex Offenders Act 1997. Officials will shortly be setting up a small steering group, which will direct the review and undertake a consultation process. Research to be published shortly on the effectiveness of the Act will provide an important, but not exclusive, background for the review. The review will examine a wide range of aspects of Part 1 of the Act and will include consultation with other Government Departments, non-government organisations and the general public. I anticipate that the steering group will report to Ministers at the end of the year.

Hilda Murrell

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on progress in the investigation of the murder of Hilda Murrell. [126265]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave him on 22 May 2000, *Official Report*, columns 365–66W.

Severe Personality Disorders

Mr. Heppell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his Department's response to the First report of the Home Affairs Committee, Session 1999–2000, on Dangerous People with Severe Personality Disorders. [126123]

Mr. Boateng: The Government's response to the Committee's report on Managing Dangerous People with Severe Personality Disorder was published as the Committee's Third Special Report on 18 May.

The Government are grateful for the Committee's support for the proposals set out in the consultation paper which was published last July. The Government expect to announce their decision on the way forward once the Spending Review has concluded in the summer.

Football Hooligans

Mr. Horam: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what proportion of the England soccer fans deported from Belgium over the weekend of 17 to 18 June had criminal convictions; [127493]

(2) how many people were stopped at ports, airports and railway stations in efforts to prevent soccer hooligans reaching the Euro 2000 soccer championships; [127489]

(3) how many police officers were deployed in the attempts to stop soccer hooligans reaching Belgium for the Euro 2000 soccer finals; [127491]

(4) how many people had their passports withdrawn or suspended for the duration of the Euro 2000 soccer championships; [127492]

(5) how many British people were prevented by police or court action from getting to the Euro 2000 championships. [127490]

Mr. Straw: Information provided by the Dutch and Belgium authorities is currently being analysed by the National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS). I understand that, to date, 393 of the 932 England supporters arrested during Euro 2000 have a criminal record. As the hon. Member may be aware, it is estimated that about one third of males in England and Wales have a criminal record by the age of 30.

There are 101 people currently subject to International Football bans, all of whom were required to report to a police station during Euro 2000. Of these 16 people were ordered to surrender their passports during the tournament as a condition of their ban. No data are available on the

number of suspected hooligans who were dissuaded from travelling to Euro 2000 as a result of intensive police activity at United Kingdom exit points. But it is known that at least 98 English supporters were refused entry by the Dutch and Belgian authorities.

I regret that it is not possible for operational reasons to say how many police officers were deployed here and overseas as part of the extensive Euro 2000 policing operation.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of the written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April have not received substantive answers, for the reason that the information is *(a)* not held centrally, *(b)* not held in the form requested or *(c)* not available. [127680]

Mr. Straw: I refer the right hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 23 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 339–40W.

Human Rights Act 1998

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the extra administrative expenditure resulting from the Human Rights Act 1998. [127619]

Mr. Straw: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State in his reply to the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) on 23 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 401W.

Election Expenditure

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what limitations will be in place for expenditure by political parties for the next election. [126143]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Paragraph 3 of Schedule 8 to the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill imposes limits on campaign expenditure by registered political parties in the 365 days prior to the date of a general election. The maximum amount a party may spend is determined by the number of constituencies contested. A party receives an allowance of £30,000 for each constituency contested, subject to a minimum threshold. A party contesting every constituency in the United Kingdom would therefore be subject to a limit on campaign expenditure of £19.77 million during the normal 365-day period. In the event that Schedule 8 is brought into force less than 365 days prior to the date of the next general election, clause 151(5) of the Bill provides that the relevant commencement order may specify a lower limit to apply during the shortened campaign period. We have undertaken to consult the main political parties before any such order is made.

Women Prisoners

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his estimate is of the increase in the proportion of women prisoners over the next five years. [126125]

Mr. Boateng: Over the next five years, the current middle variant projection is for the proportion of female prisoners in Prison Service establishments to increase from an average 5.2 per cent. in 2000 to 5.4 per cent. in 2005.

PRIME MINISTER

Central Railway

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Prime Minister what representations his office has received from Central Railway within the last two months. [126534]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 26 June 2000]:* So far as I am aware, none.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Prime Minister on which dates members of his office met representatives of Central Railway plc in the last two months. [126910]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to answer I gave him on 8 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 355W.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Prime Minister how many written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April have not received substantive answers, for reasons of commercial or other confidentiality. [127685]

The Prime Minister: Of the 454 written answers I provided within the specified period, nine withheld information in accordance with the relevant section of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information or other convention in line with the practice adopted by previous Governments.

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Prime Minister how many of the written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 have not received substantive answers, excluding those not answered for reasons of *(a)* disproportionate cost, *(b)* information not available, not held centrally, or not held in the form requested and *(c)* commercial or other confidentiality. [127341]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 22 June 2000]:* None.

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Prime Minister how many written parliamentary questions tabled to his Office between 19 October 1999 and 20 April have not received substantive answers on the grounds of *(a)* commercial and *(b)* other confidentiality. [127106]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave him today.

Channel Islands (Banking Secrecy)

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral statement of 21 June, if the Government of the Channel Islands were consulted on the proposals relating to banking secrecy. [127819]

The Prime Minister: My statement referred to the agreement reached at the European Council at Feira about how best to tackle the problem of cross-border tax evasion within the European Union. The UK discusses regularly with the Channel Islands international tax issues and matters of mutual interest.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Solicitor-General when he will give a substantive reply to the question tabled by the hon. Member for West Lancashire for answer on 27 November 1999. [127451]

The Solicitor-General: I have written to my hon. Friend today with a substantive answer to his question.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Your Britain, Your Europe Roadshow

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the meeting which necessitated the postponement of the Minister for Europe's planned visit to Reading as part of the Your Britain, Your Europe Roadshow on 26 May was arranged. [126882]

Mr. Vaz: In December last year the Portuguese Presidency scheduled the first informal meeting of Euro-Mediterranean Foreign Ministers. I had planned to attend the main day of the meeting and return to the UK on 26 May, travelling directly to Reading. After it became apparent that my commitments at the Euro-Med meeting and transport times meant that the visit would have to be curtailed, Reading Borough Council advised me on 19 May that a half day programme would not do sufficient justice to the town's contribution to our relations with the EU. We agreed therefore to postpone the visit until 10 November.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the role of the Committee for the Release of Prisoners of War and Non-Combatants, established under the Lomé Agreement; what representations he made to the parties on this issue; and how many prisoners of war have been released. [126887]

Mr. Hain: The Committee for the Release of Prisoners of War and Non-Combatants was established prior to the signature of the Lomé Peace Agreement. The Committee has met periodically under UN chairmanship.

Britain has regularly pressed the parties for the release of all detainees. However, many are believed to remain in the custody of the Revolutionary United Front.

No definitive figures of released prisoners of war are available.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what occasions his office was in *(a)* telephone and *(b)* direct communication with negotiators discussing peace in Sierra Leone in Lomé; to what extent (i) the UK delegation to Togo and (ii) the West Africa section of his Department was involved; and if he will make a statement. [126890]

Mr. Hain: British officials observing the Lomé peace negotiations remained in close touch with the negotiators throughout. Ministers were kept fully informed of the progress of negotiations.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what senior *(a)* political, *(b)* military, and *(c)* quasi-judicial positions were occupied by Revolutionary United Front personnel as a consequence of the Lomé Peace Agreement. [126886]

Mr. Hain: Following signature of the Lomé Peace Agreement, three Cabinet positions and three Deputy Ministerial positions were allocated to members of the Revolutionary United Front. The RUF leader, Foday Sankoh, was made Chair of the Commission for the Management of Strategic Resources, National Reconstruction and Development.

No military or quasi-judicial positions were occupied by members of the Revolutionary United Front.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the impact of Article XVIII of the Lomé Agreement on Sierra Leone on the effectiveness of that country's helicopter support capabilities; and if he will make a statement. [126893]

Mr. Hain: Article XVIII of the Lomé Peace Agreement states that

> All mercenaries, in any guise, shall be withdrawn from Sierra Leone immediately upon signing of the present Agreement. Their withdrawal shall be supervised by the Joint Monitoring Commission.

As far as we are aware, this provision has made no impact on the Government of Sierra Leone's helicopter support capabilities.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the status of the trust fund established in the Lomé Peace Agreement to transform the Revolutionary United Front into a political party; how much money was paid into the fund; and what British funds were involved. [126884]

Mr. Hain: Article III of the Lomé Peace Agreement states that the Parties shall approach the international community with a view to mobilising resources for the purposes of enabling the Revolutionary United Front to function as a political party. These resources may include the setting up of a trust fund.

By the end of April, the Revolutionary United Front had not fully completed its procedures to register as a political party; nor had a trust fund been fully established.

No British funds were paid into such a trust fund.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what estimate he has made of the value of the *(a)* diamonds and *(b)* gold sold by the Commission for the Management of Strategic Resources, National Reconstruction and Development established under the Lomé Peace Agreement; and what measures

were put in place during negotiations on the Agreement to ensure the Sierra Leone Treasury received the entire proceeds of these sales. [126888]

Mr. Hain: The Commission for the Management of Strategic Resources, National Reconstruction and Development was created to help the Government of Sierra Leone exercise full control of the exploitation of gold, diamonds and other resources for the benefit of the people of Sierra Leone. The Lomé Peace Agreement provided that the funds derived from resources managed by the Commission would be paid into a special account at the Sierra Leone Treasury, to be sued for the benefit of the people of Sierra Leone.

Despite international support for this objective, by the end of April, the Commission and its associated mechanisms had not been fully established.

General Affairs Council

Mr. Casale: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the outcome of the General Affairs Council held in Luxembourg on 12 to 14 June; and if he will make a statement. [126746]

Mr. Vaz: The General Affairs Council in Luxembourg on 13 June adopted the A points listed in document no. 9278/00 and noted the resolutions, decisions and opinions adopted by the European Parliament in its part-session of 15–19 May in Strasbourg listed in document no. 8157/00. Copies of these documents will be placed in the House Libraries as soon as they become available.

1. MEPs Statute

The Council took note of the Presidency's discussions with the European Parliament on a statute to regulate the salaries, expenses and conditions of MEPs. There has been no substantive progress in these discussions.

2. Feira European Council

The GAC continued preparations for the Feira European Council on 19–20 June. The Presidency indicated that issues for discussion are expected to include the IGC, the Charter of Rights, economic issues, external issues, defence and enlargement.

3. IGC

The GAC discussed progress to date on the IGC, and confirmed the objective of concluding by the end of the year. No conclusions were reached.

4. Common Strategy on the Mediterranean

Agreement on the text of the draft Common Strategy will be sought at the Feira European Council on 19 June.

5. Defence

Foreign and Defence Ministers jointly discussed European security and defence policy. They considered a Presidency report to the European Council on progress in this field since the Helsinki European Council, and agreed to submit the report to Heads of Government at Feira.

6. Sierra Leone/Liberia

The Council expressed concern at the continuing crisis in Sierra Leone, welcomed the decision to put on trial Foday Sankoh, leader of the RUF, expressed concern at links between the Sierra Leone rebels and Liberia; and emphasised that EU policy, including under the Lomé convention, would take full account of Liberia's behaviour with regard to Sierra Leone.

7. Zimbabwe

The Council expressed concern at the obstacles put in the way of international observers and regretted that the United Nations had had to withdraw from its role as a co-ordinator for the various election observer teams. The Council reiterated its concern at the ongoing violence and intimidation in Zimbabwe.

8. South Africa

The Council adopted a new development regulation for South Africa and agreed declarations on wines and spirits.

9. Western Balkans

The Council expressed its deep concern at the continuing deterioration of the political situation in Serbia and reiterated its condemnation of the repression against the opposition and independent media. The Council requested its competent bodies to expand the visa ban list.

The Council welcomed the fact that municipal elections took place in Podgorica and Herceg Novi, and reaffirmed its support to the democratic forces in Montenegro.

The Council reaffirmed the EU's strong commitment to the full implementation of UNSC resolution 1244 in Kosovo. The Council condemned the ethnic violence in Kosovo and strongly supported the efforts of UNMIK and KFOR to ensure the security of the Serb minority. It urged the Serb National Congress to end its suspension of participation in the Joint Interim Administrative Structures and emphasises the importance of municipal elections. The Council reaffirmed its support for Serbian civil society.

The Council agreed with the Commission's assessment that Croatia was ready to enter into negotiations with the EU towards a Stabilisation and Association Agreement.

The Council emphasised the importance of speedy reform in Albania and urged all parties to participate in preparation for municipal elections this autumn.

The Council heard a report from Commissioner Patten on new trade preferences for the Western Balkans and invited its competent bodies to examine it with a view to early Council adoption.

The Council approved the Commission's proposal for 20 million euro in exceptional financial assistance for Montenegro.

10. Indonesia

The Council met over lunch with Indonesian Foreign Minister Alwi Shihab to launch an enhanced EU/Indonesia relationship. A Joint Declaration was adopted, establishing formal political dialogue.

11. East Timor

The UN Secretary General's Special Representative and Transitional Administrator of East Timor, Sergio Vieira de Mello, briefed the Council on UNTAET's work in East Timor. The Council expressed its willingness to help speed up the reconstruction and rehabilitation process and called for pledges of assistance to be delivered and disbursed expeditiously.

12. Inter-Korean Summit

The Council adopted a declaration welcoming the Inter-Korean Summit of 13–14 June in Pyongyang and encouraging the process of reconciliation between the Republic of Korea and the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea.

13. Accession Conferences with EU Applicants

Accession Conferences took place with all 12 countries in negotiation for membership.

14. Association Councils with Israel, Slovakia and Slovenia

Association Councils were held with Israel on 13 June and Slovakia and Slovenia on 14 June. That with Israel provided an opportunity to discuss economic and political relations. It covered a range of issues of interest to both sides, focusing particularly on the opportunities offered by the entry into force of the EU-Israel Association Agreement.

US National Missile Defence

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what bilateral discussions with *(a)* Canada and *(b)* Denmark there have been on developing criteria for the formulation of a decision on National Missile Defence. [126957]

Mr. Vaz: We have had a number of discussions with the Canadian and Danish Governments—both bilaterally, and in NATO—on US National Missile Defence plans.

These discussions have not included the development of criteria for a decision on National Missile Defence. It is for the United States to decide whether or not to proceed with deployment of a US National Missile Defence system. The US Administration have said that such a decision would be made by the President on the basis of four criteria, namely: the threat; costs; technological feasibility; and wider international implications, including for arms control.

Cuba

Mr. Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what legal assistance, with particular reference to the filing of an appeal, was given via the British Consular staff in Cuba to Ms Rachel McGee, following her trial there in September 1999. [126766]

Mr. Hain: Our Consular staff are not legally trained and are not able to offer legal advice.

At the request of Rachel McGee, consular staff contacted Ms McGee's family about the possibility of an appeal, facilitated payment to the Cuban law firm that represented Ms McGee in the trial and transmitted her request to lodge an appeal.

Following submission of the appeal, the Embassy in Cuba have repeatedly pressed the lawyers to obtain a date for an appeal hearing.

Pharmaceuticals (Spain)

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he *(a)* has made and *(b)* plans to make to the Government of Spain about the possible effects on United Kingdom manufacturers of recent legislative changes to the regulations on the pricing of pharmaceutical products in that country. [126668]

Mr. Vaz: We have made no representations to the Government of Spain on this issue and currently have no plans to do so.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has made to the Governments of *(a)* South Africa and *(b)* other countries bordering Zimbabwe concerning the situation in Zimbabwe. [126763]

Mr. Hain: We have had regular contact with the countries of Southern Africa concerning the situation in Zimbabwe. President Mbeki visited the UK last month as a Guest of Government. I attended a meeting of the World Economic Forum in Durban on 22 June where I met leaders from other Southern African countries.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans the Government have to send observers to Zimbabwe for the parliamentary elections; and if he will make a statement. [126760]

Mr. Hain: We have no plans to send a British observer team to Zimbabwe. We have however contributed funding to the EU and Commonwealth observer teams. We have also contributed funding for the training of Zimbabwean election monitors.

Diamonds

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the Government classifies diamonds originating in the Democratic Republic of the Congo as diamonds from an area of conflict. [126754]

Mr. Hain: We believe that diamonds originating in DRC are being used by both sides to fund the war.

The UK has supported the establishment of a UN expert panel to follow up on reports and collect information on the exploitation of DRC's natural resources and the links to conflict within DRC. We look forward to the panel's recommendations to the Security Council.

We want to see a peaceful resolution of the conflict, and DRC's natural wealth used to benefit the people of DRC.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action the Government plan to take in respect of British-registered companies trading in diamonds from conflict areas. [126784]

Mr. Hain: UN Security Council resolution 1173, adopted on 12 June 1998, requires all states to prohibit the import from Angola to their territories of all diamonds not controlled through the Angola Government's Certificate of Origin regime. The UK implements this requirement by means of an amendment to the Open General Import Licence. The UK has tabled a draft Security Council resolution which would impose a similar prohibition with respect to Sierra Leonean diamonds. The Government welcome the establishment of a UN expert panel which will investigate the links between exploitation of mineral resources and conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo and will consider the panel's recommendations for action.

Elections

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what criteria the Government use to assess whether overseas elections are free and fair. [126762]

Mr. Hain: When the Government deploy observers to elections overseas, they usually participate as members of international missions. On such missions, UK observers follow the procedures laid down for the larger group. For example the European Union and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe both have codes of conduct which apply to their election observation missions. In both cases, observers are expected to consider a wide range of factors when assessing the validity of an election, including: the degree of freedom of political parties and candidates to organise and express their views; fairness of access to state resources made available for the election; fairness of access to the media; registration of voters without discrimination on the basis of gender, racial or ethnic origin; and the conduct of polling and counting.

Human Rights

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the criteria he uses to measure human rights improvements in a country. [126658]

Mr. Hain: Our policy is to promote British interests and pursue British values by supporting democracy and human rights, wherever we can, however we can. That means responding to human rights challenges in the way most likely to help the people whose freedoms are being restricted. It would be irresponsible for any government to apply the same "one-size-fits-all" approach. We need to weigh factors such as relevant international standards, the policies of the government in the country concerned, and the extent to which our actions can have a real impact on the ground.

Sudan

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the impact of critical engagement with Sudan on human rights there; and if he will make a statement. [126657]

Mr. Hain: At this year's UN Commission on Human Rights, the EU sponsored a resolution on the Sudan which set out its concerns about violations of human rights. We have also taken up many of these concerns bilaterally and through the recently renewed EU/Sudan dialogue.

While we still have many concerns, we do believe that some progress has been made. Some examples would be the release of many prisoners, the agreement to review some legislation such as the Public Order Law, and the setting up of the Committee for the Eradication of the Abduction of Women and Children which is working in close co-operation with UNICEF and Save the Children Fund (UK). Such issues remain high on our agenda.

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* the international community is taking to ensure that Sudanese oil revenues are not being used to assist the war effort in Sudan. [126662]

Mr. Hain: We are well aware of concerns that revenues from the oil industry in the Sudan could be used to fund the ongoing war in the Sudan. We have raised these concerns with the Government of Sudan, pressing them to use the revenues for development projects and to show transparency in the oil account. Public assurances have been made to that effect and we shall look to the Government to honour these assurances as evidence becomes available. This is an issue that has also been taken up by other members of the international community.

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he has taken to persuade United Kingdom companies to withdraw from Sudan until there is peace there. [126661]

Mr. Hain: There is currently an EU arms embargo on the Sudan, which the UK helped initiate in 1994. We implement this rigorously and expect it to remain as long as the civil war continues.

As regards other sectors, we give full and frank advice to British companies taking into account, for example, the security situation and reports of human rights abuses associated with the oil industry. But we do not have a policy to halt all British commercial interests.

Russia

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans there are for the co-funding, via the G8, of the development of plutonium fuel in Russia. [126572]

Mr. Hain: G8 countries have affirmed their intention to establish arrangements for the safe management of weapons-grade plutonium no longer required for defence purposes. We have recognised that an international approach to financing will be required involving both public and private funds. This issue will continue to be discussed at the upcoming G8 Kyushu-Okinawa Summit.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what her policy is on the proposal that economic support be given by member states of the G8 for the Russian plutonium and nuclear industry. [126573]

Mr. Hain: The 1996 Moscow Nuclear Summit tasked the G8 Non-Proliferation Experts Group (NPEG) to take forward international cooperation on the safe and permanent disposal of ex-weapons plutonium, focusing on the huge Russian and American stockpiles. Technical experts agreed that the most promising options for disposal were conversion (of both plutonium and uranium) into mixed-oxide fuel (MOX) for use in civil nuclear reactors, and vitrification (in glass or ceramic form). The UK has actively contributed to work: as G8 President in 1998 we held a major conference of governmental and industrial experts which examined options for implementing the programme and ways of financing it. The US and Russia have recently concluded a Framework Agreement on how they will deal with disposition of weapons grade plutonium. We look forward to further discussion at the forthcoming G8 summit in Okinawa.

Saudi Arabia

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has made to the Saudi Arabian Government on their legal system. [126637]

Mr. Hain: On 22 May, at the EU/GCC Joint Ministerial Meeting in Brussels, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary expressed concern about the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia, including aspects of the judicial process, to the Saudi Foreign Minister and representatives of the other GCC countries.

Visit Visas

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many visit visa applications from people aged over 65 years were *(a)* made, *(b)* granted initially, *(c)* refused initially and *(d)* deferred at the British High Commission in (i) Islamabad, (ii) Karachi, (iii) New Delhi and (iv) Mumbai in (1) 1997, (2) 1998, (3) 1999 and (4) 2000 to the most recent date for which information is available. [127111]

Mr. Vaz: The information requested is not collated either at Posts or held centrally. However, I have requested that the information be sought from Posts and will write as soon as it is available.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many written parliamentary questions were tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000; and how many have not received substantive answers on the grounds of disproportionate costs. [127103]

Mr. Robin Cook *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* Of the 1,539 written parliamentary questions tabled to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 32 did not receive substantive answers citing disproportionate costs as the reason.

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many of the written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 have not received substantive answers, citing as the reason that the information is *(a)* not held centrally, *(b)* not held in the form requested, and *(c)* not available. [127334]

Mr. Robin Cook *[holding answer 22 June 2000]:* Nineteen.

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many of the written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 have not received substantive answers, citing as the reason commercial or other confidentiality. [127437]

Mr. Robin Cook *[holding answer 23 June 2000]:* Four.

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many of the written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 have not received substantive answers, excluding those not answered for reasons of *(a)* disproportionate costs, *(b)* information not available, not held centrally, or not held in the form requested or *(c)* commercial or other confidentiality. [127678]

Mr. Robin Cook: No outstanding questions tabled between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 to which holding replies were given are still awaiting substantive answers.

Turkey

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Turkey about the conditions of imprisonment of Abdullah Öcalan. [127686]

Mr. Vaz: We have not made any representations to the Turkish authorities specifically concerning Abdullah Öcalan's prison conditions. We are, however, aware of recent reports alleging deterioration in Mr. Öcalan's health and will continue to follow his case closely.

DEFENCE

Departmental Vehicles

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* cars and *(b)* commercial vehicles operated by his Department were manufactured (i) in the UK, (ii) in the EU and (iii) elsewhere. [122262]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 17 May 2000]:* In addition to combat vehicles, the Ministry of Defence operates a wide range of support vehicles procured or leased from over 130 different manufacturers. While details are not held centrally, it is assessed that the number of non-combat support vehicles (including long-term leased vehicles) is as follows:

(a) cars (up to and including estate cars)—7,700

(b) commercial vehicles (buses, fork-lift trucks, light vans and upwards)—15,300.

Country of manufacture is not recorded on the management information systems that are in place across the Department. For a fleet of 23,000 vehicles, the work involved to identify the country of manufacture could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Service Accommodation

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what estimate he has made of the impact on morale of the standard of family accommodation available to service personnel; [126507]

(2) what assessment he has made of the impact the delay in the housing refurbishment and improvement programme has had upon his ability to retain Army personnel. [126509]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence understands that Service personnel and their families expect Service family accommodation to be of good quality, and that poor quality accommodation can affect retention. Accommodation standards are set according to factors such as energy efficiency, double glazing and modern bathroom facilities. Currently around 60 per cent. of accommodation is Standard Two or above.

We are working hard to bring all family accommodation in Great Britain to Standard One. The Upgrade Programme to achieve this started in 1996. It is a significant investment programme and considerable progress has been made. We originally planned that most of the estate would be upgraded by November 2003 but the 1998 Stock Condition Survey revealed that the programme would involve more work than we predicted at the outset. As a consequence, we were forced to extend the target completion date to November 2005.

The Continuous Attitude Surveys, conducted among both serving personnel and their spouses, give objective evidence of morale and show that personnel are generally satisfied with the overall standard of Service families accommodation. Independent housing surveys conducted for the Defence Housing Executive also show that 82 per cent. of Service families are content with the standard of family accommodation.

Technology, Readiness and Risk Assessment Programme

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the 2001 budget and staffing levels for the ballistic missile defence component of the Technology, Readiness and Risk Assessment programme. [126951]

Mr. Hoon: The Technology Readiness and Risk Assessment Programme is a three-year programme begun in July 1998. £12.5 million has been allocated for the overall programme, the work for which is being shared between the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) and four UK defence contractors. The wide-ranging and consultative nature of the programme means that it is not possible to provide precise details of staffing levels, but the core team comprises 25–30 staff.

Ballistic Missile Defence

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a list of agreements on information exchange between the UK and USA with regard to anti-ballistic missile systems. [126943]

Mr. Hoon: The 1985 Memorandum of Understanding relating to Co-operative Research for the Strategic Defence Initiative is the sole agreement which provides the basis for information exchange between the UK and USA with regard to Ballistic Missile Defence.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent expenditure there has been by DERA on research into and evaluation of anti-ballistic missile systems. [126950]

Mr. Hoon: The recent research by DERA in the area of BMD has resulted from the MOD sponsored and funded study known as the Technology Readiness and Risk Assessment Programme (TRRAP). The three-year programme was begun in July 1998 at a cost of £12.5 million. Approximately 55 per cent. of the funds have been allocated to DERA with the balance allocated to UK industry.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if Field Marshal Sergeyev of the Russian Federation discussed ballistic missile defences at the meeting of the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council on 9 June; and if he will publish the minutes of that meeting; [126941]

(2) what discussions have taken place between his Department and representatives of the Russian Federation concerning ballistic missile defences; and if he will publish the minutes of the meetings. [126940]

Mr. Hoon: The Government have discussed issues relating to the possible proposals for a US National Missile Defence system, and ballistic missile defence more generally, in the course of regular consultations with representatives of the Russian Federation on security-related issues. Most recently, the Russian Defence Minister, Igor Sergeyev presented in outline a Russian proposal on ballistic missile defence to NATO Defence Ministers in the NATO/Russia Permanent Joint Council on 9 June.

I am withholding records of these meetings under exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Ballistic Missile Proliferation

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent assessment NATO has made regarding the nature of the threat from ballistic missile proliferation. [126939]

Mr. Hoon: NATO prepares periodic classified assessments of threats to Alliance interests including those presented by ballistic missile proliferation.

AWE

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans his Department has to ensure that the new operators of the Atomic Weapons Establishment sites will extend the policy on openness adopted by the previous operators. [127136]

Dr. Moonie: The contract to operate the Atomic Weapons Establishment specifically requires the operator to provide a Local Liaison Committee to serve as the formal interface between the sites and the local community, including elected representatives from interested organisations and local government agencies. The presence of the on-site Ministry of Defence compliance team will ensure that the policy is adhered to.

Porton Down

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many former members of the armed services were in contact with Professor Peter Lachmann and his panel during their inquiry into the zinc cadmium sulphide trials which had been conducted by the Porton Down Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment; and if he will place the communications between them and Professor Lachmann and his team in the Library. [127131]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 6 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 554–55W.

Army Base Repair Organisation

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the value of the contract recently awarded to the Army Base Repair Organisation; which other companies bid for this contract; what is the lifespan of the contract; if the contract was for a fixed price; and if he will make a statement. [127177]

Dr. Moonie: The Army Base Repair Organisation (ABRO) has recently been awarded a contract for the refurbishment of the generator sets used to power the UK Army's Digital Trunk Communications System (Ptarmigan). The work is designed to extend the life of the generators and covers up to 158 generator sets. Six other companies submitted bids for the work: BAe Defence Systems, G&M Power Plant Ltd., Hunting Engineering Ltd., Vickers Specialist Engines, Dowding & Mills (North Eastern) Ltd. and Marconi Power & Control Systems Ltd. The contract was awarded on a firm price (ie non-variable) basis and the work is expected to take some six months to complete. Details of the contract value are commercial-in-confidence and are withheld under Exemption 14 of the Code of Practice, which relates to information given in confidence.

Staff Secondments

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence who requested the secondment of the Deputy Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency to Thomson-CSF; who approved it; what was the cost to his Department; and if he will make a statement. [127180]

Dr. Moonie: The secondment of the former Deputy Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency to the UK headquarters of Thomson-CSF arose out of discussions between Ministry of Defence officials and the company's senior management and is part of the Ministry of Defence's wider interchange programme. As with all top level civil service appointments, it was approved by the Permanent Secretary. There is no additional cost to the Department as salary and associated costs will be reimbursed by the company for the duration of the secondment.

Several MOD officials are currently seconded to UK defence companies, and two are with major US defence companies. Secondments are a valuable means of ensuring that the MOD remains an intelligent customer and obtains best value for money. They are also in the spirit of modernising Government and public sector reform.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many troops returning to the United Kingdom from deployment in Sierra Leone have been diagnosed as having signs of malaria since 12 June; how many UK troops have been so diagnosed in the last five years; and in which overseas deployments they had served. [126996]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* As of 21 June 2000, a total of 48 confirmed cases of malaria and one suspected case have been recorded among Service personnel deployed to Sierra Leone. According to the Ministry of Defence data on hospital admissions, which includes admissions to RAF medical centres for more than 48 hours and to sick bays in RN ships, 47 Service personnel were diagnosed as suffering from malaria between 1 January 1995 and 17 January 2000. (This is the latest date for which records are immediately available, other than for the Sierra Leone deployment). Those personnel had served overseas in a total of 40 countries (as listed) prior to their diagnosis. Some personnel are likely to have contracted malaria while on holiday overseas.

Australia
Bahrain
Barbados
Belize
Belgium
Brunei
Canada
Cameroon
Croatia
Cyprus
Falkland Islands
Fiji
Germany
Gibraltar
Ghana
Hong Kong
Hungary
Indonesia
Italy
Ivory Coast
Jamaica
Kenya
Morocco
Namibia
Nepal
New Zealand
Norway
Portugal
Puerto Rico
Senegal
Sierra Leone
South Africa
Spain
St. Helena
Sudan
Turkey
United Arab Emirates
United States of America
Yugoslavia
Zaire.

Procurement Fraud

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 24 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 563W, on procurement fraud, if he will state *(a)* against which contracts the three cases are being investigated, which were recorded against 1999–2000, stating which project within that contract is affected and *(b)* contracts for which the values were stated for (i) 1995–96, (ii) 1997–98 and (iii) 1998–99 were found to have been affected by fraud and from which specific area of that contract; and if he will make a statement. [126685]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 22 June 2000]:* The three contracts reported for 1999–2000 are the subject of current Ministry of Defence Police investigations and it would be inappropriate to comment further at present. None of the three contracts relate to major procurement projects. For 1995–96 the value was stated against various jobbing orders for works at a Naval Air Station and involved the corruption of a Crown Servant by a contractor. For 1997–98 the value was stated against a suspicion that a Crown Servant had submitted false Travel and Subsistence claims with the help of a firm holding a contract for resettlement training. For 1998–99 the value was stated against a PFI consultancy contract and involved an overpayment, since recovered, arising from genuine error by the contractor.

Theft

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate his Department has made of the cost to its budget in relation to theft in each year since 1995–96; how many prosecutions in each year were brought against *(a)* military personnel, *(b)* civilian personnel and *(c)* others on charges of theft of MoD

property, stating in each case the amount involved and the outcome of the prosecution; and if he will make a statement. [126687]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 22 June 2000]:* The reported estimated annual costs of theft for the financial years 1995–96 to 1999–2000 inclusive are as follows:

1995–96: £173,329

1996–97: £231,033

1997–98: £491,215

1998–99: £141,141

1999–2000: £149,891.

No abatement is made for subsequent recoveries. These figures relate to a combination of suspected and proven thefts with estimated values refined from time to time as investigations, sometimes lasting a year or more, reach a conclusion. Those cases currently brought to a conclusion involve a range of outcomes and include prosecutions resulting in custodial sentences, dismissal, fines or probation as defined by the Treasury. The reported figures for these prosecutions brought against MOD staff are as set out:

1995–96

There were five prosecutions involving civilians and one involving military personnel. Three civilians were fined £796 each and given community service following a theft valued at £1,592. Another civilian was dismissed, after a court case, for a theft valued at £8,300 while another received a five-day suspension without pay following a theft of unknown value. The military case resulted in a prosecution at Magistrates Court and a fine, followed by dismissal, for a case valued at £294.

1996–97

There were two prosecutions involving civilians and five involving military personnel. A civilian was fined £350 and dismissed following a theft where all property was recovered. In another civilian case a police caution was issued following a theft of unknown value. The military cases involved one theft valued at £1,500 resulting in probation for one year, a theft valued at £5,781 resulting in a verdict of gross negligence and a fine of £735, a theft valued at £2,721 resulting in a fine of £300, summary trial resulting in a fine of £300 for a theft valued at £60, and a fine of £25 for a theft of unknown value.

1997–98

There were three prosecutions involving civilians and four involving military personnel. Two civilians received custodial sentences following a theft valued at £320,000. Another civilian received a police caution for a case valued at £61.

The military cases involved a case of eight months detention and dismissal for a case valued at £195, a theft valued at £190 leading to seven days detention plus stoppages of £17.50, a sentence of seven years imprisonment for a case where the value is not known but involved the theft of explosives, and a theft valued at £8,000 resulting in discharge from the service and 240 hours community service.

1998–99

There was one prosecution involving a civilian and another involving a military person. The civilian case was valued at £3,000 and resulted in 12 months probation plus community service. The military case involved a charge of handling stolen goods valued at £10,000 and the payment of compensation valued at £283.

1999–2000

There are no prosecutions currently reported for this year.

Contracts

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will list *(a)* the original in-service date, *(b)* the current in-service date, *(c)* the actual or estimated cost, *(d)* the years of peak expenditure, *(e)* the expenditure in (d), *(f)* the date of the initial gate, *(g)* the date of the main gate and *(h)* the prime contractor for the projects *(i)* BOWMAN, (ii) COBRA, (iii) FET, (iv) HARRV, (v) MRAV, (vi) Phoenix, (vii) Shielder and (viii) UK Attack Helicopter; [127707]

(2) if he will list *(a)* the original in-service date, *(b)* the current in-service date, *(c)* the actual or estimated cost, *(d)* the years of peak expenditure, *(e)* the expenditure in (d), *(f)* the date of the initial gate, *(g)* the date of the main gate and *(h)* the prime contractor for the projects *(i)* ASRAAM, (ii) ASTOR, (iii) BVRAAM, (iv) Brimstone, (v) Eurofighter, (vi) FCBA, (vii) FGBAD, (viii) FOAS, (ix) FSTA, (x) Hercules Rolling Replacement Tranche 2, (xi) Merlin HM Mk1, (xii) Merlin HC Mk3, (xiii) Nimrod MRA-4, (xiv) STSA, (xv) CASOM and (xvi) SABR; [127708]

(3) if he will list *(a)* the original in-service date, *(b)* the current in-service date, *(c)* the actual or estimated cost, *(d)* the years of peak expenditure, *(e)* the expenditure in (d), *(f)* the date of the initial gate, *(g)* the date of the main gate and *(h)* the prime contractor for the projects *(i)* Astute Class Submarines, (ii) CV(F), (iii) FASGW, (iv) FCBA, (v) LPD(R) and (vi) MCMU. [127706]

Dr. Moonie: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

British Aerospace

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what discussions he plans to have with British Aerospace about its plans for its defence manufacturing capability, with particular reference to the consolidated site option for the Royal Ordnance Factory, Nottingham; [127589]

(2) what recent representations he has received with respect to job losses at British Aerospace; [127592]

(3) what assessment he has made of the impact of the recent announcement of job losses by British Aerospace on manufacturing capability in the defence industry; [127590]

(4) what assessment he has made of the effect of the recent announcement of job losses by British Aerospace on the Royal Ordnance Factory in Nottingham; and if he will make a statement. [127591]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 23 June 2000]:* The future of the Royal Ordnance site at Nottingham is ultimately a matter for BAe Systems. However the decision on its future has still not been finalised and will not be so until the end of June following discussions between the Trade Unions and BAe Systems.

War Graves

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list those charged with theft of items from war graves in United Kingdom waters; and of these how many have been successfully prosecuted. [127669]

Dr. Moonie: Ministry of Defence Police investigations have resulted in one individual being charged with theft from a sunken military vessel. The individual accepted an official "Police Caution".

There have been other prosecutions under the Protection of Military Remains Act for offences relating to aircraft.

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to increase the level of protection of United Kingdom war graves; and if he will make a statement. [127670]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence, together with other Government Departments has been assisting with Diving Associations' plans for self regulation through the development of a Code of Practice for diving on wrecks.

The aim of the Code is to re-educate divers to adopt best practices when diving on all wrecks. Current training and other publications, issued by the diving organisations, will be reviewed to take account of the legal and moral responsibilities of those who dive on wrecks. In addition a new "Wreck Diving Law Course" is being piloted by the British SubAqua Club (BSAC). Information and guidance on "Respecting Our Wrecks" already appears on the Diving Associations' websites.

Mechanisms for enforcement of the Code of Practice and other initiatives, which could result in expulsion from the organisation, are already in place in the Associations' constitution. Any member behaving in a way calculated to be prejudicial to the interests of the club could be expelled. The diving organisations are fully committed to change the way a small minority abuse the wrecks they dive on.

It is expected that this Code will be introduced by the Diving Associations shortly. The Government will assess compliance with the Code and review policy accordingly in the light of subsequent developments.

In addition, my Department has given full support to the Maritime and Coastguard Agency proposed Wreck Amnesty. The aim of the Amnesty is to encourage finders of wreck material raised in the past, but not reported under (s)236 of the 1995 Merchant Shipping Act, to come forward and report past finds. These finds could include light munitions or other potentially dangerous materials; items of historical importance as well as items capable of being returned to the rightful owner. This along with other initiatives supported by the Ministry of Defence is aimed at heightening divers' and other sea users' awareness of their legal and moral responsibilities.

My Department has produced guidance notes for sport divers when diving in the vicinity of wrecked military vessels, these are publicly available.

Along with other Government Departments we continue to encourage safe, responsible and legal diving practices.

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what protection, other than protection under the Protection of Military Remains Act 1986, there is for United Kingdom war graves in *(a)* United Kingdom and *(b)* other waters; and what methods of enforcing this protection there are. [127668]

Dr. Moonie: Legally a "war grave" is a burial maintained by the Commonwealth War Grave Commission. Since a sunken vessel is not a "burial" a sunken warship is simply a derelict in Admiralty law and has no greater or special legal status.

I am unaware of any other legislation specially drafted for the protection of underwater human remains. The fact that a vessel has not been designated does not mean that a person can remove items from a vessel with impunity. Other laws may apply.

The Protection of Wrecks Act 1973, provides protection of wreck sites that are of archaeological or historical significance or are dangerous. The Merchant Shipping Act 1995, which incorporates the International Salvage Convention 1989, provides for the rights of both owners and finders of wreck.

If there is a breach of the law then the appropriate enforcement authorities will enforce the law.

My Department is unaware of any international legislation for the protection of underwater military human remains. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea does, however, cover archaeological and historical objects found at sea which could include human remains.

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* vessels and *(b)* controlled sites have been designated under section 2 of the Protection of Military Remains Act 1986. [127666]

Dr. Moonie: No vessels or controlled sites have been designated under section 2 of the Protection of Military Remains Act 1986.

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the United Kingdom war graves in *(a)* United Kingdom waters, *(b)* international waters, and *(c)* waters belonging to other countries. [127667]

Dr. Moonie: There is no centrally held list of wrecked military vessels that lie in UK territorial water, international waters or the territorial waters of other countries and no one single source of reference which identifies all vessels lost in the service of the Admiralty or on Government Service since 1914.

The returns to Parliament following the end of both world wars, Navy Losses and Merchant Shipping Losses, list some 12,000 vessels. They list for WWI: the total number of warship losses 254; Auxiliary vessels 815, Merchant 2,479, Fishing vessels 675. WWII: Warships and Auxiliary vessels 1,503, Landing craft 1,308 and Merchant vessels 4,786. No distinction is made between those vessels in Government Service or Mercantile vessels. Only one List identifies vessels where lives were lost. These records have not been updated in the intervening years.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many parliamentary questions were tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and the 20 April which requested information, pursuant to previous answers. [127671]

Dr. Moonie: According to the Parliamentary On-Line Information System, POLIS, during the period 19 October 1999 to 20 April 2000, the Ministry of Defence received 51 Parliamentary Questions requesting information pursuant to previous answers.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Information Technology

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to ensure that computers and software used in schools under the Government's IT initiative, are upgraded to reflect technical change; and what criteria are used to determine when equipment is obsolete and in need of replacement. [119745]

Mr. Wills: The Government are supporting £657 million of investment in schools' information and communications technology (ICT) provision up to 2002 as part of the National Grid for Learning Initiative. This funding may be used to install new equipment and software and to replace or upgrade older infrastructure. It is a matter for schools themselves in the light of their own particular needs to decide when equipment and software has come to the end of its useful life. Regular competitions held by the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency to certify NGfL Managed Service suppliers set standards which ensure that the networks, equipment and services available to schools and other learning institutions keep pace with technical and other changes.

Online Services

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the services which *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the executive agencies responsible to his Department (i) provide online and (ii) expect to be deliverable online by 2002. [119442]

Mr. Wills: The Department for Education and Employment has made a good start on an ambitious programme of work, making innovative use of new technology in the delivery of our services.

We currently provide a range of services electronically that include:

Childcare Link—internet access to joined-up information on childcare from a number of organisations;

The National Grid for Learning, including the Virtual Teachers' Centre and Parents' Website;

The European Social Fund, where the application and administration process is electronically enabled, and we are developing an enhanced service to applicants allowing the completion and return of the electronic application over the internet, reducing bureaucracy and providing a better service to customers; and

The National Careers Service Extranet is a password-protected site for DfEE and the Careers Services National Association to communicate with Careers Service companies and other organisations for sharing information and good practice. With the development of the Connexions Service, the scope of the Extranet is to be broadened to allow access/use by a range of other partners including youth organisations.

The Learning and Work Bank, an internet site to be available from the end of November 2000, will provide integrated access to information about jobs, learning opportunities and careers.

The Employment Service will provide and maintain a Job Bank with all ES vacancies, which will be an essential component of the Learning and Work Bank. By the end of 2000, employers will be able to notify the ES of vacancies for inclusion on the Job Bank by calling a single national telephone number. Touch-screen kiosks will be introduced into Jobcentres between November 2000 and November 2001, which will provide job seekers with direct access to the Job Bank. The Job Bank will also be accessible from home by those with internet access.

Equality Direct is a cross-cutting project on which the DfEE is working with the three Equality Commissions and the DTI. The service is part of the Modernising Government agenda aimed to respond more directly to business needs for information and advice on equal opportunities issues. The proposal is, by September 2000, to launch a pilot telephone advice-line England wide, an internet website, and in more limited locations, local support teams to provide direct assistance to small and medium sized businesses.

We are keen to use new innovative interactive technologies to support learning and teaching. The UfI's "learndirect" online learning, support and information and advice services will be launched nationally later this year and my Secretary of State recently announced an e-universities initiative to develop a portfolio of courses suitable for delivery over the internet and pilot projects for the delivery of courses in Mathematics, Latin and Japanese for 11–14 year olds (Key Stage 3). These projects complement other pilots in the use of interactive digital TV to deliver GCSE courses and the GridClub pupil centre for 7–11 year olds to be launched in September over a range of platforms and technologies. The virtual arm of the National College for School Leadership, due to open this autumn, will establish new networks within the teaching profession.

We are developing a smart card for 16–19 year olds in education which will give access to a range of transport, leisure and commercial discounts. The first Youth Cards will be issued in autumn 2000 with functionality being added incrementally during 2001–02.

As part of the drive to improve our contacts with employers, and to give them a new channel of communication, we have set up an e-mail forum for small to medium sized firms. This forum will improve our communication with employers on skills, development and key employment issues.

We are also keen to maximise the opportunities presented by new technologies to speed up and simplify processes. Our proposal to develop an online application process for student support will provide an initial eligibility application form on the internet and the electronic exchange of data in 2000. We are also developing a paperless applications process for work permits which will ensure we provide a swift and efficient service, where the facility to receive electronic applications will be introduced early in 2001.

Automated collection of statistical information will reduce the administrative burden on schools. A small pilot trial of the use of internet technologies to collect data from the education sector is under way. If the pilot is successful, all data collection, except where schools prefer to use paper returns, will be electronic by April 2002. The prototype of a national electronic delivery and archiving service providing online DfEE information to schools and LEAs was successful and continues to be used by the growing pilot population. In particular, the use of 'Push' technology directs users to items matching their interest profile. A national service will be introduced in September 2000, reducing bureaucracy and the administrative burden.

Nursery Places

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time

nursery places were provided in each London local authority in (i) 1996–97, (ii) 1997–98, (iii) 1998–99 and (iv) 1999–2000 for *(a)* three-year-olds, *(b)* four-year-olds and *(c)* all children aged under five years. [125418]

Ms Hodge: The available information on the number of children under five who are in some form of early years education is shown in the table.

Currently, all eligible four year old children in England are in some form of early education, including 16 per cent. in private and voluntary places. Funding is provided through the early years partnerships for LEA, voluntary and private places.

Since September 1999, we have invested substantially in the creation of new, free early educations places for three-year-olds. During 1999–2000, funding was focused on 65 authorities, chosen on the basis of social need, and over 46,000 three-year-olds were able to access free early education for the first time.

Over 80 per cent. of new free places were concentrated in the private, voluntary and independent sectors and we expect this trend to continue over the next year. Our aim is that 66 per cent. of three-year-olds nationally should have access to a free early education place by March 2002, enabling some 190,000 three-year-olds the opportunity to access a free place for the first time.

Children aged three and four years of age in early years education places—England and each local education authority area in London, 1997–2000[1]

				1997					
	Aged 3[2]			*Aged 4*[2]			*Total under 5*[2]		
Position as at January	*Part-time*	*Full-time*	*Total*	*Part-time*	*Full-time*	*Total*	*Part-time*	*Full-time*	*Total*
England	199,502	17,447	216,949	161,334	341,057	502,391	360,836	358,504	719,340
London	34,666	6,068	40,734	24,648	52,477	77,125	59,314	58,545	117,859
City of London	8	3	11	0	18	18	8	21	29
Camden	386	430	816	60	1,322	1,382	446	1,752	2,198
Hackney	1,055	421	1,476	219	2,044	2,263	1,274	2,465	3,739
Hammersmith and Fulham	678	376	1,054	110	1,130	1,240	788	1,506	2,294
Haringey	1,630	383	2,013	622	2,253	2,875	2,252	2,636	4,888
Islington	614	659	1,273	40	1,991	2,031	654	2,650	3,304
Kensington and Chelsea	185	357	542	18	744	762	203	1,101	1,304
Lambeth	1,286	190	1,476	533	1,676	2,209	1,819	1,866	3,685
Lewisham	1,379	35	1,414	1,019	1,601	2,620	2,398	1,636	4,034
Newham	2,001	31	2,032	2,405	1,396	3,801	4,406	1,427	5,833
Southwark	1,842	388	2,230	373	2,662	3,035	2,215	3,050	5,265
Tower Hamlets	1,255	1,092	2,347	124	2,714	2,838	1,379	3,806	5,185
Wandsworth	1,093	521	1,614	270	2,134	2,404	1,363	2,655	4,018
Westminster	559	168	727	221	874	1,095	780	1,042	1,822
Barking and Dagenham	1,332	0	1,332	783	1,597	2,380	2,115	1,597	3,712
Barnet	2,002	29	2,031	820	2,152	2,972	2,822	2,181	5,003
Bexley	1,065	9	1,074	593	1,958	2,551	1,658	1,967	3,625
Brent	1,095	623	1,718	491	2,491	2,982	1,586	3,114	4,700
Bromley	106	3	109	79	2,481	2,560	185	2,484	2,669
Croydon	1,532	6	1,538	831	2,872	3,703	2,363	2,878	5,241
Ealing	2,614	18	2,632	1,126	2,507	3,633	3,740	2,525	6,265
Enfield	1,130	0	1,130	606	2,498	3,104	1,736	2,498	4,234
Greenwich	1,770	227	1,997	1,003	1,705	2,708	2,773	1,932	4,705
Harrow	452	0	452	566	1 644	2,210	1,018	1,644	2,662
Havering	441	16	457	237	1,942	2,179	678	1,958	2,636
Hillingdon	570	0	570	3,004	83	3,087	3,754	83	3,657
Hounslow	1,561	4	1,565	767	1,756	2,523	2,328	1,760	4,088
Kingston upon Thames	855	41	896	877	536	1,413	1,732	577	2,309
Merton	1,653	0	1,653	1,260	804	2,064	2,913	804	3,717
Redbridge	675	13	688	974	1,419	2,393	1,649	1,432	3,081
Richmond upon Thames	565	5	570	1,280	162	1,442	1,845	167	2,012
Sutton	328	1	329	1,691	72	1,763	2,019	73	2,092
Waltham Forest	949	19	968	1,646	1,239	2,885	2,595	1,258	3,853

				1998					
	Aged 3[2]			*Aged 4*[2]			*Total under 5*[2]		
Position as at January	*Part-time*	*Full-time*	*Total*	*Part-time*	*Full-time*	*Total*	*Part-time*	*Full-time*	*Total*
England	205,190	19,479	224,669	247,350	343,448	590,798	452,540	362,927	825,467
London	36,081	6,424	42,505	32,647	52,248	84,895	68,728	85,672	127,400
City of London	6	9	15	7	21	28	13	30	43
Camden	471	427	898	199	1,361	1,560	670	1,788	2,458
Hackney	1,094	451	1,545	271.6	1,932	2,204	1,366	2,383	3,749
Hammersmith and Fulham	599	458	1,057	372.4	1,099	1,471	971	1,557	2,528
Haringey	1,571	379	1,950	627.6	2,228	2,856	2,199	2,607	4,806

Position as at January	1998 Aged 3[2] Part-time	Aged 3[2] Full-time	Aged 3[2] Total	Aged 4[3] Part-time	Aged 4[3] Full-time	Aged 4[3] Total	Total under 5[3] Part-time	Total under 5[3] Full-time	Total under 5[3] Total
Islington	605	658	1,263	214	1,955	2,169	819	2,613	3,432
Kensington and Chelsea	189	338	527	228	870	1,098	417	1,208	1,625
Lambeth	1,520	343	1,863	599.8	2,127	2,727	2,120	2,470	4,590
Lewisham	1,427	49	1,476	1,474.2	1,492	2,966	2,901	1,541	4,442
Newham	2,087	19	2,106	2,383	1,504	3,887	4,470	1,523	5,993
Southwark	1,824	476	2,300	763.6	2,669	3,433	2,588	3,145	5,733
Tower Hamlets	1,211	1,061	2,272	212	2,638	2,850	1,423	3,699	5,122
Wandsworth	1,031	559	1,590	720.6	2,020	2,741	1,752	2,579	4,331
Westminster	623	171	794	410.8	918	1,329	1,034	1,089	2,123
Barking and Dagenham	1,409	2	1,411	768.6	1,585	2,354	2,178	1,587	3,765
Barnet	2,007	17	2,024	1,295.8	2,314	3,610	3,303	2,331	5,634
Bexley	1,238	9	1,247	662	1,978	2,640	1,900	1,987	3,887
Brent	1,052	661	1,713	762.8	2,360	3,123	1,815	3,021	4,836
Bromley	192	7	199	1,208.4	2,356	3,564	1,400	2,363	3,763
Croydon	1,719	10	1,729	1,534.8	2,798	4,333	3,254	2,808	6,062
Ealing	2,671	28	2,699	1,148.4	2,382	3,530	3,819	2,410	6,229
Enfield	1,144	0	1,144	1,032	2,339	3,371	2,176	2,339	4,515
Greenwich	1,670	184	1,854	1,243.8	1,648	2,892	2,914	1,832	4,746
Harrow	591	0	591	835.4	2,552	2,387	1,426	1,552	2,978
Havering	464	18	482	702.6	1,845	2,548	1,167	1,863	3,030
Hillingdon	627	1	628	3,137.2	63	3,200	3,764	64	3,828
Hounslow	1,604	2	1,606	805.8	1,658	2,464	2,410	1,660	4,070
Kingston upon Thames	878	22	900	1,113	500	1,613	1,991	522	2,513
Merton	1,716	0	1,716	1,455.6	768	2,224	3,172	768	3,940
Redbridge	807	18	825	1,440.6	1,615	3,056	2,248	1,633	3,881
Richmond upon Thames	584	3	587	1,402.2	408	1,810	1,986	411	2,397
Sutton	246	18	264	1,777.6	88	1,866	2,024	106	2,130
Waltham Forest	1,204	26	1,230	1,836.4	1,157	2,993	3,040	1,183	4,223

Position as at January	1999 Aged 3[2] Part-time	Aged 3[2] Full-time	Aged 3[2] Total	Aged 4[3] Part-time	Aged 4[3] Full-time	Aged 4[3] Total	Total under 5[3] Part-time	Total under 5[3] Full-time	Total under 5[3] Total
England	207,736	20,432	228,168	253,761	346,502	600,263	461,497	366,934	828,431
London	38,211	6,872	45,083	34,489	54,865	89,354	72,700	61,737	134,437
City of London	4	7	11	5	27	32	9	34	43
Camden[4]	416	525	941	658.4	1,410	2,068.4	1,074	1,935	3,009
Hackney[4]	1,143	487	1,630	750.6	1,964	2,714.6	1,894	2,451	4,345
Hammersmith and Fulham[4]	657	405	1,062	347.2	1,160	1,507.2	1,004	1,565	2,569
Haringey[4]	1,570	386	1,956	820.6	2,173	2,993.6	2,391	2,559	4,950
Islington[4]	616	675	1,291	301.6	1,800	2,101.6	918	2,475	3,393
Kensington and Chelsea	173	340	513	220.4	825	1,045.4	393	1,165	1,558
Lambeth[4]	1,552	365	1,917	826.4	2,150	2,976.4	2,378	2,515	4,893
Lewisham[4]	1,716	162	1,878	886	2,181	3,067	2,602	2,343	4,945
Newham[4]	3,129	62	3,191	1,144.4	2,738	3,882.4	4,273	2,800	7,073
Southwark[4]	1,862	426	2,288	731.2	2,686	3,417.2	2,593	3,112	5,705
Tower Hamlets[4]	1,234	1,181	2,415	174.6	2,690	2,864.6	1,409	3,871	5,280
Wandsworth[4]	965	625	1,590	1,229.2	2,009	3,238.2	2,194	2,634	4,828
Westminster[4]	614	210	824	619.6	946	1,565.6	1,234	1,156	2,390
Barking and Dagenham[4]	1,332	5	1,337	755.4	1,627	2,382.4	2,087	1,632	3,719
Barnet	1,984	55	2,039	1,409.9	2,397	3,806.9	3,394	2,452	5,846
Bexley	1,296	6	1,302	902	1,915	2,817	2,198	1,921	4,119
Brent[4]	1,061	650	1,711	804.4	2,331	3,135.4	1,865	2,981	4,846
Bromley	210	6	216	1,311.2	2,381	3,692.2	1,521	2,387	3,908
Croydon	1,808	60	1,868	1,663.8	2,911	4,574.8	3,472	2,971	6,443
Ealing[4]	2,661	28	2,689	1,472.4	2,497	3,969.4	4,133	2,525	6,658
Enfield	1,249	0	1,249	1,120.4	2,299	3,419.4	2,369	2,299	4,668
Greenwich[4]	1,772	132	1,904	1,233.2	1,633	2,856.2	2,995	1,765	4,760
Harrow	604	2	606	742	1,554	2,296	1,346	1,556	2,902
Havering	458	15	473	760.2	1,964	2,724.2	1,218	1,979	3,197
Hillingdon	646	0	646	3,296.4	65	3,361.4	3,942	65	4,007
Hounslow[4]	1,505	2	1,507	876.2	1,713	2,589.2	2,381	1,715	4,096
Kingston upon Thames	891	7	898	1,206.2	533	1,739.2	2,097	540	2,637
Merton	1,669	2	1,671	1,427.2	673	2,100.2	3,096	675	3,771
Redbridge	1,301	20	1,321	1,338.2	1,909	3,247.2	2,639	1,929	4,568
Richmond upon Thames	553	2	555	1,576	418	1,994	2,129	420	2,549
Sutton	284	5	289	2,064.5	99	2,163.5	2,349	104	2,453
Waltham Forest[4]	1,276	19	1,295	1,824.2	1,187	3,011.2	3,100	1,206	4,306

Position as at January	Aged 3[1] Part-time	Aged 3[1] Full-time	Aged 3[1] Total	2000 Aged 4[1] Part-time	2000 Aged 4[1] Full-time	2000 Aged 4[1] Total	Total under 5[1] Part-time	Total under 5[1] Full-time	Total under 5[1] Total
England	251,843	20,768	272,611	245,739	343,086	588,825	497,852	363,854	861,436
London	51,967	6,997	58,964	33,972	55,432	89,404	85,940	62,429	148,369
City of London	5	5	10	5	22	27	10	27	37
Camden[4]	1,193	503	1,696	623	1,334	1,957	1,816	1,837	3,653
Hackney[4]	2,101	463	2,564	734	2,051	2,785	2,835	2,514	5,349
Hammersmith and Fulham[4]	1,064	409	1,473	312	1,140	1,452	1,377	1,549	2,926
Haringey[4]	2,032	349	2,381	980	2,108	3,088	3,012	2,457	5,469
Islington[4]	1,334	703	2,037	318	1,903	2,221	1,653	2,606	4,259
Kensington and Chelsea	171	421	592	157	886	1,043	328	1,307	1,635
Lambeth[4]	2,894	340	3,234	1,162	2,130	3,292	4,056	2,470	6,526
Lewisham[4]	2,503	182	2,685	860	2,230	3,090	3,363	2,412	5,775
Newham[4]	3,820	94	3,914	1,332	2,796	4,128	5,152	2,890	8,042
Southwark[4]	2,526	432	2,958	750	2,764	3,514	3,277	3,196	6,473
Tower Hamlets[4]	1,605	1,070	2,675	217	2,783	3,000	1,822	3,853	5,675
Wandsworth[4]	2,321	637	2,958	1,083	2,025	3,108	3,404	2,662	6,066
Westminster[4]	1,187	201	1,388	612	1,000	1,612	1,799	1,201	3,000
Barking and Dagenham[4]	1,694	1	1,695	749	1,525	2,274	2,443	1,526	3,969
Barnet	1,914	110	2,024	1,373	2,200	3,573	3,287	2,310	5,597
Bexley	2,129	12	2,141	956	1,913	2,869	3,085	1,925	5,010
Brent[4]	942	743	1,685	799	2,299	3,098	1,741	3,042	4,783
Bromley	240	2	242	1,329	2,364	3,693	1,569	2,366	3,935
Croydon	1,792	37	1,829	1,603	2,821	4,424	3,395	2,858	6,253
Ealing[4]	3,115	29	3,144	1,539	2,369	3,908	4,654	2,398	7,052
Enfield	1,245	0	1,242	1,186	2,432	3,618	2,428	2,432	4,860
Greenwich[4]	2,460	162	2,622	1,222	1,587	2,809	3,683	1,749	5,432
Harrow	632	6	638	773	1,579	2,352	1,405	1,585	2,990
Havering	544	21	565	745	1,830	2,575	1,289	1,851	3,140
Hillingdon	1,372	0	1,372	2,422	882	3,304	3,794	882	4,676
Hounslow[4]	2,002	3	2,005	872	1,678	2,550	2,874	1,681	4,555
Kingston upon Thames	930	14	944	1,187	478	1,665	2,117	492	2,609
Merton	1,669	2	1,671	1,455	669	2,124	3,124	671	3,795
Redbridge	1,588	20	1,608	1,284	2,014	3,298	2,872	2,034	4,906
Richmond upon Thames	585	0	585	1,527	432	1,959	2,112	432	2,544
Sutton	238	8	246	1,998	78	2,076	2,236	86	2,322
Waltham Forest[4]	2,120	18	2,138	1,811	1,110	2,921	3,931	1,128	5,059

[1] Provisional
[2] Numbers of pupils collected from maintained schools in England in January each year as part of the Annual Schools' Census.
[3] Estimates combining Annual Schools' Census data from maintained schools in January 1998–2000 and data submitted by LEAs for Nursery Education grant purposes relating to private, voluntary and independent sector providers in spring.
[4] LEAs eligible in 2000 to provide funding for three-year-olds in the private, voluntary and independent sectors via Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships.

Teachers

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teachers left the teaching profession in each of the last five years. [126316]

Ms Estelle Morris: The number of full and part-time teachers leaving the maintained nursery, primary, secondary, special and PRU sector[1] in England in each of the last five years for which data are available are shown in the following table.

	Moving out of service[2]	Retirements[3]	Other[4]
1993–94	17,100	14,100	400
1994–95	18,000	14,100	400
1995–96	15,600	15,200	400
1996–97	15,800	16,900	400
1997–98	17,100	16,800	300

[1] Excludes those leaving sixth form colleges. Sixth form colleges became part of the FE sector at 1 April 1993.
[2] Teachers leaving the maintained nursery, primary, secondary, special and PRU sector to join FE, HE or the independent schools sector have been shown as moving out of service.
[3] Teachers retiring but then rejoining the maintained nursery, primary, secondary, special and PRU sector have not been shown as moving out of service or retiring. Teachers retiring and then joining the FE, HE or the independent schools sector have been shown as moving out of service.
[4] Teachers barred from service and dying in service.

Note:
Figures are rounded to the nearest 100.

There has been a growth of 6,900 full time equivalent regular teachers in the maintained school sector between January 1998 and January 2000.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what are the estimated *(a)* administrative and *(b)* monitoring costs of the threshold pay scheme for teachers. [127155]

Ms Estelle Morris: Cambridge Education Associates (CEA) and the Centre for British Teachers (CfBT) have been contracted to work with the Department to administer and monitor the threshold assessment arrangements in England. The costs associated with these contracts are commercial in confidence. Threshold assessments in Wales will be managed by five consortia of Welsh local education

authorities, on a slightly later timescale than in England. The cost of the Department's contracts with the Welsh consortia has not yet been finalised.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teachers are directly employed by LEAs; what estimate he has made of the number that would apply for threshold pay; when he made that estimate; and how many have applied to date. [127140]

Ms Estelle Morris: There were about 15,000 teachers employed directly by local authorities in England in 1998, of which it is estimated that 75 per cent. were eligible to apply for the threshold this year. When we published the threshold application forms and guidance materials on 24 March 2000 we encouraged all eligible teachers to apply. We did not make any estimate on the numbers of eligible teachers employed directly by local authorities. We will be announcing details about the numbers of teachers that have applied to cross the threshold this year shortly.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many written parliamentary questions were tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000; and how many have not received substantive answers, on grounds of disproportionate costs. [127102]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* 1,390 Parliamentary questions were tabled to the Department for written reply during this period.

51 of the replies given advised that some or all of the information requested could either be provided only at disproportionate cost or was not held centrally.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will give a substantive reply to the question of 6 June tabled by the hon. Member for Hertsmere (ref. 125303). [127729]

Mr. Wicks: I refer the hon. Member to my answer of 23 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 329W.

Summerhill School

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the cost of the nine Ofsted inspections of Summerhill School between 1991 and 1999. [127624]

Ms Estelle Morris: This is a matter for Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools, Chris Woodhead. I have asked him to write to my hon. Friend and to place a copy of his letter in the Library.

Interactive Voice Response Systems

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many agencies of his Department use interactive voice response systems when dealing with telephone inquiries from the general public. [127551]

Mr. Wills: As far as we are aware, there are no interactive voice systems in use within the agencies of the Department for Education and Employment for dealing with telephone inquiries from the general public.

Connexions Services

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the proposed timetable is for the testing of approaches to establish the Connexions Services in England; and what plans he has to publish the evidence. [127475]

Mr. Wicks: Activity began in pilots in April this year. This will continue for at least 12 months, but with the phased introduction of Connexions from April 2001, it may be necessary to extend the life of some of the pilots, so as to ensure continued testing until the service is in place throughout the country. Decisions on this will be taken when we know the areas that will launch the Connexions Service from April 2001. Where pilots are focusing on themes that we already know need longer testing, we have agreed extended contracts for this purpose (e.g. for Huntercombe Young Offenders Institution).

We have introduced a process of action based research, which will ensure the lessons learned from these pilots are communicated very quickly to the pilots themselves, to policy and planning officials and to the wider community who have an interest in these developments. We have already scheduled the first of a series of pilot conferences for the 4 and 5 July 2000, which will bring people together to learn from early piloting experience. In addition, we are developing other means to ensure wide circulation of information, including development of websites and use of existing publications.

Public-Private Partnerships

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment by what mechanisms sub-regional private/public partnerships which have previously been supported by TECs will be sustained after March 2001. [127564]

Mr. Wicks: We have asked all TECs to produce transition plans which set out strategies for taking forward partnership work extending beyond March 2001, including what steps need to be taken to fill the gaps which may be left by the withdrawal of TEC support. Government Offices are in discussion with TECs about these plans.

The new Learning and Skills Council (LSC) will have an important role in ensuring learning and skills form an integral part of wider economic regeneration plans. Through provisions we are adding to the Learning and Skills Bill, each local LSCs will have to include in its annual plan a statement of how its activities will impact on the economic development and regeneration of the area.

In addition we are making arrangements with the Regional Development Agencies to help support some types of partnerships from April 2001.

Higher Education (Warrington, North)

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of 18 year olds in the Warrington, North constituency have entered higher education in each of the last 10 years. [127321]

Mr. Wicks: These data are not collated centrally on a constituency basis.

TREASURY

Overseas Assets

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what is his estimate of the total of UK residents' assets held *(a)* overseas and *(b)* in the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands; and what is his assessment of the effects of these holdings being overseas on the tax base in Britain; [124351]

(2) if he will estimate the change in the amount of sterling deposits held by *(a)* foreigners and *(b)* UK residents in the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man in 1999. [124343]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer my hon. Friend to Table 18 of the Bank of England's Monetary and Financial Statisuics.

Endowment Policies

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what recent discussions he has had with insurers, banks and building societies who advised on and sold under-performing endowment policies on redress for the purchasers of endowment policies which have underperformed; [127361]

(2) if he will make it his policy to provide financial assistance to those people with projected shortfalls on their endowment mortgage policies. [127360]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards) on 23 May 2000, *Official Report*, columns 415–16W.

Insurance Industry

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to the answer of 11 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 468W, on the insurance industry, what his policy is on permitting discrimination between consumers by the insurance industry on the grounds of *(a)* disability, *(b)* ethnicity and *(c)* sexual orientation. [127394]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government expect insurers to treat customers fairly, and act in accordance with the law.

Community, Voluntary and Charitable Groups

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the estimated cost of giving a full fuel tax rebate to community, voluntary and charitable groups. [127414]

Mr. Timms: No estimate of the cost of giving a full fuel tax rebate to community, voluntary and charitable groups is available.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer to what extent proceeds from the Climate Change Levy will be used to promote the development of offshore wind energy. [127477]

Mr. Timms: Offshore wind generation stands to benefit in two respects from the climate change levy package. Firstly, the Government intend to exempt from the levy electricity generated from 'new' renewable sources of energy, such as offshore wind. Secondly, £50 million of the revenue raised by the levy will be recycled to business as a whole via an 'energy efficiency' fund. This fund aims to promote the development of 'new' sources of renewable energy and low carbon technologies and provide energy efficiency advice and audits to businesses. Allocations of the fund between these aims will be announced in the forthcoming spending review.

Charitable Giving

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to grant further concessions for charitable giving in aid of public services. [127242]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 22 June 2000]:* In his Budget Speech the Chancellor announced a generous package of measures aimed at increasing charitable giving. The Getting Britain Giving measures emerged as a result of our review of charity ta..ation and go well beyond the initial proposals set out in our consultation document. The measures are estimated to be worth around £400 million a year to charities and a wide range of charities and donors have welcomed them.

We have no plans to grant further concessions for charitable giving at this time.

Credit Unions

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to encourage the use of credit unions as part of neighbourhood renewal schemes. [127162]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 22 June 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) on 7 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 521–22W.

Air Passenger Duty

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the reduction in air passenger duty on economy flights within the European Economic Area will come into force; and what the reduction will be. [127641]

Mr. Timms: At present the air passenger duty on any flight from the UK to a destination in the EEA is £10. From 1 April next year the air passenger duty on passengers in the lowest class of travel on a flight within the European Economic Area will be £5. It will remain at £10 for those not in the lowest class of travel.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many of the written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April have not received substantive answers, for the reason that the information is *(a)* not held centrally, *(b)* not held in the form requested and *(c)* not available. [127681]

Mr. Timms: Obtaining the information requested would entail the scrutiny individually of nearly, 1,500 written answers and could be undertaken only at disproportionate cost.

Correspondence

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will reply to letters from the hon. Member for West Derbyshire, dated 2 March and 25 May, about Mr. Nigel Francis of Sudbury, Derbyshire. [127728]

Mr. Timms: I replied to the hon. Member on 21 June.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Police Witnesses (Waiting Time)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what progress has been made in the last three years in reducing the waiting time of police officers in *(a)* magistrates' and *(b)* higher courts. [127345]

Jane Kennedy: Police witnesses in magistrates' courts in November 1997 waited an average 1 hour 21 minutes before they were either called to give evidence or released. This fell to 1 hour 18 minutes in November 1998 and 1 hour 15 minutes in November 1999 (the latest survey for which results are available). In the Crown court, police witnesses waited an average of 3 hours 12 minutes in November 1997, 3 hours 6 minutes in November 1998 and 2 hours 54 minutes in November 1999.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will review the adequacy of provision of and access to legal information and help services for asylum seekers and refugees living in Sunderland and Newcastle; and if he will make a statement. [127232]

Mr. Lock: The Legal Services Commission has awarded seven contracts in the immigration category of law, both to solicitors and not-for-profit organisations, in the Sunderland and Newcastle area.

The Commission is aware that there is at present an increase in need due to the dispersal of asylum seekers to the North East Region. It has taken immediate steps to ensure that legal advice is available by making arrangements for suppliers from outside the region to travel to provide the necessary help.

The Government have already increased remuneration rates for immigration and have allocated an additional £23 million of resources to the Commission for asylum work.

The Commission is now in the process of implementing a package to improve the availability of sufficient quality legal representatives for asylum seekers dispersed throughout the country. As part of this, the Commission is looking at the way in which payments are made to immigration practitioners and how cash-flow could be improved.

Addressing payment regimes, along with the funding of training programmes around the country and a range of other measures, will increase expertise and encourage existing firms to expand and new firms to enter this important area of work.

Human Rights Act

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, pursuant to his answer of 10 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 21W, on human rights legislation, to my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), if he will break down the overall figure for the costs of implementing the Human Rights Act 1998 in the courts. [127620]

Jane Kennedy: The Government have planned carefully for implementation of the Act by setting aside funds for extra court sitting days if they are needed. These funds are contained within the Government's planned overall spending totals. The information requested is set as follows:

Court service costs	*£million*
Crown Court	16.3
Crown Office and Court of Appeal	2.3
Magistrates' Courts	2.4

Civil Justice System

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he intends to publish plans for the use of information technology in support of the civil justice system. [128062]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor's Department will publish a paper tomorrow, entitled 'Civil.Justice.2000: A vision of the Civil Justice System in the Information Age'. Copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and on the internet at the Lord Chancellor's Department website (http://www.open.gov.uk/lcd).

WALES

Welsh Assembly Committees

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the occasions when *(a)* ministers and *(b)* officials from his Department have been invited to give evidence to Welsh Assembly committees; how many have been accepted; how many have been refused; if he will give the reasons for each refusal; and what was the subject matter to be discussed for each invitation. [126684]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 22 June 2000]:* No Ministers or officials from my Department have been invited to give evidence to a Committee of the National Assembly for Wales.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will outline his policy on *(a)* ministers and *(b)* officials from his Department accepting invitations to give evidence to committees of the Welsh Assembly in relation to the impact of reserved matters on devolved policy areas. [126683]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 22 June 2000]:* The Government policy for Ministers and officials accepting invitations to give evidence to committees of

the Welsh Assembly is that set out in Devolution Guidance Note Number 12, a copy of which is in the Library of the House.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April have not received substantive answers, for reasons of commercial or other confidentiality. [127684]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Two written questions tabled between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 have not received substantive answers for reasons of confidentiality.

SCOTLAND

Regional Selective Assistance

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many Regional Selective Assistance applications were granted for each local authority area in Scotland in each year since RSA was introduced; and what was the value of each application. [126631]

Dr. Reid: RSA was introduced in 1972 under the terms of the Industry Act 1972 and subsequently the Industrial Development Act 1982. Since 1 July 1999, administration of Regional Selective Assistance grants in Scotland has been the responsibility of the Scottish Executive. Information on the number and value of grants offered is published annually in the Industrial Development Act 1982 Annual Report by the Secretaries of State for Trade and Industry, Scotland and for Wales for the year ending 31 March. Detailed information on grants in the form requested by the hon. Member is not readily available and could not be provided except at disproportionate cost.

Scottish Parliament Committees

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what instructions he has given *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* officials regarding accepting invitations to give evidence to Scottish Parliament committees; and what his policy is in relation to such invitations. [126671]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* Devolution Guidance Note 12, available in the Library, provides guidance for Ministers and officials of UK Departments who are invited to give evidence to Committees of the Scottish Parliament. I have not issued further guidance within the Scotland Office. Any invitations to give evidence to Ministers in my Department would be considered in the light of DGN 12.

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the occasions when *(a)* ministers and *(b)* officials from his Department have been invited to give evidence to Scottish Parliament committees; how many have been accepted; how many have been refused; if he will give the reasons for each refusal; and what was the subject matter to be raised on each occasion. [126672]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* I have been invited to give evidence to the European Committee twice, about the European Structural Funds. I have declined because the primary requirement of accountability for UK Ministers is to the UK Parliament, and because I had received similar invitations from the Scottish Affairs Select Committee.

Erskine Bridge

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if the Scottish Office recovered all of the costs of the repairs to the Erskine Bridge, following the damage caused by an offshore structure, from the parties deemed to be negligent; and if he will make a statement. [126692]

Dr. Reid: Responsibility for the recovery of costs of repairs to the Erskine Bridge is a matter for the Scottish Executive.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many written parliamentary questions were tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April; and how many have not received substantive answers for reasons of disproportionate cost. [127683]

Dr. Reid: Our records show that 132 written questions were tabled to my Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000. Of these, two questions did not receive substantive answers and two questions were not answered fully for reasons of disproportionate cost.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 27 June 2000

DEFENCE

Missile Defence System

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what criteria the Government will employ in making a decision on the deployment of a national missile defence system; [126947]

(2) if the results of his Department's Technology, Readiness and Risk Assessment programme will be available before a decision is taken on whether to allow UK facilities to be used in a US national missile defence system; [126949]

(3) on what basis a decision will be made on whether to allow the USA to upgrade the facilities at Fylingdales for a national missile defence system; [126948]

(4) what recent discussions there have been between the UK and the USA regarding options for locating anti-ballistic missile sites in the UK; [126942]

(5) what assessment he has *(a)* made recently and *(b)* plans to make of the impact of a national missile defence system on the security of the UK. [126946]

Mr. Hoon: We have discussed, and continue to discuss, a range of aspects of possible proposals for a US National Missile Defence system with the United States. The US has not asked for UK assistance in the deployment of the proposed system, nor would we expect them to do so until after a US decision on whether to proceed with its deployment. In discussions with the US Administration we have made it clear that the UK would consider any such request carefully, taking into account a wide range of factors, including the implications for UK defence.

The MOD's Technology Readiness and Risk Assessment Programme is due to be completed next summer. I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) on 12 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 451W.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if NATO has *(a)* carried out and *(b)* is undertaking research into ballistic missile defences. [126938]

Mr. Hoon: We are not aware of any research carried out or being undertaken by NATO into ballistic missile defences. The Ministry of Defence has, however, contributed to NATO studies on the subject, including preparations for studies into the feasibility of theatre ballistic missile defence. We expect these studies to start next year.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions have taken place between the UK and the USA on sea-based ballistic missile defences. [126945]

Mr. Hoon: The UK is not directly involved in the US sea-based Theatre Missile Defence programme but limited information exchange and collaborative research has been undertaken.

Porton Down

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment the Chemical Defence Establishment at Porton Down has made of the toxicity to humans of *(a)* the nerve agent GF and *(b)* sarin GB. [127132]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Matthew Taylor, dated 27 June 2000:

I am replying to your parliamentary question about nerve agents and their toxicity to humans since the laboratories at Porton Down are part of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA).

GB (sarin) and GF (cyclosarin) are organophosphorus nerve agents developed during World War II in Germany. Both agents are highly toxic chemicals. GB is a highly volatile liquid and is a particular hazard following inhalation. GF is some 30–35 times less volatile and presents a particular hazard from absorption through skin. In hot climates, however, GF may also present a significant hazard from inhalation.

Both GB and GF are potent inhibitors of the enzyme acetylcholinesterase, which is responsible for the control of the important chemical messenger acetylcholine within the nervous system. When humans are poisoned, the signs and symptoms of acute poisoning progress from a general feeling of malaise, pinpoint pupils (miosis), excessive sweating, salivation, runny nose and breathing difficulties, through nausea, vomiting and muscle tremor, to loss of consciousness, convulsions and death from respiratory failure. The severity of these signs and their rate of progress depends upon the dose and route of exposure to the nerve agents. In general, those agents absorbed through the skin, such as GF, will exhibit a delayed onset of poisoning and those which are inhaled, such as GB, will exhibit a very rapid onset (within 1–2 min) of signs and symptoms of poisoning.

A knowledge of the toxicity of these nerve agents has been built up over the years since the Second World War. Assessments have been prompted by intelligence reports of the chemical arsenals of potential aggressors, for example Iraq. They have been based upon studies in animals and to a limited extent in humans conducted within the UK and the Allied Nations. A number of these studies were carried out at Porton Down between 1948 and 1989. The last trial looked at the effects on the eye of low levels of GB. The trial was conducted to assess the effects from "the maximum dosage of nerve agent vapour to the eyes acceptable for aircrew" under NATO prescribed conditions. Scientists at Porton Down have also undertaken three paper exercises to examine the possible long-term effects of nerve agent exposure using the service medical records of volunteers previously exposed to GB. None of the three studies showed any significant difference between the patterns of days lost through illness, the number of specialist appointments or the number of hospital admissions between the control and exposed groups.

Medical countermeasures to both GB and GF have been developed at CBD Porton Down and the combination of pre-treatment with Nerve Agent Pre-Treatment Set (NAPS) tablets and use of the ComboPen injector, which contains atropine, an oxime (P2S) and an anticonvulsant (Avizafone), provide effective antidotes against poisoning by these agents.

I hope the above is helpful.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what information the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment (Porton Down) has compiled since 1970 on individuals who took part in the service volunteer programme; and for what reasons. [127133]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Matthew Taylor, dated 27 June 2000:

I am replying to your parliamentary question enquiring about the type of information available on individuals who have participated in the Porton Down service volunteer programme since 1970. I am replying since the laboratories at Porton Down are part of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA).

Records of volunteers who took part in studies between 1970 to the present day are held in a series of notebooks. These books contain, as a minimum, a volunteer's name, service number, date of attendance and the brief title of the study in which they participated. The general trend is that the more recent the study, the more comprehensive and detailed the information available. In the past, unless the studies involved exposure to chemical warfare agents such as mustard or nerve agents, in which case, additional information regarding the nature of this exposure might be recorded in specific laboratory notebooks, often the only surviving information on a volunteer's attendance is a simple entry in a summary book. In recent years, our records have become much more comprehensive and include written pre and post study medical examination notes.

The records of the service volunteers are part of the corporate record. This archive is a valuable source of information on which we are able to draw when answering questions from former volunteers, their relatives, general practitioners and the War Pensions Agency about individuals' participation in the volunteers programme.

I hope the above explains the situation.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what dates the Health and Safety Executive has inspected the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment at Porton Down since 1 January 1996. [127134]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Matthew Taylor, dated 27 June 2000:

I am replying to your parliamentary question about Health and Safety Executive inspections at the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment at Porton Down, since the establishment is part of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA).

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has conducted two formal inspections since 1 January 1996; an inspection was conducted during February 1996 and a further inspection of the areas of the site involved with the handling of explosives was conducted on 31 May 2000. HSE has also visited the site on several occasions between 1996 and 2000 in order to discuss specific issues.

The HSE is expected to conduct a further formal inspection of the site within the next few months.

I hope the above is helpful.

DERA

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many graduate job applications were made and how many jobs were available at DERA in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999; and how many he expects for 2000. [127605]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Robert Key, dated 27 June 2000:

I am replying to your parliamentary question about graduate recruitment within DERA since such matters relate to the operation of the Agency.

DERA runs a corporate graduate recruitment programme for newly or recently qualified graduates. The figures below apply to this mainly "new" graduate intake.

Year	*Number of applications received*	*Number of vacancies*	*Appointed*
1997–98	3,533	Up to 300	242
1998–99	4,245	Up to 300	242
1999–2000	4,721	Up to 500	457

For the year 2000 we are currently assuming vacancies again of up to 500 but, in view of the current deliberations on the future of the Agency, it is too soon to speculate the precise numbers of graduates eventually to be appointed.

The above figures do not take into account local recruitment of staff for specific appointments, many of whom may well be educated to university standard.

I hope the above is helpful.

Major Andrew Harrison

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if his Department has been in contact with Major Andrew Harrison; [127988]

(2) what measures he has taken to monitor the welfare of Major Andrew Harrison. [127989]

Mr. Hoon: I refer the right hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) on 22 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 243W. The Foreign Secretary and I are monitoring the situation very closely. We are satisfied that everything possible is being done to ensure Major Harrison's safety and welfare.

US Airborne Laser

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what *(a)* information exchange and *(b)* co-operation there has been between his Department and the US (i) Department of Defense and (ii) State Department concerning the US Airborne Laser. [126944]

Mr. Hoon: The Ministry of Defence has received limited information from the Department of Defense on the US Airborne Laser programme. There has been no discussion or co-operation on this matter between the MOD and the Department of State.

Staff Secondments

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the senior members of his Department's staff who have been seconded to *(a)* UK and *(b)* non-UK companies in (i) 1995–96 and (ii) 1996–97; what posts they held in his Department; what was the cost to his Department of the secondments; and if he will make a statement. [127231]

Dr. Moonie: Details of Ministry of Defence senior civil servants seconded to companies in 1995–96 and 1996–97 and the costs to the Ministry of Defence are given as follows.

1995–96

Company	*Role in MOD prior to secondment*	*Cost*
British Railways Board—(UK)[1]	Secretariat to the Adjutant General	£15,000
Docklands Light Railway Ltd.—(UK)[1]	Director IT (Policy)	Nil—fully funded by DLR
Opportunities for People with Disabilities[1]	Assistant Director, Ship Refitting	£60,000 (approximate annual cost)
Raytheon (non-UK)[1]	Director (Commercial) Defence Export Services Organisation	Nil—fully funded by Raytheon

[1] These secondments continued into 1996–97

1996–97

Company	*Role in MOD*	*Cost*
Avery Berkel—(UK)	Directorate (Finance and Secretariat) Weapons and Electronic Systems	Nil—fully funded by Avery Berkel
BAe—(UK)	Deputy Chief of Defence Procurement (Support)	Nil—fully funded by BAe

HEALTH

Cancer Treatment

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of urgent referrals by general practitioners of patients with suspected cancer he estimates were seen by cancer specialists in the most recent period for which figures are available. [125256]

Yvette Cooper: Since April 1999, we have set the standard that patients with suspected breast cancer will be offered an appointment with a specialist within two weeks of their general practitioner making an urgent referral. Table 1 shows that in the most recent period (January to March 2000) 96 per cent. of patients referred urgently received an appointment with a specialist within 14 days where the hospital received the referral within 24 hours of the GP deciding to refer. Table 2 shows that nearly 80 per cent. of patients were seen within two weeks where the referral was received outside 24 hours of the GP deciding to refer.

By December 2000 this high quality service will be extended to thousands of other worried patients as the standard is introduced for all cases of suspected cancer requiring urgent investigation.

Outpatient waiting times for suspected breast cancer patients by region—quarter ended March 2000; England (hospital based)

Table 1: Urgent referrals received within 24 hours of the GP deciding to refer the patient

	Waiting time from urgent referral by their GP to first outpatient appointment			
Region	*0–14 days*	*More than 14 days*	*Percentage seen within 14 days*	
Northern and Yorkshire	1,916	87	95.7	[1](96.6)
Trent	1,728	40	97.7	[1](98.2)
West Midlands	3,253	59	98.2	[1](95.3)
North West	1,841	106	94.6	[1](92.2)
Eastern	1,246	32	97.5	[1](98.9)
London	1,887	89	95.5	[1](97.1)
South East	2,472	223	91.7	[1](95.2)
South West	1,953	22	98.9	[1](99.7)
England	16,296	658	96.1	[1](96.4)

Table 2: Referrals not received within 24 hours of the GP deciding to refer the patient

	Waiting time from urgent referral by their GP to first outpatient appointment			
Region	*0–14 days*	*More than 14 days*	*Percentage seen within 14 days*	
Northern and Yorkshire	332	122	73.1	[1](77.9)
Trent	526	166	76.0	[1](65.6)
West Midlands	418	68	86.0	[1](87.6)
North West	776	231	77.1	[1](69.1)
Eastern	263	33	88.9	[1](86.1)
London	757	194	79.6	[1](73.1)
South East	402	117	77.5	[1](84.0)
South West	239	34	87.5	[1](95.8)
England	3,713	965	79.4	[1](76.7)

[1] Previous quarter

GP Practices (Patient Proximity)

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what definition he uses of a reasonable distance when determining access to a GP practice. [124642]

Mr. Denham: Subject to local planning decisions, it is for health authorities to determine, on a case-by-case basis, whether a surgery meets the reasonable expectations of its users and carers. Travelling distances are an important consideration, but we would expect travelling times, the availability and proximity of public transport and other services (such as National Health Service dispensing) to be taken into account.

East Midlands Ambulance Service

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health further to his answer of 28 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 76W, on the East Midlands Ambulance Service, when improved control technology for the East Midlands Ambulance Service Trust will be implemented; and how long the process of approval for the project has taken since first submission by the trust. [127011]

Ms Stuart: The National Health Service Executive has been working with the East Midlands Ambulance Service Trust since March 1999 on the process to approve the business case for the procurement of improved control technology. In order that the approval process can move forward as quickly as possible, the trust is currently working to address the concerns which have been highlighted in their latest business case submission. Approval will be granted only if these concerns are met.

If the scheme is commissioned, the trust's project plan suggests that the phased integrated implementation of the new technology will be achieved in around seven months for Leicestershire and eight and a half months for Derbyshire.

Interactive Voice Response Systems

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many agencies of his Department use interactive voice response systems when dealing with telephone inquiries from the general public; [127114]

(2) how many of his Department's telephone lines used by the general public are responded to by interactive voice response systems. [127391]

Ms Stuart: The Department and its agencies have only one telephone line for the general public that is responded to by interactive voice response systems. This is the Department's Public Enquiry Office.

Continence Services

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has *(a)* to monitor implementation of best practice guidance and *(b)* to conduct further awareness campaigns in connection with the provision of continence services. [127596]

Mr. Hutton: "Good practice in continence services" was issued on 19 April 2000. This guidance suggests targets for primary and community teams, health authorities and National Health Service trusts. It includes appropriate references to the NHS Performance Assessment Framework, which is used to plan and monitor the delivery of services. A National Service Framework for Older People is currently being developed. This will supplement the guidance on continence services by placing it in the wider context of improving NHS services for older people.

The guidance suggests that action to promote continence awareness should be undertaken locally and where appropriate, in consultation with relevant national organisations.

Internet

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the Government's policy on the sale of medicines on the internet. [127882]

Ms Stuart: There are legal controls on the sale of medicines direct to consumers in order to protect public health and these apply whether the medicine is sold face to face or through the internet. The Medicines Control Agency has a special Internet Unit which investigates all alleged breaches of medicines legislation and has successfully taken action against a number of websites where the law has been broken.

Empty Hospitals

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the cost was of maintaining redundant empty hospital buildings in each region in the last year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [127692]

Mr. Denham: The holding costs of maintaining the surplus estate that is not vested in trusts, once it is vacant and available for disposal, include maintenance, security, rates and utilities.

The last year for which figures are available, ie 1999–2000, for each region are as follows:

Region	£
Northern and Yorkshire	1,500,000
Trent	580,000
Eastern	415,000
London	2,543,000
South-East	2,702,000
South and West	774,000
West Midlands	1,194,000
North-West	598,000
Total	10,306,000

There is a continuing programme of disposals of the surplus estate in the ownership of the Secretary of State, which has realised in excess of £200 million per annum in recent years.

NHS Management

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the total remuneration of each NHS health authority's general manager in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [127690]

Mr. Denham: Information on the remuneration of health authority chief executives has been placed in the Library.

Tesco

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action the Food Standards Agency will take regarding the Public Health Laboratory Service testing of Tesco's organic mushrooms; and if the results of the PHLS's inquiry will be made public. [126309]

Ms Stuart: The responsibility for ensuring the accuracy of results from the testing of food lies primarily with the laboratory undertaking the testing. The Food Standards Agency was not involved in the commissioning of the survey in question.

The Public Health Laboratory Service is in the process of completing its inquiry and will make the findings available at the earliest opportunity.

Nursing Care

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his estimate of the cost of providing free nursing care for elderly people outside hospital. [127495]

Mr. Hutton: National Health Service expenditure on community nursing for people aged 65 and over was £836 million in 1998–99, the latest year for which figures are available. Local council expenditure on nursing home care amounted to £669 million in 1998–99. Extending free nursing care to everyone in nursing homes assessed as needing it would cost an additional sum. The amount would depend on defining the nursing element of nursing home care.

NHS Dentistry

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on widening access to NHS dentistry. [127498]

Mr. Hutton: We have already made good progress towards improving access to dental services. Initiatives include Investing in Dentistry, in which £10 million in grants have been approved in return for promises of nearly 900,000 new National Health Service registrations. Personal dental services explore new ways of providing dentistry for people who cannot easily or conveniently use existing services. A third wave of 14 pilots will be operational by the end of the year, bringing the total number of pilots to more than 50. Dental access centres are one form of PDS pilot. Access centres provide a full range of dental services, at convenient times and in convenient places, to people who cannot at present easily access NHS dentistry. There will be 33 pilots operating from more than 50 access centres by April 2001.

We have accepted the recommendations of the Doctors and Dentists Review Body for a commitment scheme to reward loyalty to the NHS. The scheme will cost £17 million per annum in England, and is currently being negotiated with the profession.

Further initiatives to improve access to services will form part of our plans for modernising NHS dentistry, which will be published this summer in conjunction with the National Plan for the NHS.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Euro 96

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much financial assistance was made available by *(a)* the National Lottery, *(b)* the English Sports Council, *(c)* the Government, *(d)* the UK Sports Council and *(e)* the Football Trust to assist (i) the preparation of the bid to hold the 1996 European football championships, (ii) with the upgrading of stadiums and other facilities for the 1996 European football championships and (iii) with the running costs of the 1996 European football championships. [127698]

Kate Hoey: Funding for the 1996 European championships was made available as follows:

(a) No Lottery funding was made available, either for the preparation of the bid or for the running of the championships.

(b) The English and UK Sports Councils were not in existence until 1997, but the then GB Sports Council contributed £80,000 towards the costs of the cultural programme.

(c) The Government, through the Association for Business Sponsorship for the Arts and the Sportsmatch scheme, made available a total of £400,000 for the cultural programme which ran alongside the championships in the eight host cities. No other direct Government subvention was made. Much of the expenditure incurred during the running of the tournament, including the costs of additional policing, was met by the local authorities of the eight host cities.

(d) See *(b)*.

(e) The Football Trust provided £19 million towards stadia improvements in the eight host cities during the period from 1993 to 1996. That sum was the Trust's contribution to the £72 million spent by the eight host clubs in the five years before the 1996 championships on essential ground safety work following the publication of the Taylor Report. Taking all professional clubs in England into account, the Trust made available £136 million for Taylor-related work over that five-year period. The Trust also contributed a further £500,000 towards the general running costs of the championships.

Annual Reports

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the cost of producing the annual report of *(a)* his Department and *(b)* English Heritage was in each of the two most recent years in which they were published. [127845]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 26 June 2000]:* *(a)* The costs incurred producing the Annual Report in each of the last two years were:

	£000
1999	64.6
2000	66.2

This includes the cost of buying back copies for free distribution from The Stationery Office, who are responsible for printing the reports and putting them on sale around the country.

(b) The cost incurred by English Heritage producing their 1999 Annual Report was £85,000.

I will publish the results of their 1998 Annual Report as soon as they have provided it to me.

Mr. Sedgemore: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when the review of the transparency of the BBC's financial reporting will commence; and if he will make a statement. [128140]

Mr. Chris Smith: In their response to the Davies panel's report on the future funding of the BBC, the Government announced that they would appoint independent consultants to examine the transparency of the BBC's financial reporting culminating in the publication of the Corporation's Annual Report and Accounts. The BBC's Annual Report and Accounts was published on 21 June and I have today appointed Pannell Kerr Forster to carry out a detailed review of:

the level of information provided in the BBC's "Annual Report and Accounts";

how far the reporting meets the requirements of the Royal Charter and the Government's conclusions on the outcome of the Davies review;

the process that leads up to the disclosure of information in the "Annual Report and Accounts", including the extent to which the Governors are made aware of the issues;

existing correspondence from stakeholders to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the BBC about the financial information produced; and

existing mechanisms employed by the BBC to ensure transparency, including use of focus groups.

The review will commence immediately and will be concluded by the end of July. I will publish Pannell Kerr Forster's findings. Copies of the terms of reference for the review have been placed in the Library of the House.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made in connection with the UK's policy on sanctions against Iraq of the threat to *(a)* the UK and *(b)* the United States from Iraqi use of chemical weapons; and what assessment he has made of the evidence submitted by Richard Butler to the UK Government on this subject. [125375]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* UK policy on sanctions against Iraq is governed by the relevant United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs), not by our assessment of the threat. Richard Butler, the former Executive Chairman of the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) has submitted no evidence to the UK Government on the subject of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. During his time with UNSCOM, he reported to the United Nations Security Council that numerous serious gaps remained in Iraq's declarations on its chemical and biological weapons and ballistic missile programmes. We share his concern over this, hence the importance we attach to re-establishing weapons inspection regime in Iraq under UNSCR 1284.

The UK's assessment of the threat posed by Iraq's chemical weapons capabilities can be found in the MOD document "Defending Against the Threat from Biological and Chemical Weapons", published in July 1999.

Entry Clearance Interviews

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the current waiting times in each queue for entry to the UK for settlement in each post in the Indian subcontinent and in *(a)* Manila, *(b)* Bangkok, *(c)* Lagos, *(d)* Abuja, *(e)* Accra, *(f)* St. Petersburg and *(g)* Moscow. [127112]

Mr. Vaz: The most recent information available from the Posts concerned shows the following waiting times for settlement entry clearance interviews:

Posts using 4 queue system	*Waiting time in weeks*
Islamabad	
Q1	6
Q2	22.5
Q3	32
Q4	38
Dhaka	
Q1	16
Q2	28
Q3	16
Q4	44
New Delhi	
Q1	0
Q2	10
Q3	10
Q4	10
Bombay	
Q1	0
Q2	6
Q3	6
Q4	6

Notes:
Q1 = Dependent relatives over 65; special compassionate cases
Q2 = Spouses, children under 18
Q3 = Fiancé(e)s; other settlement categories
Q4 = Reapplicants

Other posts	*Waiting time in weeks*
Calcutta	2.9
Karachi	5
Madras	9
Colombo	11
Manila	13
Bangkok	7
Lagos	8
Abuja	17
Accra	34
St. Petersburg	6
Moscow	3.2

Figures for Islamabad, Karachi, Dhaka, Calcutta, New Delhi, Madras, Colombo, Abuja and Moscow are for May 2000. All others, with the exception of Manila (where computer difficulties have hindered submission of statistical information since March 2000) are for April 2000.

Bilateral Treaties (Republic of Ireland)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library a list of bilateral treaties and agreements which have been agreed with the Government of the Republic of Ireland since 1 January 1997, including the title of each treaty and agreement and the date on which it was signed. [127138]

Mr. Vaz: I have placed a list of Treaties and Agreements between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Ireland signed since 1 January 1997 in the Library of the House today.

European Union

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on present and future activities of the Europe Made Easy Programme in the United Kingdom. [127188]

Mr. Vaz: My Department is not aware of this programme.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on how many occasions since 1 May 1997 his office has referred hon. Members in parliamentary answers to the office of the European Commission in London; and if he will make a statement on his policy of referral, with particular reference to ministerial accountability. [127192]

Mr. Vaz: We refer hon. Members to the European Commission when their questions relate to Commission policy or to facts about programmes and projects for which the Commission is responsible. We do not keep a record of numbers.

Moluccas

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received from HM diplomatic posts in Indonesia on the human rights situation in the Moluccas. [127237]

Mr. Battle: We receive regular reports from the Embassy in Jakarta on the worrying developments in Maluku. We deplore the loss of all life resulting from the violence, in particular the escalating violence in recent

days with over 100 people killed and over 200 injured. This represents a major threat to stability. We are playing a key role in the EU and the UN in calling on the Indonesian Government to work on peaceful resolution to the violence. EU representatives called on the Indonesian Government on 12 June, to remind them of their responsibility to maintain law and order, and to request an investigation and immediate steps to bring the perpetrators to justice. As part of the international effort through the United Nations Development Programme we have already funded two conferences on reconciliation in Maluku. With our partners and international agencies we are actively looking at other ways of promoting reconciliation.

Interactive Voice Response Systems

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many agencies of his Department use interactive voice response systems when dealing with telephone inquiries from the general public. [127553]

Mr. Battle: In the UK no FCO Department uses interactive voice response systems when dealing with telephone inquiries from the general public.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many of his Department's telephone lines used by the general public are responded to by interactive voice response systems. [127388]

Mr. Battle: None of the FCO's telephone lines used by the general public is responded to by interactive voice systems. Where it is sensible and efficient to use them there is an increasing use of telephone lines which are answered by voice processing systems, but these respond to touch-tone telephones rather than the human voice. These systems are deployed overseas only where the in-country telephone infrastructure is good and where it is common practice for such systems to be deployed.

Kosovo

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if any of the Kosovo Protection Corps have been *(a)* arrested and *(b)* questioned following the weapons find in the village of Kleck; and if he will make a statement. [127556]

Mr. Vaz: Following the weapons find by KFOR, investigations are under way to establish who was responsible for the arms cache. A wide range of people are likely to be questioned, including members of the Kosovo Protection Corps, but it is too early to say yet whether KPC members were directly involved. The Government welcome KFOR's discovery of this illegal weapons site and will support tough action taken against those found responsible.

Democratic Republic of Congo

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what actions he proposes to take to prevent the sale in the UK and dependent territories of diamonds and other commodities being used to fund conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo. [127704]

Mr. Hain: The UK is a leading actor in supporting international efforts to tackle the problem of illicit diamonds and other commodities being used to finance wars in Africa.

We have supported the establishment of a UN expert panel to follow up on reports and collect information on the exploitation of DRC's natural resources. We look forward to the panel's recommendations to the Security Council.

We want to see a peaceful resolution of the conflict, and DRC's natural wealth used to benefit the people of DRC.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the recent conflict in Kisangani. [127703]

Mr. Hain: We deplore the recent fighting between Ugandan and Rwandan forces in Kisangani. Their actions have put the Lusaka Agreement at risk and led to widespread suffering for the people of Kisangani. We have expressed our concerns to both governments bilaterally and supported the UN Security Council Resolution 1304 which calls for both parties to cease hostilities and withdraw all their forces from the territory of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The United Nations observer mission in Kisangani has informed us that both sets of troops have withdrawn from the town. We continue to monitor the situation closely.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will press for a mandatory EU arms embargo on countries involved in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. [127705]

Mr. Hain: As a signatory to the EU Code of Conduct on arms exports the UK will not allow exports which would provoke or prolong armed conflicts or aggravate existing tensions or conflicts in the country of final destination.

At the General Affairs Council (GAC) on 22 May the Council invited the EU/SADC working group on illicit trafficking in small arms and light weapons to examine in its next meeting practical measures to prevent arms flowing to conflict zones in the Great Lakes Region.

The Council also mandated its relevant bodies to consider whether an arms embargo on the parties to the conflict would be appropriate.

Pakistan

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has made regarding the re-establishment of democratic Government in Pakistan; and if he will make a statement. [127836]

Mr. Hain: Although we cannot endorse the recent ruling by Pakistan's Supreme Court that last October's coup was legitimate, we have noted the Court's ruling that national elections should be held within three years. We are encouraged that General Musharraf has apparently accepted this. We have continued to urge Pakistan's military to announce a clear and credible timetable for the transition to full democracy, most recently when

the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office met his Pakistani counterpart on 22 June.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the proposed budget is for the UNAMSIL deployment in Sierra Leone for the year 2000. [127659]

Mr. Hain: The UNAMSIL budget for July 1999 to June 2000 is US$266,610,000, and for July 2000 to June 2001 US$504,399,051.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many child soldiers have been demobilised by pro-Government forces in Sierra Leone since 8 May. [127658]

Mr. Hain: The screening and demobilisation of child soldiers from pro-Government forces in Sierra Leone is continuing. The screening programme is to identify those children who have actually been involved in fighting. Of the 135 children who have recently entered the screening programme, 32 were identified as child soldiers.

We welcome the Government of Sierra Leone's policy that there must be no place for children in the Sierra Leone armed forces, and that all child soldiers must be disarmed and demobilised. We will continue to press for the early release of all child soldiers in Sierra Leone.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has (i) made to and (ii) received from the Presidents of *(a)* Nigeria, *(b)* Liberia and *(c)* Sierra Leone, regarding the ECOWAS bid to broker a ceasefire between Sierra Leone Government forces and RUF rebels. [127652]

Mr. Hain: We remain in regular touch with ECOWAS states over the situation in Sierra Leone. We support the efforts of ECOWAS to help restore stability throughout Sierra Leone and bring about an end to violence.

President Kabbah has made clear that, before any ceasefire, the Revolutionary United Front must meet a number of conditions, including the immediate and unconditional release of all UN peacekeepers and other detainees.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the attendance of observers for the forthcoming elections in Zimbabwe. [127718]

Mr. Hain: Around 400 international observers from such organisations as the Commonwealth, the European Union, the Organisation for African Unity and the Southern African Development Community, as well as national groups are present in Zimbabwe.

We are dismayed that the Government of Zimbabwe has not allowed the United Nations Development Programme to co-ordinate the activities of the various observer missions, but we understand that there is a good degree of informal co-ordination between the observer teams.

Iran

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if, during his forthcoming visit to Iran, he will raise with the Government the extent of religious freedom in Iran and the treatment of the Baha'i community. [127985]

Mr. Hain: We and our EU partners have regularly raised our concerns over Iranian treatment of the Baha'is and shall continue to do so. Persecution on religious grounds is totally unacceptable.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs will discuss a number of issues, including human rights, during his visit to Iran on 4–5 July.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Incineration

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if authorities building incinerators can meet their recycling targets through the re-use of the ash. [126468]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* The introduction of new statutory performance standards was announced in the Waste Strategy 2000. Subject to consultation, we intend that the re-use of ash from waste incineration will not count towards achieving these targets.

Information Kiosks

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps his Department is taking to amend planning regulations to remove obstacles to local authorities providing street information kiosks for their local communities. [127303]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We have no current plans to make changes to the planning regulations in respect of local planning authorities providing information kiosks.

Compulsory Purchase Orders

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in what circumstances and by what means a compulsory purchase order in respect of a private dwelling can be rescinded. [126914]

Mr. Raynsford *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* Compulsory purchase of property must normally be authorised by compulsory purchase order.

A compulsory purchase order made by a non-ministerial acquiring authority, such as a local authority, must be submitted for decision to the relevant "confirming authority". This is normally the Secretary of State or Minister responsible to Parliament for the legislation and policies which apply in the particular circumstances. An order is made and confirmed under procedures set out in, and regulations prescribed for the purposes of, the Acquisition of Land Act 1981. There are also rules for public local inquiries held for the purposes of that Act.

An acquiring authority may have resolved to make a compulsory purchase order but, before submitting it formally, they may decide that they do not wish to proceed. In these circumstances, no formal compulsory purchase procedures will have been initiated and the confirming authority will have no function to discharge. Once the acquiring authority have formally submitted the order, they have no formal power to withdraw or rescind it but, in practice, it is possible to overcome this potential difficulty. If an authority have submitted a compulsory purchase formally and then decide that they do not wish to proceed with it, for example because they will no longer need to rely on compulsory powers, the normal practice in my Department is to give a short formal decision declining to confirm the order. This serves both to formally discharge the Secretary of State's statutory function and to remove the imminent "threat" of compulsory purchase of property.

If an order is confirmed, the acquiring authority must make the order operative by serving and publishing notice of the confirmation before they may exercise the compulsory powers authorised by the confirmed order. Once the order is operative, unless there is a successful challenge in the High Court, the acquiring authority have three years in which to exercise the compulsory powers by serving a notice to treat, which period may be extended by agreement, or by completing an alternative procedure vesting title to the property in themselves. Hence, one way of rescinding an order at this stage would be to allow the period to lapse, so that the authority would no longer be authorised to exercise compulsory powers. This may happen where, for example, an order was confirmed subject to an undertaking given by the acquiring authority that they would not implement the order if the owner carried out certain repairs by a certain date. Compensation is payable where a notice to treat lapses.

An acquiring authority may withdraw a notice to treat within six weeks of receiving a detailed notice of an owner's claim for compensation given in response to a notice to treat. If a dispute over compensation is referred to the Lands Tribunal, the acquiring authority may still withdraw their notice to treat within six weeks of the Tribunal's final determination. This may happen where, for example, the amount awarded by the Tribunal is higher than the authority are prepared to pay. In either case, the claimant must be reimbursed certain losses and expenses.

Land Remediation

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many mobile plant licences have been issued to practitioners within the land remediation industry; how many licensed the *(a)* in situ and *(b)* ex situ remediation of land; and what technologies were involved in each case. [127580]

Mr. Mullin: To date, the Environment Agency has issued 21 mobile plant licences of which six are for in-situ remediation, 14 for ex-situ remediation and one for a combination of both. For practical purposes, the Agency has classified the technologies involved as ex-situ bioremediation (soil treatment beds) (5.5 licences); in-situ bioremediation (1 licence); soil vapour extraction (3.5 licences); soil washing (6 licences); solvent extraction (1 licence); solidification and stabilisation (3 licences); and transformation by chemical treatment (1 licence).

Fuel Poverty

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proportion of housing in the United Kingdom falls below the Standard Assessment Procedure 20 rating for energy efficiency; and what programmes are in place to improve Standard Assessment Procedure ratings in *(a)* pensioner and *(b)* single-parent households. [127575]

Mr. Meacher: Using the latest data from the English House Condition Survey, it is estimated that about 8 per cent. of dwellings had an energy efficiency rating under the Standard Assessment Procedure of below 20. The size of the total English housing stock was some 19.6 million dwellings.

The energy efficiency of pensioner and single-parent households are being improved through a range of programmes as described.

The Home Energy Efficiency Scheme (HEES) has been radically overhauled as of 1 June 2000. The scheme now provides grants for packages of heating and insulation improvement measures, including the provision of high efficiency central heating systems for low income households aged 60 years or more. The grant maximum has been increased from £315 to between £700 and £2,000 depending on the composition of each household and the condition of the dwelling. The scheme is focused on the private sector where nearly 70 per cent. of the fuel poor in England are found. In the case of pensioners and single parents, eligibility is linked to the receipt of an income-related benefit or one of the main disability benefits. Of the 460,000 households that are expected to be helped during the first two years of HEES, some 280,000 are likely to be aged 60 years or more.

Government-funded programmes operated by the Energy Saving Trust also improve the energy efficiency both fuel poor households and others.

The Government have also substantially increased the resources available to local authorities over the lifetime of this Parliament, reversing the reductions planned by the previous Government. The extra resources in the first three years, 1997–98 to 1999–2000, were allocated through the Capital Receipts Initiative (CRI). Information collected to monitor the impact of the CRI found that around a quarter to a third of the work on local authorities' own stock financed from this initiative lead either directly or indirectly to improvements in energy efficiency. If this were replicated across all local authority housing capital expenditure on its own stock this would equate to around £400–500 million per annum.

The energy efficiency of low-income households is also likely to be improved through some of the regeneration schemes funded by DETR. These cover a wide range of activities depending on local need, and it is not possible to quantify the precise expenditure on energy efficiency improvements.

To support the installation of energy efficiency measures, the Government also reduced the level of VAT from 1 July 1998 on work carried out on low-income households through eligible schemes such as HEES. The revenue cost of the reduction was £8.5 million a year.

This year's Budget extended the reduced rate at a total cost of £35 million a year. By 2002, the total cost is estimated at £85 million.

The Government are also introducing provisions to enable lessors to claim capital allowances on their investment in boilers, radiators and controls installed in residential properties under the Affordable Warmth Programme. The Programme will operate from 2000 to 2007, with the aim of helping up to one million low-income households benefit from improved energy efficiency. Estimate that Government assistance from this measure up to April 2002 will be approximately £10 million.

In addition to Government energy efficiency programmes, since 1994 public electricity suppliers have, under the Energy Efficiency Standards of Performance, been required to encourage and assist customers with energy efficiency measures. The new Director General of the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets has, from this year extended these, to also include public gas suppliers and the overall size of the programme has been doubled to £50 million a year. Around two thirds of this help has gone to pensioner and low-income families.

As energy efficiency is a devolved matter, it is the responsibility of the respective Parliament and Assemblies to comment on the situation in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Regional Government

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) when he proposes to publish his Department's review on regional government in England; [127990]

(2) what consultations have been carried out for his Department's review on regional government in England. [127991]

Ms Armstrong: The Department has undertaken a preliminary study of the literature relating to regional government in England, which will be published shortly. No public consultation was involved. As substantive proposals are developed for taking forward the Government's commitments to regional government, there will be full consultation with regional and other interests.

Advantage West Midlands

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent assessment he has made of the performance of Advantage West Midlands; and if he will make a statement. [127888]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My Department has commissioned consultants to undertake an evaluation of the strategies and action plans produced by all eight RDAs, including Advantage West Midlands. Research is also being carried out by consultants into partnership working by RDAs in the development and production of their strategies. It is the aim that both pieces of research will be published and that the findings will contribute to a report on the RDAs performance in their first year of operation.

The 2000–01 research programme of my Department's Local and Regional Government Research Unit also includes provision for a long-term evaluation of the operation and effectiveness of RDAs.

North Wales Main Line

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the Virgin Trains commercial study of the electrification of the North Wales main line has been made available to the National Assembly for Wales. [127889]

Mr. Hill: The study was produced on a commercially confidential basis to the Franchising Director in March 1998 and he received an independent assessment of it, again on a commercially confidential basis, in September 1998. The Franchising Director has not since made the study or assessment available to the National Assembly for Wales.

GM Farm-scale Trials

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the number of new GM farm-scale trials which will be required for *(a)* autumn planting this year and *(b)* spring planting next year. [127026]

Mr. Meacher: The Scientific Steering Committee for the Farm-scale Evaluations has advised that 20 to 25 fields should be sought for the autumn sowing of the farm-scale evaluations of herbicide tolerant oil seed rape this year.

The original design for the evaluations was that for each GM crop 20 to 25 fields would be sought each year for three years. When it became apparent last February that there may be a shortfall in the number of farms for the spring sowings this year, the Steering Committee advised:

> that (the industry body) SCIMAC would need to provide sufficient farms for the research consortium to select a minimum of around 12–15 farms, representing a range of intensities and geographical locations. This would also include some redundancy for operational problems. This would allow the number of farms to be increased slightly in subsequent years, and also allow any minor imbalances in the range of farms selected for year one to be addressed.

I expect that, as a result, the number of farms for the sowings next spring and in 2002 will be increased to ensure that the original aims and objectives of the evaluations are met. The Steering Committee will provide further advice later in the year on the numbers required.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the varieties used in the non-GM part of the farm-scale evaluations. [127218]

Mr. Meacher: My Department does not hold information on the individual varieties being grown, as it is not relevant to the Farm-scale Evaluations research.

Landing Rights

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the Government's policy is on auctioning landing rights at UK airports; and if he will make a statement. [127504]

Mr. Mullin: I take the question to refer to take-off and landing slots, and not to traffic rights, which are negotiated separately. Slot allocation at congested airports is governed by European Regulation EC95/93. An independent co-ordinator makes the allocation using a set of priority criteria that reflect the European Regulation and international guidelines. The Government have no

role in the process. Slots are allocated without charge. Under the existing Regulation once allocated, their holder has an indefinite claim on them as long as they are used.

EC 95/93 is due for revision and we await proposals from the European Commission.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the revenue which would be raised by auctioning landing rights at UK airports; and if he will make a statement. [127503]

Mr. Mullin: None. The allocation of landing rights, or slots, at airports, is governed by EC Regulation 95/93 which does not explicitly authorise the buying and selling of slots. The Government do not therefore have information on which to base an estimate of the possible value of slots. The income raised would also depend on a number of variables including the number of slots auctioned, their location and how desirable they were to a particular airline.

Planning

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to streamline the procedure governing planning appeals. [128139]

Mr. Raynsford: My right hon. Friend has today laid before Parliament four Statutory Instruments to improve the handling of planning appeals under each of the three main procedures, written representations, hearings and inquiries these are: the Town and Country Planning (Appeals) (Written Representations Procedure) Regulations 2000; the Town and Country Planning (Hearings Procedure) (England) Rules 2000, the Town and Country Planning (Inquiries Procedure) (England) Rules 2000 and the Town and Country Planning Appeals (Determination by Inspectors) (Inquiries Procedure) (England) Rules 2000. My right hon. Friend has also laid before Parliament a related amendment to the Town and Country Planning (General Development Procedure) Order 1995.

A Departmental circular (DETR 5/2000), "Planning Appeals: Procedures (including inquiries into called-in planning applications)", is being issued today to accompany the new Statutory Instruments and copies have been placed in the House Libraries. This Circular (which replaces Circular DOE 15/96) explains the new procedures governing written representations, hearings and inquiries (including inquiries into called-in planning applications). The changes implement the conclusions of a consultation exercise announced by the then Minister for Planning, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Central (Mr. Caborn), on 31 March last year.

The new arrangements, due to come into operation on 1 August 2000, are a key component of our "Modernising Planning" programme. I am determined to improve the service offered to business, householders and other users of the appeal system. The changes being introduced will improve the speed and efficiency of the system without impairing the quality, fairness or openness of the process or people's ability to participate.

We have already set tough targets for the Planning Inspectorate to turn round appeals more quickly and they have made a good deal of progress in improving their own performance. However, improving service to the benefit of all concerned is not just the responsibility of the Planning Inspectorate. All parties to the appeals process have a responsibility to meet the deadlines set and to co-operate with the Inspectorate in agreeing dates offered for hearings and inquiries. In future, representations received after due dates will normally be disregarded. We shall be carefully monitoring the impact of the changes and will review their effectiveness after about a year to help us decide whether any further action is needed.

Incinerators

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much public subsidy *(a)* was spent in each of the last three years and *(b)* his Department forecasts will be spent in the current financial year on the construction of incinerators; and if he will list the incinerator projects and the amount of public subsidy in each case. [126759]

Mrs. Liddell: I have been asked to reply.

The payments made from the fossil fuel levy for electricity generated by the combustion of waste in England and Wales in the financial years 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000 to which I understand the hon. Member's question refers was £30 million, £31 million and £10 million respectively. These payments represent 26 per cent., 28 per cent. and 24 per cent. respectively of the total payments made for electricity generated from renewable sources of energy. The estimate for the financial year 2000–01 is £12 million (15 per cent. of the total). Projects are located at Edmonton, Coventry, Byker, Isle of Wight, Nottingham, Lewisham, Dudley, Wolverhampton, Stoke, Tyseley, Cleveland and Sheffield and more are expected to commission in due course. The payments received by each are commercially confidential. All of these projects offer substantial new opportunities for the recovery of metals and ash for recycling.

PRIME MINISTER

Formal Meetings

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make it his policy to record and make public details of all formal meetings in the course of his official duties; and if he will make a statement. [125999]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 15 June 2000]:* Ministers and civil servants meet many people as part of the process of policy development and analysis. All such contacts are conducted in accordance with the Ministerial Code, the Civil Service Code and Guidance for Civil Servants: Contacts with Lobbyists. In order to preserve confidentiality, it is not the normal practice of government to release details of specific meetings with private individuals or companies. This is in line with the practice adopted by successive governments.

Okinawa Summit

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what representations he has received in respect of the G8 summit in Okinawa; and what responses he has made. [127572]

The Prime Minister: I have received many representations in respect of the Okinawa Summit. These have come from international organisations, including the World bank and World Health Organisation; individual non-G8 members, including Nigeria and South Africa; NGOs, such as Greenpeace, Oxfam and Jubilee 2000; and hon. Members and members of the public. These have covered a range of global issues including debt relief, development, education, health and the global environment. I have also discussed the issues directly with some Heads of Government and NGO leaders; and responded in writing to others. Other interlocutors have received responses from Ministers and senior officials. There has also been direct dialogue on Summit themes between officials responsible for preparing the Summit and representatives of Commonwealth Governments and UK NGOs.

Strategic Communications Unit

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Prime Minister how many *(a)* special advisers, *(b)* permanent civil servants and *(c)* temporary civil servants are employed in the Strategic Communications Unit. [127425]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 23 June 2000]:* Two special advisers and nine permanent civil servants are currently employed in the Strategic Communications Unit. One of the permanent civil servants is employed on a short-term secondment to the Unit.

Council of Europe

Mr. Ernie Ross: To ask the Prime Minister if he will place in the Library the latest Information Bulletin on the activities of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Assembly of Western European Union covering the period November 1999 to April. [128096]

The Prime Minister: I have done so today.

Cabinet Committees

Mr. Maxton: To ask the Prime Minister what the membership is of each Cabinet Committee. [128095]

The Prime Minister: I have placed a copy of the current list of Cabinet Committees, their membership and terms of reference in the Library of the House. Details will also be updated on the Cabinet Office website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk).

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Shipbuilding

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the schemes which provide financial help for the shipbuilding industry; how much financial support has been contributed to these schemes by the Government since May 1997; and if he will list the beneficiaries of the assistance. [127830]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Assistance to the shipbuilding industry is provided through the Shipbuilding Intervention Fund (SIF); the Home Shipbuilding Credit Guarantee Scheme (HSCGS); and through the Innovation Budget.

Grant assistance under SIF has been: Financial Year 1997–98 £7.01 million; Financial Year 1998–99 £10.54 million and in Financial Year 1999–2000 £3.99 million.

The HSCGS is based upon offering long-term loans at a fixed rate of interest of 7½ per cent. DTI pays out subsidy or receives income depending on the relationship of market rates to that fixed rate. The net cost to/receipts by the DTI of the Home Shipbuilding Credit Guarantee Scheme have been: in Financial Year 1997–98 the Department received £223,000; in Financial Year 1998–99 the Department paid out £1,960,000 and in Financial Year 1999–2000 the Department received £1,991,000.

Since May 1997, DTI has supported two competitiveness projects under the Innovation Budget. The first, a study of the policies of the Dutch shipbuilding industry in June 1999, had a DTI contribution of £20,000 and the second, completed in September 1999, was to assist the shipyards to benchmark their production and other business processes. That grant was for £94,245.

Details of the SIF grants and HSCGS loans are confidential to the individual recipient companies. The recipient of both Innovation Budget competitiveness grants was the Shipbuilders and Shiprepairers Association, the industry's trade association.

Engineering

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which organisations were represented at the meeting on 23 May to discuss the work of the Hawley Review Group; and what was the outcome of the meeting. [127736]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The following organisations were represented at the meeting on 23 May:

AEA Technology
BAe Systems
BioIndustry Association
British Computer Society
Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals of the Universities of the UK
Department for Education and Employment
Department of Trade and Industry
Engineering and Marine Training Authority
Engineering Council
Engineering Employers' Federation
Federation of Electronics Industries
Forum for the Future.

Venture Capital

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what Government help is available to increase access to venture capital for small companies in Morecambe and Lunesdale. [127638]

Ms Hewitt: The Government recognise the vital role that venture capital can play in support of growth businesses and the value that the formal venture capital industry can add. An existing business angel network in the North West currently provides informal investment capital to small companies in the region. The Government are also committed to ensuring that there is an adequate supply of venture capital to meet demand across the

regions. The new Regional Venture Capital Funds will specialise in the provision of small scale equity to businesses with growth potential. Bidding guidance for potential sponsors of new regional funds was issued on 22 December 1999 and 21 notifications of intention to bid have subsequently been received. Should all of these come forward and meet the criteria all of the English regions, including the North West, will have access to at least one new, viable fund.

E-commerce

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what help the Government are providing to small firms to encourage e-commerce. [127639]

Ms Hewitt: I refer my hon. Friend to the answers given to my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty) and my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, South (Ms Moran) on 2 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 337W, which described the activity of the DTI-lead Information Society Initiative.

Since then, as well as launching our Technology Means Business programme which aims significantly to improve the environment of support for small businesses, we have received an extra £60 million package from the Chancellor's Budget. This will focus on ramping-up existing services to the SME community. It includes £10 million to boost the existing network of ISI Advice Centres throughout the UK and inject greater urgency into the Government's awareness campaign; and £20 million for the SBS to create a 'Gateway' through which people can get guidance, advice and information needed to run or start a small business. Additionally, the tax benefits for SMEs following the Budget include 100 per cent. first year capital allowances, the Research and Development Tax Credit for SMEs, and tax reliefs to promote corporate venturing.

Plastic Bags

Dr. Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to introduce a producer responsibility regime for plastic bags. [127725]

Ms Hewitt: Plastic bags, in common with bags made of other materials such as paper, that are used for the containment, protection handling, delivery or presentation of goods are classified as packaging. A producer responsibility regime exists for packaging in the form of the Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations 1997. These Regulations place an obligation on business throughout the packaging chain who meet certain threshold requirements, to recover and recycle packaging waste.

Auditors

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will introduce legislation to impose a duty of care on auditors towards shareholders of audited companies. [127486]

Dr. Howells: The extent to which auditors owe a duty of care to the shareholders of an audited company is as laid down by the courts. We will consider the need to change the position in the light of the final report from the Steering Group of the independent Company Law Review, expected next year. The consultation document issued by the Review in March 2000—'Modern Company Law—Developing the Framework'—addresses the issues surrounding the scope of the duty of care (paragraphs 5.146 to 5.155).

Water Companies

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if those water companies considering mutualising their assets will be able to form limited liabilities partnerships under the Limited Liability Partnerships Bill [*Lords*]. [127558]

Dr. Howells: Any two or more persons associated for carrying on a lawful business with a view to profit and satisfying the registration requirements may become a limited liability partnership. However, a "statutory undertaker" under the Water Industry Act 1991 must be a company limited by shares and could not therefore be an LLP.

Energy Policy

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he has taken in the past 12 months to support the manufacturers of renewable energy technology; and what support he makes available to promote overseas sales of renewable energy technology and energy efficiency services. [127568]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government have taken significant steps to support renewable energy manufacturers in the last 12 months.

The Government launched a new regional planning initiative for renewable energy in the summer of 1999. In November 1999 the Government issued two consultation papers, on network management and licensing issues for embedded generation, of direct relevance to renewables, and in December 1999 it announced its intention to allocate around £30 million to the growing of energy crops over the six years up to March 2007. The Government also announced plans to exempt all forms of renewable energy, including electricity generated from renewable sources, from the Climate Change Levy, which will be introduced in April 2001, providing a substantial financial incentive for its use.

On 1 February 2000, to coincide with the Second Reading of the Utilities Bill, the Government published "New and Renewable Energy—Prospects for the 21st Century: Conclusions in Response to the Public Consultation". The Conclusions Document summarises key elements of the Government's policy. They are:

a new Renewables Obligation on licensed electricity suppliers;

exemption of electricity and heat from renewables from the Climate Change Levy;

an expanded support programme for new and renewable energy including research, development, demonstration and dissemination; and

development of a regional strategic approach to planning and targets for renewable energy.

The Renewables Obligation will enable the Government to make progress towards a target of generating 10 per cent. of our electricity from renewable sources by 2010, subject to the cost to consumers being acceptable. The Government are also taking steps to set up

transitional arrangements to ensure that Non-Fossil Fuel Obligation (NFFO) contracts continue to be viable in the future.

The renewables industry is also benefiting from the increased renewables R & D budget, expected to be £32 million over this and the next financial years.

Export opportunities in renewables technologies and services are a priority area for DTI support. DTI supports renewable energy technology in overseas markets in numerous ways, among them financial support for feasibility studies, country profile reports on renewables, and grant-supported outward and inward missions. For example we have recently sponsored two inward missions from China, concentrating on wind energy in the UK.

Support for energy efficiency services is a matter for my hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what his timetable is for responding to the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution report, Energy-The Changing Climate. [127625]

Ms Hewitt: I, together with my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment, and other colleagues, will be giving careful consideration to the recommendations in this report and we will be aiming to respond within a year. In the meantime, the Government are considering responses to the draft Climate Change Programme, and plan to publish the final version in the autumn.

Dr. Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what plans he has to enable unfulfilled Non-Fossil Fuel Obligation contracts for the supply of wind energy from onshore locations to be implemented anywhere within the area of sea within the Government's jurisdiction; [127584]

(2) if he will enable Non-Fossil Fuel Obligation contracts to be implemented anywhere within the Government's jurisdiction. [127585]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government have no locus in the contracts entered into by the Public Electricity Suppliers (PES) to secure the generating capacity from renewable sources of electricity required by the non-fossil fuel obligation (NFFO) Orders. These contracts are location specific and any amendment to their location needs to be agreed between the contracting parties. In addition the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (Ofgem) needs to be satisfied that the amendment does not cause the contract to cease to be a qualifying arrangement. If the contract ceased to be a qualifying arrangement the PES would not be eligible to receive fossil fuel levy for the electricity generated. I have asked the Non-Fossil Purchasing Agency Ltd. and Ofgem to re-examine the scope for amendments which would allow projects that have been frustrated by circumstances outside the control of the generator to go forward to construction and generation. Their re-examination has not yet reached a conclusion.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the proposed new gas trading arrangements. [127479]

Mrs. Liddell: The term "new gas trading arrangements" covers a number of exercises, led by the Director General of Gas Supply and his office Ofgem, aimed at securing effective competition in gas supply and the economic and efficient operation of Transco's pipeline system. These include auction arrangements for entry capacity into the national transmission system and an on-the-day commodity market for balancing purposes, both introduced with effect from October 1999. Work is in hand on further refinements to the capacity and energy balancing regimes, including reviews of the exit capacity regime and of the possibility of introducing a linepack regime. Further background is available on the Ofgem website www.ofgem.gov.uk.

Departmental Cars

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the *(a)* make, *(b)* model and *(c)* number of each make and model of car (i) owned and (ii) leased by his Department; and what is the (1) purchase price and (2) annual cost of the lease of each car. [127383]

Dr. Howells: My Department does not own any cars. The following are leased:

Make	*Model*	*Number*	*Annual cost per car (£)*
Ford	Escort	4	2,853.48
Ford	Escort	1	2,884.92
Ford	Escort	4	3,338.76
Ford	Escort	4	3,344.40
Vauxhall	Astra	1	3,272.76
Vauxhall	Vectra	1	3,473.16
Fiat	Cinquecento	1	1,680.00
Fiat	Brava	1	2,555.52
Peugeot	206	1	2,806.60
Citroen	Xantia	1	3,532.44

Excluding VAT

Private-public Partnerships (London)

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what arrangements to support sub-regional private/public partnerships will operate in London until the London Development Agency becomes operational. [127563]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My Department supports the work of the sub-regional partnerships through the Government Office for London and the Invest in Britain Bureau and this will continue up to, and after, the establishment of the London Development Agency on 3 July.

Manufacturing Industry (London)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action his Department is taking to promote and support manufacturing industry in Greater London. [127386]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My Department provides assistance to encourage competitiveness and innovation in manufacturing and other sectors through a range of schemes and initiatives delivered in London. These include Regional Selective Assistance; Enterprise Grants; and support through Business Links aimed at developing new and growing businesses, including in export markets.

BNFL

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list each of the projects in Russia where British Nuclear Fuels has a business or research involvement; and if he will set out the sources of the support budgets in each case. [126571]

Mrs. Liddell: This is a matter for BNFL. I have asked the Company Secretary to provide my hon. Friend with the information requested.

Farnborough Airshow

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what support his Department is providing to the organisers of this year's Farnborough Airshow; and what assistance his Department is providing to overseas visitors to attend the show. [127877]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My Department is providing no financial support to the Society of British Aerospace Companies (SBAC) in respect of the Farnborough International 2000 Airshow. Support from my Department of up to £29,500 has been offered to the SBAC, to assist delegations from Brazil, Canada and the Czech Republic attend the Airshow.

Maternity Pay

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the review of maternity pay and parental leave will conclude; what organisations have been involved in the review; and how the information will be treated once the review is completed. [127251]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 26 June 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) on 22 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 236–37W. There will be extensive consultation throughout the review.

Intellectual Property Rights

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he has taken to assess the compatibility of *(a)* the Convention on Biological Diversity and *(b)* the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights Agreement in respect of the treatment of genetic resources. [127462]

Dr. Howells: We consider the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) to be compatible, but we need to ensure that they are implemented in a mutually supportive way. For this reason we supported the recent decision of the 5th Convention of Parties (COP5) to the CBD, which asked the WTO further to explore the interrelationship between the provisions of the TRIPS agreement and the CBD.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make it his policy to seek an amendment to Article 27.3(b) of the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights Agreement to exclude genetic resources for food and agriculture. [127465]

Dr. Howells: The current exclusions from patentability for biological materials as set out in Article 27.3(b) of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement allow all WTO members sufficient flexibility to implement patent and other intellectual property regimes appropriate to their individual circumstances, within internationally agreed limits. Patents are afforded only to new technical inventions. Valid rights cannot be obtained for naturally occurring plants or animals or information concerning their genetic composition. Similarly, traditional or indigenous knowledge concerning the existence, use or properties of plants and animals is already not patentable. Given this flexibility and these limitations, we do not consider the requirements of Section 27.3(b) to be incompatible with WTO member states needs.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of intellectual property rights over plant and animal varieties. [127466]

Dr. Howells: Patents are available only for inventions for new technical solutions. Under the Patents Act 1977 and EC Directive (98/44/EC) on the legal protection of biotechnological inventions, plant and animal varieties, or the breeding of plants and animals by traditional methods, cannot be the subject of patent rights. However, inventions concerning plants and animals may be patentable if the technical feasibility of the invention is not confined to a particular plant or animal variety. To be patentable, such an invention would have to satisfy the general criteria for patentability that the invention is new and would not be obvious to someone in the technical field.

World Trade Organisation

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to increase *(a)* public involvement in the WTO decision-making process and *(b)* openness in the operation of the WTO. [127463]

Mr. Caborn: The Government launched a consultation exercise before Seattle and continues to receive and respond to public concerns through correspondence as well as the DTI website www.dti.gov.uk/worldtrade. I, my colleagues and our officials also hold regular meetings with business, NGOs and trade unions. The UK has, since Seattle, pressed for progress on WTO reform, and in particular on issues relating to consensus building and communication. The WTO's General Council agreed earlier this year that a consultation process should be launched on improvements to WTO consultative and decision-making procedures. We await the outcome of this consultative process.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress he has made since the Seattle meeting in securing reform of the WTO. [127467]

Mr. Caborn: The Government launched a consultation exercise before Seattle and continues to receive and respond to public concerns through correspondence as well as the DTI website www.dti.gov.uk/worldtrade. On 7–8 February, the WTO General Council meeting agreed that a consultation process should be launched on

improvements to WTO consultative and decision-making procedures. We await the outcome of this consultative process.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is his policy in respect of the admission of China into the WTO. [127469]

Mr. Caborn: The UK supports China's accession to the WTO on the right terms. We welcome the European Commission's success in negotiating an EU/China bilateral market access agreement. Of course, it is essential that China's commitments upon accession to the WTO are clearly set out and reviewed at regular intervals to ensure adherence.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress he is making in achieving clarification of the relationship between multi-lateral environmental agreements and the WTO rules. [127468]

Mr. Caborn: The UK and EU have proposed that a new Round of WTO negotiations includes a clarification of the relationship between WTO rules and trade measures taken within multi-lateral environmental agreements. We are continuing our efforts to build a consensus among WTO members for this proposal.

Textile Industry

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the impact of imported textiles and clothes on the UK textile industry. [127460]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The increased level of imports of textiles and clothing has presented a significant challenge for domestic producers, which has been met in a variety of ways. Some UK companies have looked at the opportunities for manufacturing overseas to take advantage of lower wage rates; most have looked at their existing operations and worked to increase their competitiveness.

Most encouragingly the industry itself set up the Textiles and Clothing Strategy Group, and its Final report, "A National Strategy for the UK Textile and Clothing Industry" was launched last month. My Department responded rapidly and positively to the report's recommendations and we are considering what further action we can take to help the industry compete internationally in the future.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much of his recently announced support for the textile industry will go to firms based in *(a)* the Coventry area and *(b)* the West Midlands. [127461]

Mr. Alan Johnson: All of the Government's 'announceables' outlined in its 12-point plan are applicable to *(a)* Coventry and *(b)* the West Midlands.

The DTI and DfEE are currently liaising to carry through the initiatives announced in the 12-point plan, and how much support a region is allocated very much depends on the 'take-up' from the textile and clothing industry in that locality.

Research Council (Luxembourg)

Mr. Casale: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the outcome was of the Research Council held in Luxembourg on 15 June; and if he will make a statement. [127183]

Mr. Byers: I am pleased to report that the Council of 15 June:

1. Debated the future of the Information and Knowledge Society, underlining the importance of research policy, social inclusiveness and the interconnection of high speed electronic research networks.
2. Adopted a Resolution on establishing an European area of research and innovation.
3. Adopted Presidency Conclusions concerning funding for life science infrastructures.
4. Received information from the Commission on progress on the joint ESA-EU strategy for space, and from the Presidency and Commission on international co-operation.
5. Under Other Business, the Council received information from the Presidency on discussions regarding marine science, and heard an intervention from Germany on the question of authorisation procedures for the release of genetically modified organisms.

The Council also discussed the future of fusion research spending.

Cannabis

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the licensed clinical trials of cannabis are expected to be concluded; and if he will make a statement. [127861]

Ms Hewitt: The Medical Research Council is supporting a clinical trial to look at the efficacy of cannabis extracts in the treatment of spasticity in multiple sclerosis patients. The trial was announced in December 1999 and is being run by Dr. John Zajicek (Derriford Hospital, Plymouth) and the MRC Clinical Trials Unit.

The trial is making good progress; local ethical committee approval has been obtained in principle and an application has been made to the Medicines Control Agency for the appropriate licence. The cannabinoids will be given exclusively in capsule form. Recruitment of patients is planned to start later in the summer. The results will be available in about 2.5 years, after formal scientific assessment of the results has taken place.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Youth Offending Teams

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of youth offending teams; and if he will make a statement. [126367]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Youth offending teams have been in place across England and Wales since 1 April 2000. They are now operating a range of new interventions for young offenders with support from the Youth Justice Board. The Board will be monitoring their impact and will identify and disseminate good practice.

Youth offending teams and the new police and court powers were previously piloted for 18 months and in 10 areas. The interim reports of the evaluation led by Sheffield University are in the Library. They show the practical value of the teams' multi-agency approach. The final evaluation report will be published during the summer.

Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent representations she has received concerning the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill; and which organisations have expressed concern about the Bill's provisions. [127459]

Mr. Straw: I have received a number of representations on the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill including from:

The Confederation of British Industry/Alliance for Electronic Business;

Institute of Directors;

British Chambers of Commerce;

London Investment Bankers Association;

British Bankers Association;

Internetforum;

Internet Service Providers Association/London Internet Exchange; and

Vodafone.

The content of representations was described in the reply I gave the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on 20 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 147–48W.

Family Reunification

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his policy towards current EU discussions on *(a)* rights to family reunification and *(b)* temporary protection of displaced people. [127195]

Mrs. Roche: The Government have decided not to opt into the European Commission's proposal for a Directive on the right to family reunification. Our decision was based on concern that opting into the proposal would remove the United Kingdom's ability to formulate and adjust policies in relation to family reunification as a matter of domestic law.

However, in remaining outside this proposal, it is not the Government's intention that the United Kingdom should be seriously out of line with our European partners in this important area of immigration policy. For that reason we shall continue to participate fully in discussion of the text.

As to the Commission's recent proposals on temporary protection for displaced persons, negotiations over this text have not yet begun. The Government will participate actively in those discussions.

Cyclists (Fixed Penalties)

Mr. Bradshaw: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cyclists have been issued with fixed penalty notices for *(a)* pavement cycling and *(b)* other offences in each police area since August 1999; and if he will make a statement on the impact fixed penalty notices have had. [126314]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) on 26 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 383–86W.

Correspondence

Mrs. Roe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to the letter of 21 March and subsequent correspondence from the hon. Member for Broxbourne, concerning her constituents Ms K. Vertigans and Ms L. Coe. [127809]

Mrs. Roche: I wrote to the hon. Member on 26 June in response to her letters on behalf of her constituents, Ms K. Vertigans and Ms L. Coe. I am very sorry that I was unable to do so sooner, and would like, through the hon. Member, to extend my apology to her constituents for the delay.

Onus of Proof

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his policy is on EU draft instruments which seek to alter the onus of proof in court cases. [127483]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government's policy on European Community draft instruments is developed on the merits of each proposal.

If the question is referring to the recent agreement of the European Community Directive on racial discrimination—which includes a provision requiring the respondent, once a prima facie case of discrimination has been made by the complainant and accepted by the court, to demonstrate that there has been no breach of the principle of equal treatment—the Government welcome the agreement of this Directive.

This applies only to civil cases and does not represent a major change in terms of United Kingdom legal practice. Under current United Kingdom law, United Kingdom tribunals can and do, if faced with facts which raise a presumption of discrimination, and where no reasonable explanation is offered, draw an inference that discrimination has occurred.

Interactive Voice Response Systems

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many agencies of his Department use interactive voice response systems when dealing with telephone inquiries from the general public. [127552]

Mr. Straw: An interactive voice response (IVR) system automatically answers telephone calls with a recorded voice which asks the caller to use the telephone keypad to select the required service. There are four executive agencies in my Department. The UK Passport Agency uses an IVR system for inquiries from the public. About 40 per cent. of calls are effectively dealt with by playing recorded information. The others are answered by operators in a call centre, who are able to handle most calls directly and to connect the rest to staff in regional offices. The available information shows that IVR systems are not used in Her

Majesty's Prison Service, the Forensic Science Service or the Fire Service College. No central records of IVR systems are kept.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many departmental telephone lines used by the general public are responded to by interactive voice response systems. [127405]

Mr. Straw: An interactive voice response (IVR) system automatically answers telephone calls with a recorded voice which asks the caller to use the telephone keypad to select the required service. IVR systems are used by the Immigration Service at London (Heathrow) Airport Terminal 3, and at the Port of Dover. The Nationality Directorate and National Asylum Support Services also use IVR. The available information shows that no other IVR systems are used in my Department. No central records of IVR systems are kept.

Prison and Probation Services

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to improve arrangements for the strategic management of the prison and probation services and for future complaints arrangements for the two services. [128072]

Mr. Boateng: We think it right to recognise the substantial and growing overlap in the work that both services perform as we pursue our drive to reduce re-offending through proven and well-targeted programmes and re-settlement planning as set out in the correctional policy framework which we published last year.

We have established a new strategy board for correctional services, chaired by myself as the Minister with responsibility for prisons and probation, to advise the Home Secretary on giving strategic direction for the prison and probation services. This replaces the prison service strategy board. We will make formal amendments to the framework document of the Prison Service in due course.

We have also decided to extend the prisons ombudsman's remit to cover probation services. This joint ombudsman will be created initially on an administrative basis, as with the prisons ombudsman, but we plan to legislate as soon as practicable. We are giving careful consideration to what the ombudsman's terms of reference should be. We shall make a further statement to Parliament in due course.

CABINET OFFICE

Social Exclusion Unit

Mr. Field: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) how many of the members of the Policy Action Teams are resident in the neighbourhoods identified by the Social Exclusion Unit as especially disadvantaged; [127326]

(2) how many of the *(a)* members, and *(b)* advisers to the Social Exclusion Unit are residents of the 3,000 neighbourhoods that the Social Exclusion Unit has identified as being especially disadvantaged. [127327]

Marjorie Mowlam: Policy Action Team members were chosen to reflect a wide range of backgrounds, knowledge and experience of issues affecting deprived areas. Information is not held about members' home addresses.

SEU reports have consistently pointed out that there is no universally agreed definition of a deprived area.

The members of the SEU, both its staff and its advisers, are drawn from a wide range of backgrounds, knowledge and experience, both within and outside Government.

Government Annual Report

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office, pursuant to her answer to the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) of 14 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 65W, for what reason the Government have no plans to involve the National Audit Office in the production of the Government's Annual Report. [127812]

Marjorie Mowlam: All the statistical data in the Government's Annual Report series are provided or checked by the Office for National Statistics or other reputable statistical sources such as Eurostat.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

House of Lords

49. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the President of the Council what publications will carry the proposed advertisements from the Appointments Commission soliciting applications for membership of the House of Lords. [126385]

Mr. Tipping: That is a matter for the Appointments Commission.

Modernisation Committee

50. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the President of the Council what progress has been made in respect of the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons proposals on modernising the procedures of the House. [126386]

54. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement on progress by the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons on reforming the procedures of the House. [126391]

Mrs. Beckett: 48 of the 54 recommendations of the Committee have been implemented. Apart from abolishing conventions, such as the use of the top hat, the work of Modernisation Committee has produced a clearer Order Paper, better explanatory notes for legislation, more effective Thursday sittings, more freedom for Standing Committees to meet when they wish, a new scrutiny reserve for European business, the introduction of a new forum for debate in Westminster Hall and some easing of restrictions on the Press Gallery and Lobby, which they have long sought.

Oral Questions

51. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the President of the Council what recent representations she has received on altering the cut-off time for tabling oral questions. [126387]

Mrs. Beckett: Other than those from the hon. Gentleman, none.

European Union Duties

52. **Mr. MacShane:** To ask the President of the Council what steps she is taking to provide resources for hon. Members to carry out duties relating to Parliament or their constituencies in the European Union. [126389]

Mr. Tipping: The House agreed to greater flexibility in the scheme for visits to European constituencies on 25 May last year. At that time we said the scheme would be reviewed after a year; the review has begun.

Ministerial Accountability

55. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the President of the Council what plans she has to improve the parliamentary accountability of Ministers during *(a)* adjournments and *(b)* prorogations. [126392]

Mr. Tipping: Ministers are accountable to Parliament at all times.

Select Committee Reports

56. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the President of the Council if she will propose to the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons a new system for advance notification of the publication of Select Committee reports. [126393]

Mrs. Beckett: No. Arrangements for publication of reports and notification of publication are matters for the Select Committee concerned or for the Liaison Committee.

Written Questions (Recesses)

57. **Mr. Quinn:** To ask the President of the Council what proposal the Government have made to the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons on the tabling and answering of written questions during parliamentary recesses; and if she will make a statement. [126394]

Mrs. Beckett: The Government have made no such proposals.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Clergy Remuneration

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, (1) when he expects the General Synod to decide on the Archbishops' Council's review of the clergy remuneration package; [127123]

(2) when he expects an announcement to be made following the Archbishops' Council's consideration of the clergy remuneration package. [127126]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The Review Group set up by the Archbishop's Council will consult widely by means of a survey to be sent to all stipendiary clergy and licensed layworkers, the purpose of which is to assess how clergy are managing financially. The Group has also prepared a consultation document for discussion within the Church.

It is hoped that an interim report will be made to the Council this November, but at this stage it is too early to say when the General Synod will discuss the review and be able to take a decision on its findings, or when an announcement will be made.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, if he will make a statement on the factors the Archbishops' Council will take into account in reaching a decision on the clergy remuneration package. [127125]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The factors comprising the Review Group's formal terms of reference are listed in answer to the previous question. Responses to consultation will be another key factor. In addition to the financial survey to be sent to all stipendiary clergy and licensed layworkers, the Group's consultation document for discussion within the Church asks for views on the concept of the stipend, its structure, the principle of differentials, other elements of the remuneration package, and the ability of the Church to fund any increases in stipends.

I have arranged for my hon. Friend to be sent a copy of the consultation document.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, if he will list the main components of the clergy remuneration package to be considered by the Archbishops' Council. [127124]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The principal elements of the remuneration package to be considered include the level and structure of the stipend itself, pension provision and housing. It will consider how stipends are to be funded as well as the level at which they should be set.

The Group's formal terms of reference are:

(i) To consider the concept and definition of the stipend;

(ii) To examine the content of the clergy remuneration package (including retirement provision) and its comparability with remuneration for other groups;

(iii) To ascertain, through a properly conducted large-scale survey of clergy and consultations with dioceses and charities, the financial circumstances of clergy;

(iv) To review the size of dignitaries' differentials;

(v) In conjunction with the Finance Committee, to evaluate the affordability and long-term financial sustainability of the present arrangements and any proposals for change;

(vi) To consider the implications for any proposals for:

clergy deployment and partnership between dioceses;

future numbers of stipendiary clergy and patterns of ministry

(vii) To consider whether the present structure for setting stipends should be retained and outline possible alternative structures;

(viii) To consult with the Church Commissioners, the Pensions and Board and dioceses;

(ix) To consult with other national church bodies through the Churches Main Committee and government agencies on matters of fiscal and taxation policy which affect stipends, in particular the treatment of benefits in kind;

And to determine options for wide debate within the Church.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

School Bus Service

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary school children have access to a school bus service; and what was the cost of providing such services to (i) primary and (ii) secondary children in the last year for which figures are available. [124532]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 5 June 2000]:* We do not collect statistics on school children who have access to a school bus service. Provisional figures for local education authority expenditure in England on school transport in 1998–99 were £78 million for pre-primary and primary schools, £164 million for secondary schools, and £203 million for special schools.

Medical Students

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students entered medical school in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [126917]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* The following table sets out the number of full-time undergraduate entrants to medical schools in UK HE institutions in each of the last five years.

	Number
1999–2000	5,306
1998–99	5,105
1997–98	5,044
1996–97	4,833
1995–96	4,699

SEN Statements

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many complaints he has received in the last two years from parents of children with statements of special educational needs who consider that their LEA is failing to meet the special educational provision specified in the statement. [127142]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is not available in this form. During the past two years Ministers at the Department for Education and Employment have answered about 650 letters dealing with special educational needs issues and almost 6,500 letters were answered by officials.

School Funding (Warrington, North)

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what has been the total capital allocation since May 1997 to schools in the Warrington, North constituency; and if he will break down these capital allocations by category of grant. [127317]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 26 June 2000]:* The following table shows the information requested for Warrington, North.

£

Category	*Grant allocation*
NDS1 Allocation-1997–98	37,328
NDS2 Allocation-1998–99	613,441
NDS3 Allocation-1999–2000	998,201
NDS4 Allocation-2000–01	640,032
Energy Efficiency Initiative Allocation-1998–99	36,135
Class Size Capital Allocation-1998–99	80,000
Class Size Capital Allocation-1999–2000	637,088
Class Size Capital Allocation-2000–01	180,000
Devolved Formula Capital Allocation-2000–01	347,521
Total	3,569,746

[1] Reserved pending statutory proposal decision

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the schools in Warrington, North constituency which have received funding through the New Deal for schools; and in each case for what purpose the money was allocated. [127318]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 26 June 2000]:* The following table shows the information requested for Warrington, North.

School	*Purpose of grant allocation*
Beamont Infant and Junior	Replacement of Dining Room
Beamont Community Infant	Energy and Efficiency Initiative
Bewsey Lodge Primary	Replacement of Pipe Work
Brook Acre Community Primary	Enclosure to Existing Fire Escape Staircase
Brook Acre Community Primary	Energy and Efficiency Initiative
Bruche Community Infant	Re-roofing Main School
Burtonwood Primary	Window Repairs
Burtonwood Community Primary	Re-build Gable Wall
Callands Community Primary	Provision of One Classroom
Culcheth Community Primary	Provision of One Classroom
Culcheth High	Electrical Re-wire
Culcheth High	Replace Heating Boilers
Culcheth High	Fire Alarm System Unification
Culcheth High	Improvements to Ventilation
Culcheth High	Alterations to Heat Treatment Area
Culcheth High	Re-roofing
Culcheth High	Re-slate Roof and Window Repairs
Culcheth High	Refenestration of Block C

School	Purpose of grant allocation
Glazebury CE Primary	Boiler Replacement
Hollins Green St. Helen's Primary	Provision of One Classroom
Locking Stumps Community Primary	Repair of Floor
Newchurch Community Primary	Replacement of Copper Roof
Padgate Community High	Re-roofing
St. Alban's RC Primary	Refenestration
St. Alban's RC Primary	Refurbishment of Toilets
St. Andrew's CE Primary	Re-surfacing of Paved Areas and Footpath, Playground, Carpark and Access Road
St. Margaret's CE Primary	Provision of Two Classrooms
St. Margaret's CE Primary	Energy Efficiency Initiative
St. Oliver Plunkett RC	Energy Efficiency Initiative
St. Paul of the Cross RC Primary	Provision of One Classroom
St. Phillip's CE Primary (Playgroup)	Construction of Extension to Existing Teaching Area
St. Stephen's RC Junior	Provision of Toilets
St. Stephen's RC Primary	Refurbishment of Infant Toilets
St. Stephen's RC Primary	Provision of Nursery Toilets
St. Stephen's RC Primary	Energy Efficiency Initiative
Twiss Green Community Primary	Refenestration and Replacement of Fascias
Twiss Green Community Primary	Replace Heating System
Twiss Green Community Primary	Provision of Two Classrooms
William Beamont Community High	Replace Fire Alarm System
William Beamont Community High	Refurbishment of Sport Facilities
William Beamont High	Energy Efficiency Initiative
Winwick CE Primary	Energy Efficiency Initiative
Winwick CE Primary	Provision of One Classroom
Woolston Primary	Provision of One Classroom
Woolston Community High	Improvements to Floor and Provision of Dust Extraction in CDT Room
Woolston Community Primary	Installation of Fire Doors to Hall
Woolston Community Primary	Re-roofing
Woolston Community High	Science and Technology Block—to Replace Deteriorating Mobiles

Careers Education

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the linkages between personal health and social education and careers services for young people. [127457]

Jacqui Smith: There are strong links between careers education (which is a statutory requirement for pupils aged 14–16) and the revised Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) framework, which we expect schools to implement from autumn this year and includes reference to career planning and management. In April we published a booklet "Careers Education in the New Curriculum"—a copy of which has been placed in the House of Commons Library—which sets out the relationship between these areas, as well as the new Citizenship programme of study. We encourage schools to take advantage of the introduction of PSHE and Citizenship to enhance the provision of careers education. Many schools already teach these areas in an integrated manner.

Teenage Pregnancies

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the linkages between personal health and social education and targets to reduce teenage pregnancy rates. [127458]

Jacqui Smith: The Government have launched a wide-ranging programme to tackle the unacceptably high level of teenage pregnancies in Great Britain. The Department for Education and Employment will shortly publish new sex and relationship education guidance which is an important part of this broader strategy, and will assist schools in educating young people so that teenage pregnancies are reduced. The guidance will be firmly rooted in the PSHE framework and National Curriculum published in autumn 1999.

This programme includes funding a number of local education authorities through the Standards Fund to reintegrate school age mothers back into the education system and support age-appropriate educational projects aimed at reducing the rate of teenage conception by raising pupils' self esteem, exploring issues of choice and responsibility and peer pressure. We aim to ensure that these initiatives are integrated with individuals schools' Personal, Social and Health Education frameworks and other approaches such as Sure Start and child care pilots for 16 and 17 year olds.

Tuition Fees

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the cost of abolishing tuition fees for undergraduate courses in higher education in each of the next five years; and if he will make a statement. [127506]

Mr. Wicks: I refer the hon. Member to my reply dated 14 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 393W. Figures for beyond 2001–02 depend on student numbers on which decisions have not yet been made.

Schools (Repairs and Maintenance)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the backlog of repair and maintenance work at schools in England; and if he will make a statement. [127600]

Jacqui Smith: The Department does not currently hold accurate and comprehensive data on all school buildings. We have, however, made resources available to local

education authorities to help them prepare Asset Management Plans covering all the maintained schools in their areas. When completed, these plans should provide a comprehensive picture of the repairs to school buildings which still need to be carried out.

A total of £1.9 billion is being spent in the current financial year on repairs and maintenance, three times the amount spent in 1996–97. This includes the New Deal for Schools, public-private partnerships, and other capital grants to schools and LEA borrowing.

Teachers (Performance-related Pay)

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teachers are eligible to apply for performance-related pay. [127884]

Ms Estelle Morris: Around 265,000 teachers in England and Wales were eligible to apply for the performance threshold this year.

Post-16 Education and Training

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to equalise the funding arrangements for post-16 education and training. [128002]

Mr. Wicks: How the Learning and Skills Council will allocate its funds is subject to a current consultation. The Government have invited partners' views on a system of national rates for the majority of learning programmes, which means that the same programme would attract the same funding wherever it was delivered. The Government recognise the current differences in funding levels, and favours upwards convergence, but we recognise that this can only happen over time, and subject to resources being available. Changes in levels of funding will, of course, be subject to the real-terms funding guarantee we have given to school sixth forms.

Engineering

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the recent Engineering and Marine Training Authority report entitled "Working in Engineering", with special reference to opportunities in engineering for young people from ethnic minorities. [127721]

Mr. Wicks: I welcome the report by the Engineering Employers' Federation/Commission for Racial Equality. The recommendations stemming from the project provide a realistic opportunity for engineering companies to engage the ethnic minority communities in a more constructive way.

This will require greater commitment and positive action to build more effective links with schools and ethnic minority community centres. I believe a vital factor in encouraging young people from the ethnic minority community to be engineers is to provide role models from their own communities. The case studies which have been published should actively encourage entry into the industry.

My Department strongly supports the outcomes and follow-up initiatives from the project and will continue to work closely with all appropriate parties to ensure that the engineering sector, together with the construction and manufacturing sectors—for example—attract more young people from the ethnic minority community.

TREASURY

VAT

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what would be the cost of increasing the value added tax threshold for small businesses by *(a)* 10 per cent., *(b)* 20 per cent., *(c)* 50 per cent. and *(d)* 100 per cent. per year; and if he will make a statement. [127494]

Mr. Timms: Customs and Excise do not have reliable current estimates of the cost of substantial increases in the VAT registration threshold. A description of the difficulties involved in predicting the effect of large changes in the threshold is contained in "The VAT Shortfall: Report of the Working Group on VAT Receipts and Forecasts", Treasury Occasional Paper No. 9, September 1997. Table A.13 of the Budget 2000 Financial Statement and Budget Report contains an estimate of the Exchequer cost of indexing the VAT registration and deregistration thresholds in line with inflation.

Tax Avoidance and Evasion

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what action he plans to take to reduce tax avoidance and evasion through non-domiciled status. [127602]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government keep all aspects of the tax system under review.

We have taken steps in successive Finance Bills to combat avoidance and evasion across the tax system.

HIPC Initiative

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the World Bank and IMF will set up the joint committee for overseeing the implementation of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative; and where it will be based. [127713]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The World Bank and IMF announced the establishment of the HIPC Joint Implementation Committee on 16 April this year. The Committee is based in Washington and has had its first meeting on 22 May.

Red Diesel

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on how many days the HM Customs and Excise testing units for red diesel operated within Scotland during *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 1998; and how many prosecutions were brought for illegal use of red diesel in each of those years. [127661]

Mr. Timms: Scotland has two road fuel testing units. In 1997 they were operational for a combined total of 446 days and for 432 days in 1998. In the same period they made 277 detections leading to penalties and duty recovered totalling £423,214. In 1997 and 1998 two cases were taken to prosecution.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the net yearly costs in the first year of implementation of the climate change levy to *(a)* the dairy industry and *(b)* the agriculture industry in Scotland. [127697]

Mr. Timms: It is not possible to say what the precise effect of the levy will be on any one particular industry. The impact of the levy package will depend on a number of factors, including: the future energy consumption by firms; the level of employment in those firms; the number of firms that are eligible to receive a discount on the main rates of the levy by signing up to an energy efficiency agreement; what use they make of electricity generated from 'new' renewable sources of energy and in 'good quality' combined head and power plants; and the extent to which they take advantage of the proposed introduction of a system of enhanced capital allowances for energy saving investments. However, the agriculture sector stands to benefit from a number of features of the levy package including the proposed special package of support for the horticulture subsector announced in the March 2000 Budget.

GNP

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of GNP has been spent on *(a)* defence, *(b)* education and *(c)* health in each of the last 15 years. [127640]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Table 4.4 of Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis 2000–01 (Cm 4601) shows the amount of public expenditure spent on these services, as a percentage of GDP, in each of these years.

The Health figures presented in this table are net of income from charges and asset sales, and do not include NHS trusts interest and dividend payments.

Tax Returns

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discounts are available for electronic filing of tax returns. [127634]

Dawn Primarolo: On 16 February 2000, the Chancellor announced that individuals who file their self-assessment tax returns over the internet in 2000–01 and pay any tax due electronically will receive a discount of £10. Small businesses that do the same for their PAYE and VAT returns in 2001–02 will receive a discount of £50 for each. And in his Budget speech on 21 March 2000 he said that small businesses that qualify for the PAYE discount and which pay tax credits to employees would receive a further discount of £50. These discounts are being offered to encourage businesses and individuals to embrace internet technology. Legislation has been included in this year's Finance Bill to provide for the payment of these incentives. The detailed conditions will be set out in regulations to be published later this year.

Child Benefit

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the revenue from taxing child benefit for *(a)* all upper-rate taxpayers at 40 per cent. and *(b)* upper-rate taxpayers at 40 per cent. but 50 per cent. for those with taxable incomes of over £100,000 per annum; and if he will make a statement. [127500]

Dawn Primarolo: The estimated revenue from taxing child benefit received by higher-rate taxpayers at 40 per cent. in 2000–01 is £50 million in a full year. The additional revenue from taxing child benefit received by higher-rate taxpayers with taxable incomes of over £100,000 per annum at 50 per cent. is estimated to be less than £5 million.

Tax Evasion

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of tax revenue lost to the UK Exchequer as a result of tax evasion; and if he will make a statement. [127603]

Dawn Primarolo: No such estimate has been made. There is no generally accepted method of producing an estimate sufficiently reliable to be of value.

National Insurance

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the Government's proposals and timetable for the reduction of Class 1 National Insurance contributions payable by employers. [127977]

Dawn Primarolo: As announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the rate of employers Class 1 National Insurance contributions will be reduced from 12.2 to 11.9 per cent. in April 2001 and from 11.9 to 11.8 per cent. in April 2002.

Exchange Rate

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the effect of his policy of stability in the British Government finances and in the economy on the exchange rate since May 1997. [127484]

Miss Melanie Johnson: It is not possible to identify precisely the impact of stability-orientated policies on the exchange rate. Delivering low inflation and sound public finances is the best contribution the Government can make to securing a stable and competitive exchange rate over the medium term.

No-smoking Policy

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on *(a)* the effectiveness of his Department's no-smoking policy and *(b)* the proportion of his Department's offices that do not allow smoking. [125148]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, North-East (Mr. Crausby) on 24 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 117W.

Employee Share Schemes

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much extra tax and national insurance he will collect following the introduction of the All-Employee Share Scheme from employee and employer participants in the scheme. [126960]

Mr. Timms: The new all-employee share plan is a tax and NICs relieving measure designed to encourage more employees to hold shares in the companies for which they work and to reward their long-term commitment. The new plan will eventually cost the Exchequer around £400 million a year.

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received from *(a)* employers and *(b)* employees about the All-Employee Share Scheme; what was the nature of those representations; and if he will make a statement. [126935]

Mr. Timms: Since December 1998, when the consultation process on employee share ownership began, the Inland Revenue has received in the region of 1,000 representations. While these have mostly been from employers and their advisers, many individual employees have also made representations.

The responses have covered all aspects of the existing Inland Revenue approved share schemes and the proposals for the new all-employee share plan and Enterprise Management Incentives. They have been overwhelmingly in favour of the new proposals. We have reflected these representations in the legislation.

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will review the annual upper limit of £1,500 for contributions to the All-Employee Share Scheme; and if he will make a statement. [126934]

Mr. Timms: The limit of £1,500 on the amount which employees may contribute annually from their salary under the new plan was arrived at after extensive consultation. We have no plans to review the limit at the present time.

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions he has had with employers about the cost and administration which will be involved in running the new All-Employee Share Scheme alongside existing schemes; and if he will make a statement. [126968]

Mr. Timms: Consideration of employers' costs in setting up and running the new plan has formed a major part of the consultation underlying the plan, and the views of employers have been sought at every stage. Improvements designed to reduce these costs have been made to the legislation currently going through Parliament. The Regulatory Impact Assessment published on 21 March sets out a detailed cost/benefit analysis.

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions with employers he had before deciding on an upper limit of £1,500 per year for employees purchasing shares under the new All-Employee Share Scheme; and if he will make a statement. [126961]

Mr. Timms: The limit of £1,500 on the amount which employees may contribute annually from their salary under the new plan was arrived at after extensive consultation involving their employers, their advisers and other interested parties. Over 1,000 written responses have been received during the consultation period, mainly from employers and their advisers. The process started in December 1998 and ended earlier this year, following the publication of the draft legislation in November 1999. An advisory group drawn from large and small companies, their advisers, the TUC and the academic world worked with officials on the detailed legislation, and a 60-strong group of large and small employers was consulted throughout.

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of employees who contribute more than £1,500 per year to purchase their employing company shares through a share scheme; and if he will make a statement. [126936]

Mr. Timms: A full picture of the distribution of amounts used by employees to purchase shares in the companies they work for is not available.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Interactive Voice Response Systems

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many telephone lines to his Department used by the general public are responded to by interactive voice response systems; [127119]

(2) how many agencies of his Department use interactive voice response systems when dealing with telephone inquiries from the general public. [127122]

Angela Eagle: There are three telephone lines used by the general public which are responded to by interactive voice response in the Department's Headquarters and one Agency (Benefits Agency).

These are the Child Benefit Centre, which is manned by operators until 5.30 pm and from 5.30–8.00 pm by interactive voice response, and the Customer Care Helpline, which gives the client two interactive voice response options before/instead of being put through to an operator.

The third is run on our behalf by a commercial organisation and deals with inherited SERPS inquiries.

Income Support

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his estimate of the cost of restoring entitlement to Income Support to 16 and 17-year-olds; and if he will make a statement. [127496]

Mr. Bayley: I refer the hon. Member to the written answer I gave on 17 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 663W.

State Pension

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost in each of the five financial years beginning with 2001–02 of *(a)* linking the basic pension to earnings and introducing an age addition of £5 for pensioners aged 75 to 79 years, and £10 for pensioners aged 80 years and above and *(b)* introducing an increase in the basic pension in 2001–02 of £5 for pensioners aged 75 years, £10 for pensioners aged 75 to 79 years and £15 for pensioners aged 80 years or above, followed by price indexation of all rates of pension thereafter, in each case showing the cost net of savings on means-tested benefits and increased income tax revenue. [127881]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

£ billion

	Option (a)		Option (b)	
	Gross	Net of means-tested benefits and income tax	Gross	Net of means-tested benefits and income tax
2001–02	2.3	1.5	4.4	2.9
2002–03	2.9	1.9	4.5	3.0
2003–04	3.6	2.3	4.5	3.0
2004–05	4.5	—	4.5	—
2005–06	5.3	—	4.6	—

Notes:

1. Option (a) assumes that the age addition is paid in full to all basic state pension recipients and is not uprated. Option (b) assumes age-related increases are paid pro-rata to those without full basic state pension.
2. Both options include the cost of benefits whose rates are linked to the rate of basic retirement pension.
3. Figures are rounded to the nearest £0.1 billion and are in 2000–01 price terms.
4. Gross costs estimated by the Government Actuary's Department. Costs net of income-related benefit savings are estimated using the Policy Simulation Model. Income tax revenues estimated by the Inland Revenue.
5. Estimates of income tax revenues not available beyond 2003–04.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Local Authority Funding

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the funds which are available to local authorities on application, indicating those for which the Torbay Unitary Authority has successfully applied in each of the last two years. [124197]

Mr. Nick Brown: Local authorities can apply for a range of funds managed by my Department, depending on their individual circumstances. My Department's records show that Torbay Unitary Authority had three successful applications under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme in 1998–99.

Organic Farming

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what percentage of those farmers requesting information from the organic conversion information service entered the organic farming scheme. [127027]

Mr. Morley: Precise figures are not available. However, we estimate that around 25 per cent. of farmers who contact OCIS eventually enter land into conversion.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many farmers requested information from the organic conversion information service in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [127028]

Mr. Morley: In the period 5 June 1999 to 2 June 2000, just over 2,000 farmers contacted the organic conversion information service.

Beta-sitosterol

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on his policy towards beta-sitosterol products. [126892]

Ms Stuart: As responsibility for food safety and standards matters have now passed to the Food Standards Agency which reports to Parliament through Health Ministers, I have been asked to reply.

I am advised by the Food Standards Agency that products containing beta-sitosterol require pre-market approval under the European Commission Novel Foods Regulation 258/97 if they did not have a significant history of consumption in Europe at the time the regulations came into force.

ADVOCATE-GENERAL

Human Rights

28. **Dr. Godman:** To ask the Advocate-General what recent advice she has given to the Government concerning the cross-examination of complainers in court cases involving sexual assault and similar offences in relation to *(a)* the human rights of such witnesses and *(b)* the European convention on human rights. [126363]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: This raises difficult questions which require to be handled with great delicacy by policy Ministers. These questions include issues of human rights, of the complainer as well as of the accused. In England and Wales, this is the responsibility of the Home Secretary and legislation has been passed by Parliament. The relevant provisions of the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999 will be brought into force once the necessary rules of court, which are at an advanced stage, have been made. In Scotland, where the matter is devolved, the Executive have announced their intention to examine options open to them.

Devolution Issues

29. **Mrs. McKenna:** To ask the Advocate-General in what type of cases, intimated to her as devolution issues, she has intervened. [126364]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: I have intervened in a variety of devolution issues cases. Each case is considered on its merits. In general terms I have intervened, for example, where important issues of principle have arisen particularly in cases which might have ramifications for the whole United Kingdom. I do not usually intervene until a case has reached appeal or Privy Council stage.

SCOTLAND

New Deal

6. **Mr. McFall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many people in Scotland have moved in to unsubsidised employment as a result of the New Deal; and if he will make a statement. [126341]

Mr. Wilson: At the end of March this year, 28,795 people had moved in to unsubsidised employment as a result of participating in the New Deal in Scotland.

Scottish Constituencies

7. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the time scale for reducing the number of hon. Members representing Scottish constituencies. [126342]

Dr. Reid: It is not possible to be precise on this. The Parliamentary Boundary Commission for Scotland has not yet formally started its next review. It is for the Commission to determine when this commences, keeping in mind the requirement that it needs to report between December 2002 and December 2006. Following the report, implementation will take some time.

9. **Mr. Syms:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with the Boundary Commission for Scotland about the Government's plan to reduce the number of hon. Members representing Scottish constituencies. [126344]

Dr. Reid: I have had no such discussions. The rules for the redistribution of parliamentary seats are set out in the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986, as amended, and the Scotland Act 1998. The Boundary Commission is required to follow these in any review of the number of constituencies in Scotland.

25. **Mr. Paterson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with the Prime Minister about reducing the number of hon. Members sitting for Scottish constituencies. [126360]

Dr. Reid: I have regular discussions with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on various matters.

Pensioners

8. **Mrs. Laing:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has made to the Secretary of State for Social Security regarding pensioners. [126343]

Dr. Reid: I have frequent discussions with my right hon. Friend. We are proud of this Government's record: we are spending an additional £6.5 billion on pensioners over the course of this Parliament.

Barnett Formula

10. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what recent representations he has received on the operation of the Barnett formula in respect of the block grant to the Scottish Executive. [126345]

Dr. Reid: I have not received any such representations in the past six months.

Coalfield Communities

11. **Mr. Eric Clarke:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what action is being taken to regenerate coalfield communities in Scotland. [126346]

Dr. Reid: This Government are very aware of the specific problems faced by coalfield areas and remain committed to a long-term plan of action to regenerate coalfield communities. As I explained in my reply to my hon. Friend on 18 April, the work of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust is a matter for the Scottish Executive. With the publication of the report "Improving Lottery Funding Access and Delivery in the British Coalfields" on 5 June, this Government have signalled their intention to ensure that people in coalfields and other deprived areas can get the fullest benefit possible from the National Lottery.

National Minimum Wage

12. **Mr. Wray:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many Scottish companies have had action taken against them to enforce the national minimum wage. [126347]

Mr. Wilson: Since the introduction of the minimum wage on 1 April 1999, national minimum wage inspectors in Scotland have taken action against 17 companies to enforce the national minimum wage. There are presently 229 cases being investigated by national minimum wage investigators. The Low Pay Commission reported on 15 February that the Inland Revenue has made a successful start to enforcement and was working proactively to ensure compliance with the legislation.

15. **Mr. Donohoe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many workers in Scotland have benefited from the introduction of the national minimum wage. [126350]

Mr. Wilson: Over 100,000 workers in Scotland are entitled to higher rates of pay as a result of the introduction of the national minimum wage on 1 April 1999.

Assisted Areas Map

13. **Mrs. Ewing:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what recent discussions he has had with the Department of Trade and Industry and the Scottish Executive regarding the assisted area status map for Scotland. [126348]

Dr. Reid: I have had various discussions with both the Department for Trade and Industry and the Scottish Executive about the assisted areas map for Scotland. I am hopeful that the Commission will soon agree to a map that will secure a very favourable outcome for Scotland.

Planning Decisions

14. **Mr. Peter Atkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will raise in the joint Ministerial Committee between the Scottish Executive and the UK Government the subject of planning decisions with cross-border implications. [126349]

Mr. Wilson: My right hon. Friend has no plans to raise this issue in the Joint Ministerial Committee. Planning decisions are in the first instance a matter for local government, and it will generally be desirable that local authorities should discuss planning matters that span their boundaries with neighbouring local authorities, whether those authorities are in Scotland or England. The bilateral concordat between the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Scottish Executive provides for communication and co-ordination between these central government bodies.

Fairness at Work

16. **Mr. Russell Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the effects on employees and trade unions in Scotland of the proposals contained in the Government's "Fairness at Work" White Paper. [126351]

Dr. Reid: The Government have implemented the proposals contained in the "Fairness at Work" White Paper mainly through the Employment Relations Act 1999. Workers and trade union members in Scotland have benefited a great deal from the creation of decent minimum standards at work and the emphasis on a partnership approach to work.

Criminal Assets

17. **Mr. Jim Murphy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what recent discussions he has had about the seizure of criminal assets in Scotland. [126352]

Mr. Wilson: My right hon. Friend has regular discussions with both his Cabinet colleagues and Scottish Executive Ministers on various matters.

US Trade Dispute

18. **Mr. Moore:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with *(a)* industry and *(b)* others about the future of Scottish cashmere manufacturing. [126353]

Mr. Wilson: I meet representatives of the industry and of individual companies on a regular basis to discuss a range of issues affecting the industry. I have written to the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry about the current US Carousel retaliation threat to the cashmere and other industries, as well as discussing this with the US Ambassador to Britain. I am also in contact with the Scottish Executive on this issue.

The hon. Member will be aware that we still await the final retaliation list from the USTR. I continue to be hopeful that our efforts on behalf of the cashmere industry have been successful.

19. **Mr. Tynan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what recent discussions he has had with the Scottish textiles industry regarding the trade dispute between the USA and the European Union. [126354]

Mr. Wilson: I have had a range of discussions with the industry about the current trade dispute. I have also written to the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry about the current US Carousel retaliation threat to the cashmere and other industries as well as discussing this with the US Ambassador to Britain. I am also in contact with the Scottish Executive on this issue.

The hon. Member will be aware that we still await the final retaliation list from the USTR. I continue to be hopeful that our efforts on behalf of the cashmere industry have been successful.

Textiles Industry

23. **Mr. Browne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the future of Scotland's textiles industry. [126358]

Mr. Wilson: The Government recently announced a twelve-point plan to support the British textile industry, which has, until now, lacked an overall strategy and adequate support. The strategy will help the competitiveness of the industry by addressing issues such as the supply chain, design and research, public procurement and exports. I was delighted that the excellent work of Heriot Watt University's Galashiels Campus has been recognised by its designation as a Centre of Manufacturing Excellence in Textiles

All the measures for the UK textile industry will equally apply in Scotland. I am delighted, however, that the Scottish Executive considers that the importance of the textile industry to the Scottish economy merits further action and is introducing a comprehensive package of additional measures to support the textile industry in Scotland.

Eurozone

20. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what recent advice he has given to the Prime Minister regarding the readiness of the Scottish economy for entry into the eurozone. [126355]

Mr. Wilson: My right hon. Friend has regular discussions with the Prime Minister on a wide range of issues including the current healthy state of the Scottish economy.

Genetic Paternity Testing

21. **Mrs. Irene Adams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what the implications are in Scotland of the recommendations made by the advisory committee on Genetic Paternity Testing; and if he will make a statement. [126356]

Dr. Reid: A draft Code of Practice on Genetic Paternity Testing is currently being considered by the Human Genetics Commission. The Government plan to publish the Code later this year. The intention is that the Code will cover the whole of the United Kingdom, including Scotland.

Drug Deaths

22. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what action his Department is taking to reduce the number of drug deaths in Scotland as part of the UK anti-drugs strategy. [126357]

Mr. Wilson: Responsibility for action to reduce the number of drug deaths in Scotland lies with the Scottish Executive, working within the common UK-wide statutory framework. The reduction of drug-related deaths is a key objective of Scotland's drug strategy.

Poverty and the Knowledge Economy

24. **Mrs. McKenna:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the joint management committees on poverty and the knowledge economy. [126359]

Dr. Reid: The Joint Ministerial Committees on poverty and the knowledge economy, which bring together Ministers from the UK Government and the devolved Administrations, both met on 26 May, in Edinburgh. The

meetings were chaired by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The Advocate-General for Scotland represented the Scotland Office. A wide variety of issues were discussed. Areas discussed at the meeting on poverty included the work being done to help pensioners; the Children's Fund and social inclusion. Areas discussed at the meeting on the knowledge economy included jobs and skills. It was agreed that a conference on services for pensioners should take place later this year. The next meetings of the Joint Ministerial Committees on poverty and the knowledge economy will take place in the autumn.

Road Accidents (A90)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many *(a)* fatal and *(b)* serious injuries accidents occurred per vehicle mile on the A90 between Ellon and Aberdeen in (i) 1995, (ii) 1996, (iii) 1997, (iv) 1998 and (v) 1999. [127228]

Dr. Reid: Responsibility for statistics for fatal and serious accidents in Scotland is a matter for the Scottish Executive.

Orange Badges

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many valid orange disability badges are currently held by individuals resident within Scotland, broken down by local authority area. [127660]

Dr. Reid: Responsibility for statistics for orange disability badges in Scotland is a matter for the Scottish Executive.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Bananas

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on how her Department is working with Caribbean banana smallholders and the Fairtrade Foundation to encourage the introduction of fair trade bananas to the UK market. [127886]

Mr. Foulkes: I met with the Fairtrade Foundation on 13 June to discuss their request for DFID support for the launch of the Fairtrade Windward Island Banana Campaign later this year. We have agreed to provide support for this campaign, and discussions on the details are continuing.

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on how her Department is working with the EU and other institutions to assist Caribbean banana smallholders. [127887]

Mr. Foulkes: We are continuing to press the European Commission to reach an agreement on a successor bananas regime that will not be WTO-compatible but will enable the continuation of a viable—albeit restructured—banana industry in the Caribbean. We are also continuing to work actively with the European Commission and other donors in a programme to support and encourage necessary reforms to achieve a more commercially based banana industry in the Eastern Caribbean. This programme is being supported by substantial funding from the Stabex facility and the EC Special Framework of Assistance for banana industry restructuring, economic diversification and social safety net provision during the transition process.

Intellectual Property Rights

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent discussions she has had with developing countries in respect of the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights Agreement; and if she will make a statement. [127464]

Mr. Foulkes: The WTO TRIPS Council is currently conducting its review of the implementation of TRIPS legislation for 13 of its developing country members. The Government will be following this review closely.

The Government are well aware that the TRIPS Agreement has been difficult for some countries to implement and that questions have been raised about its coverage and approach.

The Government stand ready to offer assistance to developing countries on understanding the implication of the Agreement for themselves and its implementation.

Our Department is actively funding programmes aimed at helping developing countries to better their Uruguay Round commitment including in the area of intellectual property rights.

The Government's position is to maintain an agreement on TRIPS. The Government are open to constructive suggestions on how to improve the TRIPS Agreement and as part of a new comprehensive round would be open to substantive negotiations on the Agreement.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development on how many occasions she has deposited papers in the Library in response to parliamentary questions tabled to her Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April. [127673]

Mr. Foulkes: Between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 papers have been deposited in the Library on 16 occasions in response to parliamentary questions.

Burmese Refugees

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what measures the Government are taking to support Burmese refugees who have fled to *(a)* Thailand, *(b)* China, *(c)* India and *(d)* Bangladesh. [127802]

Mr. Foulkes: Over the last two years, DFID has given the Burma Border Consortium (a grouping of NGOs) a total of £537,500 for the provision of humanitarian assistance to around 110,000 Burmese refugees in Thailand. In Bangladesh, we have given UNHCR £250,000 for its programme to repatriate Burmese refugees. We understand that over 90 per cent. of these refugees have now returned to Burma, leaving some 22,500 in Bangladesh. In India and China, we understand that the number of registered Burmese refugees is very small (around 1,000 in total), and we have not targeted any assistance on these groups.

Development Policy Forum

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement regarding the Development Policy Forum held recently in Glasgow. [127720]

Mr. Foulkes: The Forum in Glasgow was one of a series of 11 being held across the UK between January and July this year. The Development Policy Forum process is designed to share thinking and ideas on development issues with groups and individuals from across society both to raise awareness of key issues and to deepen participants' understanding. This year's Forums have addressed three themes: achieving benefits for developing countries from the next round of World Trade negotiations, tackling corruption and aid untying.

All three themes were addressed at the Glasgow Forum on 23 May, with useful and lively discussions taking place. The Government team was led by myself.

Empowerment of Women

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps the Government are taking to support the efforts of international aid agencies to facilitate the empowerment of women. [127803]

Mr. Foulkes: The Department for International Development is working extensively to encourage international agencies to actively support the empowerment of women in all their programmes. This includes key agencies in the UN, the European Commission, the international financial institutions, and international organisations in civil society. More specifically, we have recently significantly increased our support to the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). Details of this support are published in our annual Departmental Report.

Departmental Cars

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is the *(a)* make, *(b)* model and *(c)* total number of each make and model of car (i) owned and (ii) leased by his Department; and what is the (1) purchase price and (2) annual cost of the lease of each car. [127395]

Mr. Foulkes: The Department for International Development makes use of three official cars, namely a Vauxhall Omega, a Vauxhall Vectra and a Ford Mondeo. All cars are used on a lease basis from the Government Car Service costing a total of £142,476.36 per annum.

Sudan

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what aid projects are currently financed by her Department in the Sudan. [127156]

Mr. Foulkes: Projects in the Sudan currently financed by the Department for International Development are listed.

DFID Funded Projects Active in Sudan, June 2000

Agency	*Project*	*Amount*
CARE	South Kordofan emergency water	195,439
IGAD	Sudan Peace Secretariat, Nairobi	18,777
MSF	Hyper Endemic Kala Azar treatment, Gadaref State	346,075
MSF	Health assistance for local and displaced population of north Bahr El Ghazal	400,000
MSF	Kala Azar treatment/prevention, south Sudan	207,272
OCHA	Operation Lifeline Sudan Security Project	882,000
OCHA	Operation Lifeline Sudan: humanitarian co-ordination in Khartoum and Nairobi	200,000
SCF	Support to the World Food Economy Analysis Unit	57,154
SCF	Emergency distribution of seeds and tools, south Sudan	258,333
Tear Fund	Nutrition Programme, Omdurman, Khartoum State	73,610

Notes:
CARE = Cooperation for Assistance and Relief Everywhere
IGAD = Inter-Government Authority on Development
MSF = Medecins sans Frontieres
OCHA = United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs
SCF = Save the Children Fund

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Bailiffs

36. **Mr. Hilary Benn:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the powers of bailiffs. [126372]

Mr. Lock: Professor Beatson of Cambridge University is conducting a review of bailiff law on our behalf, and will report to us this month. The National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux has published a report, entitled "Undue Distress", on bailiff powers and regulation. The Government have substantial concerns about the way some bailiffs operate and are regulated. We will look closely at the powers and role of bailiffs in the light of both these reports.

Shrewsbury County Court

37. **Mr. Paul Marsden:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on progress in refurbishing the Shrewsbury county court and the expected completion date thereof. [126373]

Jane Kennedy: The arrangement for payment of the agreed contribution of £40,000 to the Court Service from the local authority has now been resolved. There has been particular difficulty in reaching agreement with the Landlord; consequently it is anticipated that the new lease will not be signed before September 2000. Once the lease has been signed there will be a programme of works, approximately six months in duration, to be completed

by the Landlord/Court Service. The completion date is dependent upon agreement of the lease and the Landlord disclosing the timetable for the works.

Domestic Violence

38. **Ms Moran:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he intends to implement section 60 of the Family Law Act 1996 relating to domestic violence cases. [126374]

Jane Kennedy: Section 60 will allow third parties to apply for civil remedies in domestic violence cases on behalf of survivors of domestic violence. Those remedies are occupation orders and non-molestation orders. The implementation raises a number of questions which we are currently looking into. We will consider issuing a public consultation paper on this issue later this year.

Magistrates Courts (South Staffordshire)

39. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the administration of the magistrates courts in South Staffordshire. [126375]

Jane Kennedy: Decisions on the administration of magistrates courts in South Staffordshire are for the Staffordshire Magistrates Courts Committee to determine, in consultation with its local paying authorities.

Public Trust Office

40. **Dr. Naysmith:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the failure of the Public Trust Office Executive Agency to meet two of its key performance indicators for the 1999–2000 financial year. [126376]

Jane Kennedy: The Public Trust Office failed its Unit Cost and Charter Standard key performance indicators for 1999–2000 (these results are still subject to National Audit Office approval). The Unit Cost target for the 1999–2000 financial year was to generate an efficiency saving of 3 per cent. This target was failed because the Public Trust Office's cost base was increased during the year to take account of a revaluation of its building. This unexpectedly added £500,000 to annual costs. Although the Public Trust Office missed its target of achieving 98 per cent. of Charter Standards, actual performance was 96.6 per cent., a creditable result against a very demanding target.

Legal Services Ombudsman

41. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the performance of the Legal Services Ombudsman. [126377]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor published the first full review of the Office for the Legal Services Ombudsman on 29 March. The independent review, conducted by Miss Ann Chant, found that the Office is carrying out its responsibilities effectively, notwithstanding that its work load had doubled since its creation in 1990. The Office is described as professional, strongly committed to good client service and experienced in handling high volume cases economically and to a good standard. The Ombudsman's 1999–2000 annual report is to be published next month.

Rural Magistrates Courts

42. **Mr. Paterson:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the work of rural magistrates courts. [126378]

Jane Kennedy: There is no difference in the work of magistrates courts in either a rural or urban location. All magistrates courts have the same criminal jurisdiction.

I refer the hon. Member to the answer that I gave him on 25 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 180W. Magistrates courts are best managed locally by the relevant magistrates courts committee under the provisions of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997.

County Court Fees

43. **Mr. Brady:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what meetings he has had with the Law Society to discuss the level of county court fees. [126379]

Mr. Lock: I have had no meetings with the Law Society to discuss the level of county courts fees, and there has been no request for such a meeting.

Solicitors (Supervision Office)

Ms Coffey: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the performance of the Office for the Supervision of Solicitors. [126369]

Mr. Lock: We have a number of concerns about the ability of the Office for the Supervision of Solicitors to meet the casework targets that the Lord Chancellor expects them to achieve, in particular in relation to the quality of adjudication and the turnaround times. However, we acknowledge that some progress has been made in reducing the backlog of outstanding cases since August 1999. We will continue closely to monitor their performance against the targets and timetable agreed by the Lord Chancellor.

Interactive Voice Response Systems

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many agencies of the Lord Chancellor's Department use interactive voice response systems when dealing with telephone inquiries from the general public. [127554]

Jane Kennedy: No agencies of the Lord Chancellor's Department use interactive voice response systems when dealing with telephone inquiries from the general public.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many departmental telephone lines used by the general public are responded to by interactive voice response systems. [127406]

Mr. Lock: The headquarters of the Lord Chancellor's Department does not use any interactive voice response systems.

Written Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many written parliamentary questions were tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April; and how many have not received substantive answers for reasons of disproportionate cost. [127682]

Mr. Lock *[holding answer 26 June 2000]:* In the relevant period, 345 parliamentary questions were tabled to the Lord Chancellor's Department for written answer. Of these, 11 parliamentary questions did not receive a substantive answer for reasons of disproportionate cost and a further six questions received a partial answer where a full answer could have been provided only at disproportionate costs.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 28 June 2000

NORTHERN IRELAND

Shootings

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the shooting dead of James Alfred Cornhill on 19 April. [123057]

Mr. Ingram: No. The matter is currently under investigation and the investigation is being supervised by the Independent Commission for Police Complaints.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the result of the ICPC inquiry into the shooting dead of Robin Charles Scott Maxwell in January 1994; and what were the findings of the coroner's inquest. [123056]

Mr. Ingram: The Independent Commission for Police Complaints issued a statement of satisfaction as to the conduct of the investigation.

A Coroner's inquest found that, on the evening of 27 January 1994 two masked men entered the High Trees Garage with the intention of robbing the premises. The owner, Mr. Weir, spotted the robbers and alerted two policemen who were hidden in the store at the rear of the shop. On entering the shop the policemen were confronted by the two robbers, one carrying a cudgel and one holding a firearm to Mr. Weir's head. The policemen issued a warning and the robber who held the cudgel fled from the premises pursued by Constable Fox. The other robber, Robin Charles Scott Maxwell, turned and pointed a weapon in the direction of Constable 'A', who, fearing that his and the owner's life was in danger, discharged his firearm, killing Mr. Maxwell almost instantaneously. The jury found that the police had no plan to intercept or arrest the robbers before their arrival at the premises.

Extraditions

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many persons sought by the *(a)* RUC and *(b)* other UK police forces were extradited from the Irish Republic to the UK in (i) each of the previous three years and (ii) the current year. [125543]

Mr. Mandelson: The table provides details of the numbers of persons sought by the RUC and other UK police forces who have been extradited from the Irish Republic to the UK in the last three years and the current year. The figures include both terrorist and non-terrorist cases. It should be noted that the figures for England and Wales are not necessarily complete, as the information is not collated centrally.

Given the complex nature of extradition proceedings, it is not possible to compare directly the number of extradition requests with the number of individuals extradited in any given year. With appeal proceedings the process may take a number of years to be completed.

	Applications made	*Extradited*
Great Britain		
1997	22	10
1998	29	16
1999	17	11
2000	4	1
Northern Ireland		
1997	8	3
1998	6	6
1999	6	3
2000	1	1

Police

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on how arrangements for Best Value will be made within the proposed new structure for policing under the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill. [126577]

Mr. Ingram: The Police (Northern Ireland) Bill will provide for the new Policing Board to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement, or 'Best Value', in the way in which its functions are exercised. The Policing Board, in its capacity as a high level regulatory body, will have lead responsibility for economy, efficiency and effectiveness arrangements. 'Best Value' will provide a framework for the Board to deliver continuous improvement, and the Board will be held accountable to the people of Northern Ireland for ensuring that they achieve 'Best Value' from the police service.

The Government do not wish to be prescriptive about the exact arrangements. It will be for the Policing Board, in association with the Chief Constable, to determine the precise arrangements for managing 'Best Value', in accordance with best practice elsewhere.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

BSE

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what access he has to the work of the Harvard University Center for Risk Analysis and United States Department of Agriculture on risk analysis relating to BSE. [123392]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 25 May 2000]:* Officials of my Department have been contacted by members of the Harvard University Center for Risk Analysis team, and have assisted them by providing information on request. The team also visited the UK in 1999 and spoke to both officials and external experts. We understand that they were gathering information to determine their own approach to BSE; not undertaking a risk analysis of the UK situation.

Farm Production Methods

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with his EU counterparts about the inspection of their farm production methods with particular reference to welfare, hygiene and environmental aspects of production; and if he will make a statement. [126954]

Mr. Morley: EU standards are negotiated and adopted in these areas by the Council of Ministers. Once EU measures have been adopted, checking that member states have taken proper steps to implement and enforce them is the responsibility of the European Commission. There have been no discussions with ministers from other member states on these matters recently, although at last week's Council of Ministers my right hon. Friend the Minister strongly urged his colleagues to enforce EU rules on the welfare of livestock in transit strictly, as we do in the United Kingdom.

Milk

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the EU intervention level for milk. [126958]

Ms Quin: There is no intervention price for milk under the CAP milk regime. The market is supported by means of intervention prices for butter and skimmed milk powder. The intervention price for butter is 3,282 euros per tonne and 2,055.2 for skimmed milk powder. The intervention prices expressed in sterling can vary on a daily basis since they are converted into national currency using the daily sterling/euro market rate of exchange.

EU Intergovernmental Conference

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on his Department's negotiating objectives for the Nice Treaty. [127198]

Mr. Morley: The Government set out their objectives for the IGC in the White Paper presented to Parliament by the Foreign Secretary on 15 February.

Common Fisheries Policy

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list projects being assessed by his Department for potential submission for funding under EU budget line B2–903A: strengthening the dialogue with the fishing industry and groups affected by the Common Fisheries Policy. [127189]

Mr. Morley: Budget line B2–903A covers the costs of:

(a) Meetings arranged by European trade organisations to prepare for meetings of the Advisory Committee on Fisheries and Aquaculture, which advises the European Commission on matters concerning the Common Fisheries Policy;

(b) Regional workshops organised by the European Commission to address particular issues of local fisheries management; and

(c) Disseminating information and explanatory material on the Common Fisheries Policy to the fishing industry and others with an interest.

Applications for funding of national projects are not invited under this budget line.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the joint policy proposed by the Scottish Fishermen's Federation and the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations, A New Vision for Europe's Fisheries; and what assessment he has made of whether implementation of that policy would require the unanimous agreement of the Council of Ministers. [127843]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 26 June 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the replies I gave to the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) on 22 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 302–04W.

Regional Offices

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the staffing levels are in each of his Department's *(a)* regional offices in England and Wales and *(b)* offices in (i) Bristol, (ii) Exeter and (iii) Plymouth. [127730]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 26 June 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) of 9 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 427W.

This sets out the number of substantive staff on a full-time equivalent basis at each of the MAFF Regional Services Centres, on 1 May 2000, including the offices at Bristol and Exeter. There are currently seven staff based at the Ministry's District Fisheries Office at Plymouth.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much time officials in each of his Department's regional offices have spent in meetings with farmers in each of the last five years. [127731]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 26 June 2000]:* The information in the form requested is unavailable. However, in 1999, farmers made some 79,000 visits to the nine MAFF Regional Service Centres, the equivalent of around 5 per cent. of the total estimated farmer contacts with the RSCs.

Diversification

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the organisations that can advise farmers on diversification. [128057]

Mr. Morley: There are numerous organisations, both in the public and private sector, that can provide business advice to farmers on diversification. Guidance on these sources of advice will be set out in a new booklet on farm diversification to be published by this Department later this summer as part of the Action Plan for Farming.

Crop Contamination

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what compensation he will make available to organic farmers whose crops and organic status are at risk from contamination from genetically modified crops on neighbouring farms; and if he will make a statement. [128044]

Mr. Morley: There is currently no commercial cultivation of genetically modified crops in the UK. Compensation for any detriment to a farmer as a result of activity on a neighbouring farm would be a matter between the farmer and those responsible for the activity.

International Whaling Commission

Mrs. Fitzsimons: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the position of the United Kingdom will be at the forthcoming meeting of the International Whaling Commission. [128441]

Mr. Morley: The International Whaling Commission (IWC) will be holding its 52nd Annual Meeting in Adelaide between 3 and 6 July. I will be attending.

At this meeting I will be confirming that the UK remains strongly opposed to whaling, and that our ultimate aim is to secure a permanent, worldwide ban on all whaling, other than some limited aboriginal subsistence whaling. We will be seeking to build upon the successful outcome of the recent CITES meeting where all whale downlisting proposals were rejected and the primacy of the IWC reaffirmed.

There will be further discussions of proposals put forward by Ireland in 1997 for a package of measures on whaling. The Irish proposals would involve a ban on all whaling, including scientific whaling, outside coastal waters (in effect creating a global ocean sanctuary), with a possibility that countries might authorise whaling under IWC rules within their own coastal waters; there would be a ban on international trade in whale products. In these discussions we will maintain our previous position on these ideas: while we are prepared to discuss constructively all ideas for improving whale conservation, and strongly support some elements of these proposals, we have significant reservations about others, in particular those relating to coastal whaling. Nevertheless we are prepared to consider interim solutions on the way to our ultimate destination provided that these deliver very real benefits to whale conservation.

It is, however, unlikely that any progress will be made on the Irish proposals, as the whaling countries and their allies remain opposed to key aspects of them. Japan, in particular, has demonstrated that it is not prepared to consider ending scientific whaling or a ban on international trade in whale products. In these circumstances, the United Kingdom will continue to support the alternative ways of achieving our aims that we outlined at least year's meeting and subsequently reported to the House on 9 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns 348–50W.

A key element of our approach is support for the creation of regional sanctuaries, and we will be strongly supporting a proposal put forward by Australia and New Zealand to create a South Pacific Whale Sanctuary. The proposed sanctuary will afford greater protection to whales in a highly important breeding and feeding area, and one through which many other great whales migrate. The proposal has been endorsed by South Pacific Forum leaders.

At previous IWC meetings the UK, together with a majority of IWC members, has consistently criticised the whaling operations authorised by Japan under special permits—so called "scientific" whaling. It is, therefore, very disappointing that Japan has presented proposals, for discussion in the IWC Scientific Committee, to extend these whaling operations to cover two further species, Sperm and Bryde's whales. Under the IWC's parent convention, IWC approval for these proposals is not needed and it is for Japan to authorise whaling under special permit., We will, nevertheless, be registering the Government's strong objection to these proposals and will be urging Japan to withdraw them.

There will be further discussion of The Revised Management Scheme (RMS), which is being developed to regulate all aspects of any future commercial whaling. The IWC meeting will be preceded by a two day working group focusing, in particular, on the Inspection and Observation Scheme which would form an integral part of the RMS. It is important for the credibility of the IWC for it to be seen to be making progress on the development of the RMS, and the UK will continue to participate constructively in this work. We will be seeking a comprehensive RMS that would ensure that, if commercial whaling was ever authorised in future, it could not pose a threat to whale conservation and that catch limits and other rules would be strictly observed. The Government will also be making it clear that our participation in this work is without prejudice to our opposition in principle to commercial whaling.

As we have at previous meetings, the UK will again be expressing its concern about the cruelty involved in whaling; we also intend to raise the inhumane methods used and lack of regulation in the hunts for small cetaceans, such as dolphins and porpoises, that take place in some countries. Other topics on which we hope to make progress include the impact of environmental change and pollution on whales and other cetaceans and the encouragement of whalewatching.

We will report the outcome of the meeting to Parliament.

DEFENCE

Exposure Facility

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a copy of the safety regulations covering the new exposure facility which was opened in February. [127137]

Dr. Moonie: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

TRACER Programme

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much his Department has paid to date on the joint project to develop a system of Tactical Reconnaissance Armoured Combat Equipment; what is the planned final cost; if this project is running on time and at agreed budget levels; and if he will make a statement. [127181]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked him to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 28 June 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence on the collaborative Tactical Reconnaissance Armoured Combat Equipment Requirement (TRACER) programme. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The joint programme with the United States to develop TRACER was formally launched with the signature of the programme Memorandum of Understanding in July 1998. Contracts for the current Project Definition phase were awarded to two UK/US industrial consortia in January 1999. These contracts will be of 42 month duration and are due to complete in July 2002. This phase of the programme is proceeding to schedule and within budget. UK expenditure on the joint programme to 31 March 2000 amounted to £30 million and the current estimate of the overall cost to the UK of this phase is £120M at current prices.

UK involvement in phases beyond Project Definition will be subject to further approval and will take account of parallel studies into the use of Unmanned Air Vehicles for battlefield reconnaissance. A realistic estimate of the total cost of the project is not possible in advance of the decisions on the balance of investment between platforms ie armoured reconnaissance and Unmanned Air Vehicles.

A feature of defence procurement is the need to accommodate new sophisticated systems within the resources expected to be available. Conflicting demands on the available resources inevitably lead to priorities being kept under review. The current budgetary review process in the US, which could have implications for the TRACER programme, is being closely monitored, and we are in regular contact with the US DoD.

Procurement Spending

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the percentage of GNP spent on defence procurement in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [127176]

Dr. Moonie: Changes introduced under the European System of Accounts (ESA) 95 mean that GNP is no longer calculated. Gross National Income (GNI) is now recognised as the accepted, more accurate, standard and this has been used to provide the comparison with expenditure on Defence Equipment set out in the table. The GNI figure for 1999–2000 will not be available until the end of June and an updated reply will be made available at that time.

Financial year	*Expenditure on defence equipment £ million*	*GNI £ million*	*Expenditure on defence equipment as a percentage of GNI*
1998–99	9.785	866.461	1.13
1997–98	9.003	822.720	1.09
1996–97	9.100	771.837	1.18
1995–96	8.537	723.960	1.18
1994–95	8.819	689.421	1.28
1993–94	9.200	646.273	1.42
1992–93	8.711	609.755	1.43
1991–92	9.758	585.515	1.67
1990–91	8.838	556.784	1.59

Decorations

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence under what circumstances service decorations can be withdrawn from former members of the armed forces. [127875]

Dr. Moonie: As laid down in the Statutes and Royal Warrants which govern official British awards and at the discretion of the Defence Council, arrangements exist for the forfeiture of awards by any officer or member of the military forces, or former officer or member of the military forces. These include Orders, decorations and medals. Normally, forfeiture may be liable after conviction of offences by court-martial or by the Civil Power. The awards forfeited vary according to the gravity of the offence. The Statutes and Royal Warrants are reproduced in the Queen's Regulations for the Armed Services, copies of which are in the Library of the House.

Barracks

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if the Whittington Barracks near Lichfield will be designated a core location for the armed forces in the Midlands and the North; and if he will make a statement; [127222]

(2) when he expects to announce the names of the barracks to site the Army Training Regiment following completion of the review. [127470]

Dr. Moonie: The Army Training and Recruiting Agency (ATRA) is currently conducting a review into its strategic development over the next few years. This work will be taken forward in close co-operation with other studies being undertaken into the provision of training and the management of our training estate. Work is still at a very early stage and no decisions have been taken as to which sites will remain core ones within ATRA.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Incinerators

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the maximum toxic emission levels permitted for incinerators, broken down by individual toxic substances. [123488]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 23 June 2000]:* Under Part I of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, emissions to air, water and land from larger plant regulated by the Environment Agency and emissions to air from medium and small plant regulated by local authorities are controlled through permits which impose emission limits on the basis of the site-specific BATNEEC principle (Best Available Techniques Not Entailing Excessive Cost) and relevant European legislation specifying emission limits. There are currently two municipal waste incineration Directives (89/369/EEC and 89/429/EEC) and a hazardous waste incineration Directive (94/67/EC) which specify emission limits, and a further Directive (Common Position (EC) No 7/2000) which will replace these earlier Directives and cover virtually all incineration plant is currently in the final stages of negotiations.

This latest proposed Directive would result in a ten-fold tightening of the municipal waste incinerator dioxins standard so that incinerators covered by it would be required to emit no more than 1 billionth of a gram of dioxins in a cubic metre of emissions to air.

Refrigerants

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment his Department has made of the risks to public safety from the use of volatile and flammable hydrocarbons as refrigerants. [126979]

Mr. Meacher: Health and Safety Executive carries out general research on the risks from flammable substances as part of the development of guidance and safety standards. However, no specific assessment has been made of the risks to public safety from the use of volatile and flammable hydrocarbons as refrigerants.

Land Remediation

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much of the contaminated land, required to satisfy his proposals for house building up to 2016, he estimates will be remediated using *(a)* process technologies and *(b)* excavation to landfill. [127581]

Mr. Mullin: One of the main objectives of national planning policy for housing (PPG3) is that authorities make far better use of previously developed land and buildings for meeting the country's housing needs. The Government have set a target that by 2008 60 per cent. of additional housing should be provided this way. It is not possible to forecast precisely how much of the previously-developed land used by 2016 will be contaminated land, nor how that land will be remediated.

However, the Environment Agency has carried out a survey of remediation activity in England and Wales from January 1996 until December 1999. Information was collected from local authorities, industry and the National House-Building Council (NHBC). The survey was not statistically representative of all the remediation which took place during that time, but it does give an indication of current practice.

Of the 367 sites identified from local authority and industry sources, 75 per cent. involved excavation and disposal off site and 21 per cent. involved process based methods.

Of the 1,189 sites recorded by the NHBC, civil engineering techniques (including excavation and off site disposal, site re-grading and containment) were used on 95 per cent. of sites. Process based methods were used on 5 per cent. of sites.

Pollution Prevention and Control

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the role of environmental impact assessments in the application of Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations; and if he will make a statement. [127579]

Mr. Hill: Installations covered by the draft Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations may also require an environmental impact assessment (EIA) under the planning system. The Regulations require the regulator to take account of any information supplied in the context of an EIA in determining the permit application. We are considering the case for reviewing the links between the planning and pollution control systems. A Regulatory and Environmental Impact Assessment for the Regulations has been placed in the Library of each House of Parliament.

Taxis (Wheelchair Access)

Dr. Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of licensed hackney carriages in England and Wales were wheelchair accessible in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999. [127583]

Mr. Hill: The licensing of hackney carriages—taxis—is a matter for individual local licensing authorities. Many of them have policies which require all or part of their fleet to be accessible to disabled people, for example all London taxis (some 19,000) were required to be accessible from 1 January 2000. Information on the number of vehicles that are accessible is not, however, held centrally.

Dr. Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to ensure that licensed private hire cars are wheelchair accessible. [127582]

Mr. Hill: We have no powers to require that licensed private hire vehicles be wheelchair accessible. The powers provided in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 to introduce accessibility regulations only apply to licensed taxis, buses and coaches and rail vehicles.

Our statutory advisers—the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee—will, however, be considering the issue of access to private hire vehicles as part of their work programme.

Regional Planning Guidance (South-East)

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if additional sums were allocated to county councils for the purpose of distributing copies of the draft regional planning guidance for the South-east. [127799]

Ms Beverley Hughes: No extra finance was allocated to local authorities to distribute the document and leaflets to the libraries in their area. It is normal practice for such consultation documents to be sent to the county councils for distributing through their own distribution system to the local libraries. Further copies were sent by the Government Office to any individual or organisation that requested them.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many copies of the draft regional planning guidance for the South-east were sent to Buckinghamshire County Council. [127800]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Initially 50 documents and 150 leaflets were sent. Following a subsequent request from Buckinghamshire County Council during the consultation period on Proposed Changes to Draft Regional Planning Guidance (PRG9), further copies were sent.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 14 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 640–41W, on Regional Planning Guidance (South-east), if a copy of the draft regional planning guidance for the South-east was provided for every branch library in Buckinghamshire; and for what reason copies of the draft regional planning guidance for the South-east were not distributed direct from his Department to branch libraries in the South-east. [127832]

Ms Beverley Hughes: It is normal practice for the County Councils to distribute consultation documents through their distribution system to libraries within their area. Further copies were sent by the Government Office to any organisation or individual that requested them.

Railtrack

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with Railtrack concerning the possibility of the Government taking a share in the company; and if he will make a statement. [127805]

Mr. Hill: In the context of developing our 10 Year Plan for Transport, we have discussed with Railtrack and others ways of increasing investment in the railway. Our plans for rail investment will be set out in the 10 Year Plan, to be published next month, and in the shadow Strategic Rail Authority's subsequent strategic plan.

Rail Fares

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the powers of the Rail Regulator with regard to fare increases. [127643]

Mr. Hill: Responsibility for the regulation of rail fares lies with the Franchising Director not the Rail Regulator. Under the Railways Act 1993, the Franchising Director has powers to regulate fares where it is in the interests of passengers to do so. He has imposed a cap on the price of key fares, and operators are not able to increase those fares overall above the rate of inflation. Since January 1999, the key fares have been capped at 1 per cent. below the rate of inflation for each of the next four years. The key fares include all Saver tickets, unrestricted standard returns where there are no Savers, and all standard weekly season tickets. Other fares, including discounted fares for off-peak travel, are set by the train operators.

Busking and Begging

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures are being taken to tackle busking and begging on or near public transport. [127215]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 26 June 2000]:* The problem of begging is a concern to all public transport operators and in particular the railways and London Underground. They are trying to increase public awareness of the associated problems and announcements are made on stations and trains requesting that the public refrain from giving money to beggars.

Various powers are available to the police forces dealing with both begging and busking under the Vagrancy Act, the Children and Young Persons Act and specialist railway legislation. Police forces adopt a proactive approach, especially where issues of safety are concerned, and have an agreed policy with the Crown Prosecution Service to charge and prosecute first time offenders where safety may be compromised.

A multi-agency group has also been formed to tackle the issues of begging and busking and meets four times a year. This group includes the Metropolitan Police, the British Transport Police, Thames Valley Constabulary, Social Services, Child Protection Teams and the Asylum Seekers Co-ordinator. They are currently producing a joint strategy to deal with begging.

The railway operators, London Underground and other light rail operators have submitted new byelaws to the Secretary of State for confirmation and these are currently being considered. The new byelaws include provisions to allow the operators to license buskers on their property. It is hoped that this measure will allow them easier control of the problems associated with busking.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he will take to achieve his target for carbon dioxide reduction. [127898]

Mr. Meacher: The draft climate change programme that the Government published on 9 March sets out how we propose to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. It sets out proposals for policies and measures that will ensure the Government deliver their Kyoto target and move towards their domestic goal of reducing carbon dioxide emissions to 20 per cent. below 1990 levels by 2010. These measures include action to improve energy efficiency in business and the home; increase renewable energy and reduce emissions from the transport sector. A copy of the draft strategy is in the Library.

London Development Agency

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to support the London Development Agency in 2000–01. [128440]

Mr. Hill: Parliamentary approval for making grants to this Agency, which is to be an executive body working with the Mayor for London, is being sought in a Summer Supplementary Estimate for Housing, construction regeneration, regional policy, planning and countryside and wildlife Vote (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, Class III, Vote 1). Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £7 million will be met by repayable advances from the Contingencies Fund.

The Agency has the same statutory purposes as the regional Development Agencies in the rest of England. The status of the Agency is described in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' Annual Report 2000. Financial provision for predecessor bodies was made in the Main Estimates 2000–01, so this

announcement will not add to the total of public expenditure. The Ambit of the Supplementary Estimate will, however, clearly identify the Agency.

Roads

Mr. Ivan Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made on the M60 junction 12–18 study. [128481]

Mr. Hill: Phase 1 is complete and it will now be taken forward as a Multi-Modal Study. I expect work to begin this summer with completion in summer 2001.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much was spent on the A55 in each of the last 10 years on *(a)* construction work and *(b)* maintenance. [124726]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have been asked to reply.

During the 10 years up to 1 July 1999, the approximate investments into the A55 in Wales was *(a)* £247 million on construction and *(b)* £36 million on maintenance. The figures for maintenance of the A55 in Wales are not held in a suitable form to be broken down annually without incurring disproportionate cost.

Annual construction costs for the A55 in Wales for the 10 years leading up to 1 July 1999 were:

£

Year	*Costs*
1990	72,031,304.98
1991	58,039,274.90
1992	38,265,737.02
1993	50,778,935.95
1994	13,380,375.87
1995	4,729,880.48
1996	1,400,083.32
1997	3,966,241.82
1998	4,224,182.77
1999	115,916.18
Total	246,931,933.29

For that part of the A55 in England, the Highways Agency only hold information for the last two years (1998–99 and 1999–2000), when expenditure was:

£

	1998–99	*1999–2000*
Construction	219,500	120,000
Maintenance	67,500	1,032,500

All functions with regards to trunk roads and motorways in Wales were transferred to the National Assembly for Wales on 1 July 1999.

HEALTH

Meat Hygiene Service

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when, and for what reason, the St. David's Practice was awarded the Mead Webber contract by the Meat Hygiene Service; and how many other vets or vet practices were invited to bid for that contract. [122049]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 15 May 2000]:* I am advised by the Food Standards Agency that a tender valuation panel met on 16 March 2000 to consider tenders submitted for the provision of official veterinary surgeon services to the plant operated by Mead Webber Limited. All tenders were assessed against a range of pre-determined criteria including quality and price.

The panel awarded the contract to the St. David's Farm and Equine Veterinary Practice on the basis that it provided overall best value when evaluated against these criteria.

Nine other veterinary practices or veterinary surgeons were invited to tender for this particular contract.

Public Health (West Midlands)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the priority given to public health and healthy living programmes in the plans of primary care groups and NHS trusts in *(a)* Coventry and *(b)* the West Midlands region. [125681]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 12 June 2000]:* Health development groups working across agencies and organisations have been set in motion to develop the health improvement programme (HImP) in Coventry. I understand that primary care groups have had a key leadership and membership role in these groups. Each of the three PCGs in Coventry has identified its local priorities based on an assessment of health needs of its populations and aligned funding of its Primary Care Investment plans with the health improvement plans.

Regeneration in Coventry will be further supported through the development of a healthy living centre (HLC), subject to the success of the bid which was submitted at the end of May. HLCs are funded through the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) and are aimed at mobilising community activity in improving health and reducing inequalities. The HLC bid arose from extensive partnership working and more than 300 information packs were distributed to voluntary, community and statutory groups across Coventry. Coventry's bid is designed to complement other initiatives such as the HImP and the community plan and will focus on young people, their families and carers.

HImPs across the West Midlands include an assessment of the health needs of local populations. Priorities are determined locally and the funding of Primary Care Group investment plans is aligned with HImP priorities.

Primary care groups and National Health Service trusts have huge potential to improve people's health and prevent illness, and the West Midlands Regional Office will continue to support that developing role.

Children's Homes

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children have died while in children's homes in each decade since 1970. [126198]

Mr. Hutton: The estimated number of children who died while being looked after by local authorities in children's homes in England during the period 1 April 1992 to 31 March 1999 was 70. Over the same period an estimated 58,000 looked after children spent at least some time in a children's home.

The Department holds no information about looked after children's deaths by type of placement before this date.

Asthma

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what public information has been made available in the last three years, and where, by his Department on the relationship between asthma and environmental conditions; how much has been spent on providing such information; and what other agencies have been involved. [126103]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* In January 1998, the Department published an information pack, "Air Pollution and Health". It contains leaflets, contacts and statements on the relationship between asthma and air pollution from agencies such as the National Asthma Campaign, the Lung and Asthma Information Agency as well as the Department's Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollutants. Copies have been placed in the Library. The total design and printing costs of the pack were £23,500.

The Department offers health advice to other Government Departments from time to time on health aspects of their policies, in particular to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) on health and environmental issues. A relevant example here is the production of a DETR leaflet "Air Pollution—what it means for your health", published in July 1998. This was designed as a guide to the Air Pollution Information Service which DETR Ministers relaunched in October 1997. The service is available by freephone, Ceefax, Teletext and via the internet. The leaflets and an accompanying poster were distributed in general practitioners' surgeries, asthma and heart clinics, Citizen's Advice Bureaux and libraries. Copies are also now included as part of the Department's "Air Pollution and Health" pack.

The design and printing costs of the leaflets and posters were £25,142.

Public Health Report

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what reasons underlay his decision to discontinue the annual published report by the Chief Medical Officer on the state of the public health. [126665]

Yvette Cooper: The last Chief Medical Officer's report was published in August 1998 by Sir Kenneth Calman shortly before he left office. The present CMO came into post in late September 1998. He has taken stock of the publications issued by the Chief Medical Officer and introduced a number of changes. He is currently exploring the opportunities for greater use of web-based publishing methods.

After listening to a wide range of views he also intends to introduce changes to the format of his annual report. Although the previous format served its purpose well in the past, it is very detailed and it is not always clear in what areas action is being called for. The practice of the CMO's annual report containing descriptions of a wide range of government policies which are contained in other documents added to the detailed nature of the reports.

It is the intention of the CMO to produce the new format of the report in the autumn of 2000. It will be shorter, with a clear focus on areas for action and in a more accessible form.

Emergency Contraception

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about proposals to make emergency contraception available over the counter without prescription from dispensing chemists. [126112]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* The Medicines Control Agency is presently consulting on an application to reclassify levonorgestrel 0.75 milligrammes for emergency contraception from prescription only to pharmacy availability for women aged 16 years and over. This follows independent expert advice from the Committee on Safety of Medicines. The consultation period ends on 29 June 2000. The responses will then be considered by the Medicines Commission and their recommendations presented to Ministers for a decision.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made with pilot schemes for the prescription of emergency contraceptives by pharmacists; and when emergency contraception will be more widely available. [126997]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* There are currently two pilot schemes run by health action zones (HAZs) in Manchester, Salford and Trafford (MST) and Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham (LSL) where emergency contraception is supplied by pharmacists, under a patient group direction. Both pilots form part of the HAZ's overall strategy to reduce the rate of unintended pregnancies locally. Both pilots are to be fully evaluated and the results will be published.

The Medicines Control Agency is presently consulting on an application to reclassify levonorgestrel 0.75 milligrammes for emergency contraception from prescription only to pharmacy availability for women aged 16 years and over. The consultation period ends on 29 June 2000. The responses will then be considered by the Medicines Commission and their recommendations presented to Ministers for a decision.

In addition the Integrated Sexual Health and HIV Strategy is looking at improving access to services including emergency contraception products.

National Poisons Information Service

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) for what reason the National Poisons Information Service has not submitted its annual reports, due in July 1999 and March 2000, to his Department; and what steps he has taken to ensure that the contractual commitments of the NPIS have been delivered; [127022]

(2) if he will list the members of the National Poisons Information Service Board; and how details of their meeting schedule, agendas and minutes can be obtained; [127020]

(3) what were the terms of the contracts between his Department and the National Poisons Information Service between 1995 and the current year. [127023]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* The National Poisons Information Service (NPIS) provides a service to health care professionals. It consists of six poison information centres situated at Belfast, Birmingham, Cardiff, Edinburgh, London and Newcastle, and the Tablet and Capsule Identification System (TICTAC) at St. George's. The UK Departments of Health, (in Wales the Specialist Health Services Commission on behalf of health authorities), commission the NPIS Centres to provide information and, on request, clinical advice to health care staff on the diagnosis, treatment and management of patients who have, or are suspected to have, been poisoned. The service is available 24 hours per day, 365 days per year.

The NPIS Board was set up to advise the UK Health Departments on matters such as policy and the strategic direction of the service, and to scrutinise its work. The Board's membership consists of representatives from the four UK Health Departments who have executive powers and nine non-executive members representing health professionals. The Board aims to meet quarterly (providing there is sufficient business to warrant a meeting). It is an internal management committee and as such its agendas and minutes are not published.

Formal agreements have existed between the Secretary of State for Health and providers of poisons information services over the period 1995 to 1999. The exact terms of these agreements will have varied between each year and between each NPIS Centre. Broadly, such agreements will have set out details of the levels and quality of service to be provided as well as financial arrangements.

For the calendar year 1998, NPIS Centres were required to compile a report to the Department of Health to comply with the provisions of EC Resolution 90/C 329–03. All Centres met with this requirement. Under the terms of agreements with the Secretary of State for Health for the financial year 1999–2000, the three English NPIS Centres were required to submit information for management purposes. To date, one of the Centres has submitted a written report for the year 1999–2000 and the two other Centres have been requested to provide written reports by the end of June. These reports are for internal use only and therefore are not published.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for Health since 1990, what work on pesticides has been carried out by the Medical Toxicology Unit (Guy's and St. Thomas' Hospital Trust) and the NPIS (London) under contract to agrochemical companies; what equipment, facilities and staff funded by his Department have been used for this purpose; what agreements with his Department have been made to cover this activity; if he will publish details of those contracts; and if he will make a statement. [127021]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* The laboratory of the Medical Toxicology Unit at Guy's and St. Thomas' National Health Service Hospital Trust has never carried out any work under contract on pesticides. Any work in relation to pesticides has been part of the trust's NHS function in providing services for diagnosing poisoning.

Funding by the United Kingdom Departments of Health for National Poison Information Service services covers only the inquiry services, contribution to the maintenance and development of a poisons database (TOXBASE), and outreach to, and training of, health professionals in the use of the service. This funding is not provided for the purposes of other associated activities at the Medical Toxicology Unit (Guy's and St. Thomas' Hospital NHS Trust) or at any other of the Centres.

Hospital Beds

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many hospital beds were available in *(a)* Great Britain and *(b)* each NHS trust in (i) 1979, (ii) 1990 and (iii) each year since 1992 for which figures are available. [126921]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 21 June 2000]:* Copies of the information available have been placed in the Library. This relates to all types of beds and is for England only. Hospital beds in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are a matter for the devolved administrations. The information is subject to the following caveats:

Information on the average daily number of beds is now collected annually, on a financial year basis, from National Health Service providers. Prior to 1987–88 information was collected on a calendar year basis.

Figures for 1989–90 were collected at district health authority level.

From 1991–92 to 1994–95 NHS beds were provided by a mix of NHS trusts and directly managed units. The information in the tables is split into beds provided by NHS trusts and beds provided by directly managed units. From 1995–96 all beds were provided by NHS trusts.

Such information is published annually in 'Bed Availability and Occupancy, England', copies of which are in the Library.

Spiritual Healers

Mr. Tredinnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with the Home Secretary about the Charity Commission's approach to the proposed registration of the National Federation of Spiritual Healers Charitable Trust Ltd. as a charity; and if he will make a statement. [126473]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 22 June 2000]:* None. This is a matter for the Charity Commission, which is answerable to the High Court for its legal decisions and its interpretation of charity law.

Eye Tests

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many free eye tests have been undertaken for pensioners under the current scheme; and what is the cost of the scheme to date. [127587]

Mr. Denham: We estimate that 2.5 million additional people aged 60 or over received National Health Service sight tests in the financial year from April 1999 and that the cost of our decision to restore eligibility for free tests to this population group is about £40 million per annum.

National Plan

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress he has made on compiling the National Plan; and if he will make a statement. [127650]

Mr. Denham: We have now received working papers from each of the modernisation action teams; reports on the consultation with National Health Service staff from each of the NHS Executive regional offices; responses from around 50 national and local organisations; and over 219,000 responses from staff and members of the public. We are now in the process of synthesising the material and will publish the National Plan next month.

MRSA (Greater London)

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many outbreaks of MRSA there have been in each of the last five years for which figures are available in *(a)* Greater London and *(b)* Enfield and Haringey Health Authority; how many wards were closed as a result and what the average length of closure was; and if he will make a statement. [127841]

Mr. Denham: The Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) compiles aggregate data on numbers of incidents of MRSA (three or more patients infected or colonised by the same strain of MRSA in a month) that are reported voluntary by NHS Trusts.

Data are available by health service region. The health regions that include Greater London have changed twice in the past five years. Data on MRSA incidents in the Thames regions (1995–98) and London and South East regions (1999) are summarised in the table.

MRSA incidents, South East England 1995–99

Region	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
North East Thames	266	245	[1]158	—	—
North West Thames	300	294	[1]141	—	—
South East Thames	248	235	[1]120	—	—
South West Thames	129	186	93	—	—
North Thames	—	—	[2]245	289	—
South Thames	—	—	[2]172	220	—
London	—	—	—	—	290
South-East	—	—	—	—	170
Total	943	960	929	509	460

[1] Data from January to June 1997
[2] Data from July to December 1997

The PHLS does not collect data for individual health authorities.

Health Action Zones

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans the Government have to announce a further bidding round for health action zones; and if he will make a statement. [127840]

Mr. Denham: There are no plans for a further bidding round for health action zones (HAZs). We are however committed to spreading learning and good practice from the existing 26 HAZs into other areas and seeing the services and approaches being developed by HAZs integrated into mainstream activity throughout the country. An example of this is the new premises flexibilities that were developed with HAZs and that I announced to all health authorities on 20 January.

Coronary Heart Disease

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the implementation of the National Service Framework for Coronary Heart Disease. [127430]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 23 June 2000]:* The National Service Framework (NSF) which sets national standards for improved prevention, diagnosis and treatment of coronary heart disease (CHD) was published on 6 March.

Action is progressing on a number of fronts:

National Priorities Guidance (NPG) identifies developing and implementing local prevention policies on CHD and stroke by March 2001, increasing the number of coronary revascularisations (CABG/PTCA) by 3,000 by April 2002 and achieving the NHS milestones for April 2001 as priorities for the National Health Service.

We have appointed Dr. Roger Boyle as National Director for Heart Disease. Dr. Boyle's first priority is to work with NHS and Regional Offices on drawing up plans for guidance on the immediate priorities including plans for expenditure of £50 million (announced last October) to increase the numbers of heart operations.

Plans are also being worked up for spending the further £50 million (announced on 6 March) for establishing rapid access chest pain clinics, speeding up ambulance response times and purchasing defibrillators and other equipment.

£3 million of the £50 million will also be used to reduce waiting times for treatment by developing projects to test out better and more streamlined ways of delivering services, the CHD partnership programme. Plans to take this forward are in hand.

Health authorities and their partner organisations are establishing local implementation teams to draw up comprehensive local delivery plans, to be completed and agreed by October 2000.

We are in the process of setting up the National Coronary Heart Disease Implementation Group which will oversee national progress on implementation.

Surgical Services

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the effect of clinical governance on the continuing provision of in-patient surgical services at *(a)* smaller hospitals and *(b)* in general. [127797]

Mr. Denham: Clinical governance is central to our plans to provide a health service that continually improves the overall standard of clinical care it delivers, reduces unacceptable variations in treatment outcomes, and ensures that clinical decision making is supported by evidence of effectiveness. It represents a systematic approach to clinical quality assurance and improvement, but does not dictate how services should be managed or delivered. This is the responsibility of local commissioners who must ensure that high quality surgical services are provided safely, taking into account local circumstances such as geography and the need for remote smaller services to be linked into wider clinical networks.

Acute Services

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many acute hospital beds are available at NHS hospitals within the Greater London Authority area. [127847]

Mr. Denham: I refer my hon. Friend to my answer of 17 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 128W.

The average daily number of available acute hospital care beds in the London region in the financial year 1998–99 was 17,022.

Internet

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he has taken to provide protection to patients who utilise the Internet for health information services and products. [127883]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 27 June 2000]:* The success of the Internet has been partly due to the ease with which people can access and create information. While it is not possible to restrict what patients see on the Internet, we recognise the need to signpost information sources, and to give easy access to relevant quality information that the public and patients can rely on, and which is presented in a clear and intelligible way.

A number of information initiatives are being put in place to improve the quality and range of information available about health and health services:

The National Health Service Executive has set up the Centre for Health Information Quality (CHiQ). The role of CHiQ is to work with the producers of information for the patients and the public to improve its quality, accessibility and evidence base. The CHiQ work uses the DISCERN tool for evaluating health literature. DISCERN was developed by the UK academic sector in collaboration with healthcare professionals and is funded by the NHS Executive.

NHS Direct Online (www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk) is a highly successful gateway to health information on the Internet attracting 25,000 users a week and complementing the NHS Direct telephone advice service. NHS Direct Online is managed by the CHiQ on behalf of the NHS Executive.

nhs.uk will provide a strongly branded gateway (www.nhs.uk) to NHS websites and licensed or accredited websites and services. Close working relationships with the Department of Health, NHS Executive, other NHS Information Authority programmes and the NHS are in place.

The National Electronic Library for Health (NeLH) will provide a common point of public access to a wide range of health knowledge bases. The NeLH will emphasise the need for all clinical practitioners to critically evaluate sources.

There is currently no formal process of NHS accreditation of the vast amount of clinical and health related reference material already available on the Internet. Feedback from the consultation exercise on the NHS National Plan has indicated that there is a need to identify NHS approved quality resources by means of a NHS "kitemark". The work being undertaken by CHiQ and the NHS Information Authority to develop NHS Direct Online and the National Electronic Library for Health will help to identify practical options for achieving this.

Ultimately however the responsibility rests on individual clinicians, patients and members of the public to make their own judgments about the validity of the material they access.

NHS Management Spending

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much was spent on NHS management and administration in each region in England in the last year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [127689]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 27 June 2000]:* Management costs expenditure is shown in the tables.

£ million

Health authority/region	*1997–98 Outturn*	*1998–99 Plan*[1]	*1999–2000 Plan*[2]
Northern and Yorkshire	54.0	53.7	70.1
Trent	44.8	43.9	56.3
Eastern	42.3	41.0	52.8
London	77.6	73.5	92.8
South East	70.6	68.2	87.2
South West	37.7	38.2	49.7
West Midlands	45.9	44.3	57.2
North West	59.3	56.4	74.1
England	452.2	419.2	540.2

[1] 1998–99 outturn figures will be published shortly.

[2] Comprises health authority cost baseline of £418 million and £122 million to support primary care groups redistributed from the former general practice fundholder management allowance.

£ million

NHS trust/region[1]	*1997–98 outturn*
Northern and Yorkshire	164.6
Trent	122.0
Anglia and Oxford	120.2
North Thames	235.0
South Thames	206.5
South West	147.8
West Midlands	135.4
North West	164.3
England	1,295.7

[1] At 1 April 1998 regions were re-configured. These figures are expressed in the old configuration.

£ million

NHS trust/region	*1998–99 plan*[1]	*1999–2000 plan*
Northern and Yorkshire	169.0	164.5
Trent	126.4	126.4
Eastern	120.5	119.2
London	282.7	281.1
South East	204.0	201.6
South West	111.3	111.2
West Midlands	134.1	133.6
North West	168.1	168.3
England	1,316.1	1,305.9

[1] 1998–99 outturn figures will be published shortly

Therapeutic Cloning

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects the Donaldson inquiry on therapeutic cloning to report. [127987]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 27 June 2000]:* The Chief Medical Officer's expert group on therapeutic cloning has completed its work on the potential benefits,

risks and the ethical issues raised by developments in stem cell research and cell nuclear replacement. We are now considering the report's recommendations.

Hospital Waiting Times

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost of reducing *(a)* inpatient and *(b)* outpatient waiting times to (i) six months or less and (ii) three months or less; and if he will make a statement. [127499]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 27 June 2000]:* We are determined to reduce waiting lists and times for all patients. As part of the National Plan for the National Health Service, the Patient Care: Speed of Access Modernisation Action Team is looking at improving patient's access to NHS services.

Respite Care

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of the population is entitled to respite care in each local social services authority. [127894]

Mr. Hutton: Respite care is provided by or on behalf of local authority social services departments. The supply of short-term breaks is not entitlement-based but is governed by the assessment of individuals' needs.

Terminally Ill Children (Southend)

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the investigations into the allegations relating to the treatment of terminally-ill children within the Southend Community Services Trust. [128060]

Mr. Denham: We are aware of the police investigation which is clearly a matter of major concern. We understand that the South Essex Mental Health and Community Care NHS Trust is co-operating fully with Essex Police. As the matter is at present under police investigation it would be inappropriate to comment further.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Canadian Memorial Fountain, Green Park

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when the Canadian Memorial Fountain in Green Park will be switched back on; and if he will make a statement. [126589]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* Responsibility for the subject of the fountain has been delegated to the Royal Parks Agency. As its Chief Executive, William Weston, has not yet taken up his appointment, I have asked the Agency's Head of Policy, Viviane Robertson, to reply on his behalf.

Letter from Viviane Robertson to Mr. Paul Marsden, dated 28 June:

The new Chief Executive has not yet taken up his appointment and I have been asked by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to answer your Parliamentary Question about the Canada Memorial Fountain, because Green Park is the responsibility of the Agency.

The Canada Memorial is maintained by the Canada Memorial Foundation, not by the Agency, although we let them know whenever our contractors or park management staff report that it is not working. I understand that the water was flowing intermittently at the weekend and the Foundation have been informed of this.

Buildings at Risk

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action he proposes in response to the publication by English Heritage of the Register of Buildings at Risk 2000; and if he will make a statement. [127306]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 22 June 2000]:* I very much support the Buildings at Risk initiative which is a valuable tool in directing funding to the most important of England's historic buildings which are in urgent need of conservation. Removal of buildings at risk from the register is a key target in the Funding Agreement between my Department and English Heritage (EH), although the exact allocation of resources to this activity is a matter for EH's Commissioners. It is also important that owners of these buildings play their part in funding conservation works.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Opinion Research

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 12 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 466W, on opinion research, what information is held centrally about the results of his Department's market and opinion research. [127644]

Dr. Howells: There is no central point where all the results of the Department's market and opinion research is held.

National Weights and Measures Laboratory

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has for the National Weights and Measures Laboratory in Teddington; and if he will make a statement. [127863]

Dr. Howells: The National Weights and Measures Laboratory is an Executive Agency of my Department. The status of Executive Agencies is regularly reviewed. A review of the status of the National Weights and Measures Laboratory has just been undertaken. The reviewer consulted widely. The staff and the customers of the Laboratory were among those consulted. The reviewer's recommendations have only very recently been sent to Ministers. No decisions have been taken. A further statement will be made after Ministers have considered the reviewer's report.

Small Business

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what percentage of the work carried out by the Small Business Unit is focused on *(a)* urban and *(b)* rural areas. [128053]

Ms Hewitt: The support and advice being provided by the Small Business Service, both on a national basis and through the new network of Business Links, will be

available to all small businesses and those considering starting up in business. The new Business Links will be expected to tailor services to the particular needs of their areas; the Small Business Service will be working to ensure, during the planning stages, that the services provided reflect the needs of their local business communities.

Post Offices

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will publish the report by the Performance and Innovation Unit on rural post offices. [128054]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I refer the hon. Member to the statement made by my right hon. Friend earlier today, *Official Report*, columns 907–09.

PRIME MINISTER

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to the answers of the Foreign Secretary of 8 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 258W, on sanctions, what the value is of the contracts in respect of Iraq checked to date. [127221]

The Prime Minister: The Oil for Food programme began on 10 December 1996. As at 31 May 2000, 12,675 contracts with a total value of $15.6 billion had been received under the programme. As indicated previously, the UK checks all contracts to ensure that the goods will be used for their stated purpose.

HOME DEPARTMENT

National Infrastructure Security

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the responsibilities of the National Infrastructure Security Co-ordination Centre; and if he will make a statement. [126287]

Mr. Straw: The responsibilities of the National Infrastructure Security Co-ordination Centre (NISCC) are to co-ordinate and develop existing work on protecting the Critical National Infrastructure within Government departments and the private sector from the threat posed by Electronic Attack. This will include developing arrangements to monitor and increase awareness of the threat, to defend against it and to respond to incidents. The monitoring and advice aspects of this work are achieved through Unified Incident Reporting and Alert Scheme (UNIRAS), which is operated by the NISCC.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment his Department has made of the vulnerabilities of the United Kingdom's critical infrastructure. [126288]

Mr. Straw: At this time there is no evidence to suggest a significant risk from Electronic Attack to the United Kingdom's Critical National Infrastructure. The National Infrastructure Security Co-ordination Centre (NISCC) is, however, working in partnership with organisations which own systems that are critical to the national infrastructure, in order to obtain assurances that their systems are appropriately safeguarded against the threat posed by Electronic Attack.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many baboons and cynomolgus monkeys are held within United Kingdom laboratories awaiting xenotransplantation procedures; and if he will make a statement; [125262]

(2) how many baboons and cynomolgus monkeys intended for xenotransplantation research have been killed without any xenotransplantation procedures being completed on them in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement; [125263]

(3) what was the *(a)* longest and *(b)* average recorded journey time for non-human primates imported into the United Kingdom for research purposes during 1999 from (i) China, (ii) Mauritius, (iii) Indonesia, (iv) the Philippines and (v) Israel; and if he will make a statement; [125266]

(4) how many cynomolgus monkeys were imported into the United Kingdom for the purpose of xenotransplantation research, broken down by *(a)* where the monkeys were imported from, *(b)* how many died during transport, *(c)* the date of deaths, *(d)* the causes of death and *(e)* action taken by his Department as a result, in (i) 1995, (ii) 1996, (iii) 1997, (iv) 1998, (v) 1999 and (vi) 2000; [125259]

(5) how many cynomolgus macaques and baboons were used in xenotransplantation research in *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996, *(c)* 1997, *(d)* 1998, *(e)* 1999 and *(f)* 2000; and if he will make a statement; [125267]

(6) how many baboons were imported into the United Kingdom for the purpose of xenotransplantation research; and *(a)* where they were imported from, *(b)* whether they were wild-caught, *(c)* how many died during transport, *(d)* the date of deaths, *(e)* what were the causes of death and *(f)* what action was taken by his Department as a result, in (i) 1995, (ii) 1996, (iii) 1997, (iv) 1998, (v) 1999 and (vi) 2000; [125260]

(7) when current project licences to conduct pig primate xenotransplantation research will expire; and whether he is considering future pig-to-primate xenotransplantation licences. [125261]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer 9 June 2000]:* The Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 requires that non-human primates are only used in scientific procedures if no other species is suitable. In deciding whether to grant a licence for any regulated procedure, the 1986 Act requires that the likely benefits of the programme be weighed against the likely adverse effects on the animals concerned (the cost/benefit assessment) and that there are no alternatives which either replace animal use entirely, reduce the number of animals needed or refine the procedures to minimise suffering. We must also be satisfied that the procedures are likely to achieve the stated objectives.

In addition to regulatory testing to help ensure the safety of medicines, non-human primates are also used for other important areas of fundamental research aimed primarily at better understanding the causes of disease in man and developing potential new treatments.

They contribute, for example, to programmes of work relating to Parkinson's disease, visual impairment, stroke, diabetes, disorders of reproduction, xenotransplantation and vaccine development.

There are no cynomolgus macaques or baboons known to be awaiting xenotransplantation procedures at the present time in United Kingdom designated establishments.

According to our records, journey times for non-human primates imported into the United Kingdom for research purposes in 1999 were:

	Number-imports	*Longest (hours)*	*Average (hours)*
China	5	46	43
Mauritius	21	34	29
Indonesia	0	—	—
Philippines	1	34	34
Israel	9	16	Less than 10

In accordance with measures introduced in 1996, the Home Office requires only an estimated total journey time to be provided prior to each acquisition and that, after each acquisition, confirmation be provided that the importation was in accordance with what had been authorised. There has been no obligation to provide precise journey times. Data have also been drawn from copies of journey details required by and supplied to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, who would be the more appropriate Department to provide such data in future.

The Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997, which is administered by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, governs the transportation of live animals, including primates. It requires that the animals must be fit to travel, carried in a way that does not cause injury or unnecessary suffering and be accompanied by someone competent to look after their welfare. Import licences specify the intended use and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food receives details of deaths arising.

I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) by the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth) on 8 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns 262–63W, which provided details of deaths and serious injury in primates arriving in the United Kingdom for use in regulated procedures. I will, however, repeat the relevant parts of this information for ease of reference.

Twelve wild-caught baboons were imported from Kenya in 1996 for the purpose of xenotransplantation research, the earliest year for which we hold such records. A further 28 were imported in May 1999. There have been no subsequent importations of baboons for this purpose. No deaths or serious injuries have been reported in baboons during transportation.

In 1995, one cynomolgus macaque was found to be dead on arrival in the United Kingdom from Mauritius. The cause of death was believed to be enteritis.

In 1996, one cynomolgus macaque was found to be dead on arrival in the United Kingdom from Mauritius. The cause of death was believed to be shigellosis.

In 1997, one cynomolgus macaque was found to be traumatised on arrival in the United Kingdom from Mauritius, possibly as a result of being pair-housed during transport. It was euthanased and all primates are now individually housed during transport. Another cynomolgus macaque was found to be dead on arrival in the United Kingdom from the Philippines. The cause of death was probably a trauma to the head.

In 1998, three cynomolgus macaques were found to be dead on arrival in Paris from the Philippines. The causes of death were not ascertained, but it is believed that they were probably due to a combination of factors:

the animals concerned were larger than normal;

although International Air Transport Association minimum dimensions were not breached, the containers were not large enough to allow these particular animals to stand up and turn around freely; and

all the dead animals had been in central compartments, which were less well ventilated.

The containers have been enlarged and redesigned to rectify these problems. Another cynomolgus macaque was found to be dead on arrival in the United Kingdom from Israel. There was no obvious cause of death.

It is not possible to give an accurate figure for how many cynomolgus macaques intended for xenotransplantation have been imported and we cannot, therefore, confirm whether all of the animals listed above were to be used for this purpose.

Airlines refusing to fly animals directly to the United Kingdom as a result of harassment from animal rights activists has led to longer journey times. This may have contributed to deaths associated with transportation in some instances.

Eighty wild-caught baboons were used in xenotransplantation research in 1995, 29 in 1996 and 16 in 1997, three in 1998 and none subsequently.

Thirty-one cynomolgus macaques were used in xenotransplantation research in 1996, 67 in 1997, 78 in 1998, 49 in 1999, and five in 2000.

It is not possible to give an accurate figure for how many baboons and cynomolgus monkeys intended for xenotransplantation research have been killed without any xenotransplantation procedures being completed on them. The intended purpose is known to the Home Office in the case of animals acquired directly from overseas breeding centres by project licence holders. However, if animals are obtained from a designated supplier within the United Kingdom or from stock already held by the establishment, there is no requirement for reference to be made to the Home Office. The estimated number of animals expected to be used is provided in each project licence application but this does not necessarily mean that the animals are acquired in advance. We do not hold records of individual animals which are subsequently not used for the intended purpose.

There are currently two project licences authorising pig to primate xenotransplantation procedures, one expiring in 2003 and the other in 2004. There are no new applications under consideration at this stage. Any future applications received will be considered on their merits.

Police Pensions

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his estimate for planning purposes of net pensions fund obligations, pensions less contributions, for *(a)* the Metropolitan police and *(b)* all UK police forces in (i) 2000–01, (ii) 2001–02, (iii) 2005–06 and (iv) 2010–11; and how these obligations will be financed. [127330]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The available figures for England and Wales, provided by the Police Service Expenditure Forecasting Group, are:

£ million

	Metropolitan police	*England and Wales*[1]
2000–01	251	1,054
2001–02	273	1,143

[1] The England and Wales figure is inclusive of the Metropolitan police

Under the Central Local Partnership the Home Office works closely with the Forecasting Group to assess future resource demands for the following three years. The Group does not prepare longer range projections. Its assessments of future funding pressures, including pensions, are taken into account by the Government in the Spending Review process.

The Police Funding Formula takes account of police pensions expenditure. 14.5 per cent. of funding is currently allocated through a component for pensions.

The provision of revenue funding for the police forces in Scotland and Wales is the responsibility of the devolved administrations.

Assaults, Alton Railway Station

Mr. Galloway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will call for a report from the Chief Constable of Hampshire on the attack on Dr. Burhan al-Chelabi and Detective Constable Stephen Longshaw on 30 April; and if he will make a statement. [127170]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The attack on Dr. Burhan al-Chelabi and Detective Longshaw took place at Alton Railway station in Hampshire and was investigated by the British Transport police. I understand that Dr. al-Chelabi was assaulted by Mr. Colin Smith who also subjected him to racist abuse. Detective Constable Longshaw, a serving officer with the Metropolitan Police Service, who was enjoying an outing with his family in the company of Dr. Burhan al-Chelabi and his wife, prevented Mr. Smith from attacking Dr. al-Chelabi with a sword. During the incident Mr. Smith also attacked Detective Constable Longshaw who received a cut across his nose.

Mr. Smith was arrested by Detective Constable Longshaw and subsequently detained under the Mental Health Act 1983.

Mike Tyson

Ms Jenny Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what checks were made on personnel who have entered the UK with Mike Tyson with regard to establishing previous convictions for serious offences; [127398]

(2) who entered the UK accompanying Mike Tyson. [127476]

Mr. Straw: Mike Tyson was accompanied on his flight to the United Kingdom by his manager and two trainers.

The personnel accompanying Mike Tyson were treated in accordance with current immigration procedures. Under these, arriving passengers are not routinely questioned at ports of entry to establish whether they have criminal records. Where there is reason to believe that someone has a criminal record hitherto unknown to the Immigration Service, further examination would take place to establish whether there were grounds for refusing entry to that person.

Transsexuals

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent representation he has received about transsexual men and women being treated in law as being of the same sex as when they were born. [127645]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Since 15 February 2000, we have received representations from 26 members of the public and one organisation. Several hon. Members have also written about this matter. In addition, following their meeting in January with the Interdepartmental Working Group on Transsexual People, representatives of six organisations representing the transsexual community (Gender and Sexuality Alliance, Gender Trust, Gender Identity Research and Education Society, Change, Liberty, and Press for Change) submitted further information.

Policing Costs (Stonehenge)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the cost was to *(a)* Wiltshire Constabulary and *(b)* English Heritage of police operations at Stonehenge on 20 and 21 June; if (i) public order and (ii) other offences were committed; and if he will make a statement. [127710]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The estimated cost to the Wiltshire Constabulary of police operations at Stonehenge on 20 and 21 June was £50,000. English Heritage were not charged for police costs arising from this operation. No persons were arrested for public order offences and no offences in connection with the event at Stonehenge have been reported to police. Five people were arrested on the night of 20 June at the temporary car park on suspicion of drink driving and vehicle theft. One person was subsequently charged with a drink driving offence while the other four persons were released without charge. I should like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation of the roles played by both Wiltshire Constabulary and English Heritage in ensuring that the event passed off peacefully.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* Turkish and *(b)* Kurdish refugees have applied for asylum in the United Kingdom in each of the last five years; how many of these applications have been granted in each of those years; how many are still outstanding; and if he will make a statement. [127829]

Mrs. Roche: The available information is given in the table. Applications for asylum are recorded on a nationality basis, therefore, Kurdish refugees are not separately identifiable within the statistics. An applicant's ethnic origin could only be obtained by examination of individual case records.

Asylum applications[1] received in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants, and initial decisions[2,3] on applications, 1995 to 1999, nationals of Turkey

Principal applicants

	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*[7]
Applications					
Total	1,820	1,495	1,445	2,015	2,850
Port	745	825	890	1,620	2,045
In country	1,075	670	555	390	805
Decisions					
Total decisions	995	1,405	1,585	1,085	[6]625
Grants of asylum	50	55	65	40	[6]15
Grants of ELR	35	20	25	30	*
Total refusals	910	1,330	1,475	1,015	[6]100
Grants of ELR under backlog criteria[3,4]	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	[6]505
Non compliance refusals under backlog criteria[3,5]	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	[6]5
Applications pending	3,545	4,280	4,050	4,870	N/A

[1] Figures rounded to nearest 5, with (*) = 1 or 2
[2] Information is of Initial determination decisions, excluding the outcome of appeals or other subsequent decisions
[3] Cases decided under pragmatic measures aimed at reducing the pre Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 asylum backlog.
[4] May include a small number of cases where asylum has been granted.
[5] May include a small number of cases where the applications has been refused on substantive grounds.
[6] January to May 1999 only
[7] Provisional data
Note:
n/a = Not applicable and N/A = Not available

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers were held under immigration law in *(a)* Campsfield, *(b)* Haslar, *(c)* Oakington and *(d)* Her Majesty's prisons in each of the last 12 months. [127903]

Mrs. Roche: The information requested, on numbers of asylum applicants held under immigration law in Campsfield House, Haslar, Oakington and Her Majesty's prisons in each of the last 12 months, is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

The latest available information on immigration detainees relates to 30 April 2000. On that date, a total of 1,107 persons were detained in immigration detention centres and prison establishments in the United Kingdom solely under Immigration Acts powers. This figure is not recorded in such a way as to identify those who had applied for asylum at some point.

The latest reliable snapshot of detained asylum seekers related to those asylum applicants detained in immigration detention centres, prison establishments and police cells solely under Immigration Acts powers as at 30 December 1998 for port applicants and 4 January 1999 for in-country applicants. On those dates 741 such persons were recorded. Data recording problems mean that an updated figure is not currently available.

The most recent data available for persons detained at Oakington show that up to 18 June a total of 439 principal asylum applicants and 33 dependants of asylum seekers have been detained at varying times since it opened on 20 March 2000.

Terminally Ill Children (Southend)

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will call for a report from the Chief Constable of Essex Police on the progress of police inquiries into allegations about the treatment of terminally ill children within the Southend Community Care Trust. [128061]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand from Essex Constabulary that the investigations are at an early and extremely sensitive stage.

Passport Agency

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish the report on the United Kingdom Passport Agency Quinquennial Review. [128296]

Mr. Straw: I have today published the United Kingdom Passport Agency Quinquennial Review Report and I have placed copies in the Library.

Immigration

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made in

the case of Mr. K. (reference K422196/2); when this case is likely to be concluded; and if he will make a statement. [127910]

Mrs. Roche: Mr. K.'s application for a reconsideration of his case will be reviewed shortly and he will be contacted directly once a decision is made.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Animal Welfare

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she is taking to discourage developing countries from adopting industrial animal husbandry systems which have been shown by scientific research to have adverse implications for animal health and welfare; and if she will make a statement. [127849]

Mr. Foulkes: DFID's involvement in the livestock sector is based on an appreciation of the diverse contribution livestock make to the livelihoods of the poor and vulnerable.

We are supporting the international "Livestock, Environment and Development" initiative, which seeks to identify policy interventions to correct the market distortions that currently favour industrial livestock production in many developing countries.

We are also developing a programme of support to FAO aimed at strengthening international norm-setting in the livestock sector: norms that will undoubtedly address issues of animal health and welfare.

DFID has anticipated the impact of globalisation on animal welfare and trade in developing countries. We already have guidelines on the use of animals in development programmes, which will now be revised in the context of global shifts in livestock production and markets. Dialogue with UK and international welfare groups and other stakeholders is under way.

Heavily Indebted Poor Countries

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with other Government departments regarding relief of debt to UK companies who supply services and goods to heavily indebted poor countries as a result of tied aid. [127902]

Mr. Foulkes: None. Debt relief is not provided to UK companies. It is provided to governments of Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) who are committed to eradicating poverty, to benefit the poor. The Government have agreed to provide complete relief on all debts owed to the Export Credit Guarantee Department for those countries which qualify for the HIPC initiative. Aid debts have already been cancelled.

Uganda

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with the Government of Uganda concerning the abolition of primary school fees once debt relief has taken place. [127900]

Mr. Foulkes: There has been no need for discussions on this particular issue as the Government of Uganda abolished primary school fees in all Government schools, with the exception of those in municipal areas, in January 1997. HIPC1 is on-going and HIPC2 has yet to be finalised; both sets of resources will be used to support the Government of Uganda's primary education programme.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with the UN concerning the suspension of debt relief to Uganda. [127899]

Mr. Foulkes: My right hon. Friend had no discussions with the UN concerning debt relief to Uganda. We agreed that Uganda's debt relief could not be finalised by the Paris Club of government creditors at their May meeting as planned, because of Uganda's involvement in fighting at Kisangani. We want an early and lasting resolution to the situation, and we urge all sides to implement their obligations under the Lusaka Accord. When Uganda has fulfilled the undertakings it has given on Kisangani, we will support their return to the Paris Club. Uganda is receiving interim relief from the IMF and the World Bank, and we believe this should continue.

Montserrat

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many Montserratians who temporarily took refuge in the UK following the volcanic eruption in Montserrat have returned home; and if she will make a statement on *(a)* conditions in Montserrat and *(b)* the aid which is provided there. [127895]

Mr. Foulkes: Since May 1996, about 3,000 Montserratians have come to the United Kingdom because of the volcanic activity on the island. In May 1999, DFID introduced a Return Air Fare Scheme to provide assistance to those people who, having relocated to the UK or the Caribbean region, wished to return to Montserrat and had suitable accommodation on island. During the first year, 109 applications were received from people living in the UK and, as at the 31 May 2000, 83 people had returned to Montserrat.

Statistics are not held by Her Majesty's Government or the Government of Montserrat on the number of people returning without assistance from the Return Air Fare Scheme.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with the Government of Montserrat concerning funding for the Reporter news-sheet. [127896]

Mr. Foulkes: None. Officials have discussed the matter with their counterparts on island, and the Chief Minister. The Montserrat Reporter received start up capital from HMG and for several years since has received budgetary aid from DFID, paid through the Chief Minister's Office in exchange for publishing Government news. The Government of Montserrat have recently concluded in a Public Service Inquiry that these payments did not represent value for money. DFID officials have now decided to withdraw the support, which was never intended as a permanent arrangement.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his estimate of the cost of *(a)* restoring the severe disablement allowance and *(b)* reversing the changes to Incapacity Benefit entitlement made since May 1997; and if he will make a statement. [127497]

Mr. Bayley *[holding answer 27 June 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the written answer I gave the hon. Member for Moray (Mrs. Ewing) on 8 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 129–30W.

Housing Benefit

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the impact of Housing Benefit shortfalls on the family budgets of households on Income Support/Incapacity Benefit. [127006]

Angela Eagle: Restrictions on the rent met by Housing Benefit can arise for a number of reasons. For example, any rent met by Housing Benefit will be net of ineligible service charges. It is a basic principle of the scheme that such costs should be met from clients' other income, including Income Support.

Restrictions may also be made under the local reference rent scheme. This scheme is designed to give tenants an interest in their housing costs and to deter private sector landlords from charging higher rents to those claiming Housing Benefit than they would be able to get from tenants who are not in receipt of Housing Benefit.

The available information on family units receiving Housing Benefit and Income Support and Incapacity Benefit who were assessed under the local reference rent scheme in May 1998 (the latest date for which figures are available) is set out in the tables. It is important to note that there is no direct correlation between the average amounts of rent restriction shown in the tables and families' actual incomes which will vary with individual circumstances. For a family on Income Support their actual income may be higher than Income Support levels because of the various disregards on both earned and unearned income. In addition, local authorities have discretionary powers to make additional payments where they judge that the rent restriction would cause the family exceptional hardship.

Housing Benefit (HB) family recipients also in receipt of Income Support (IS) in Great Britain—May 1998

		Family type		
	Total	*Single with dependants*	*Couple with no dependants*	*Couple with dependants*
Total in receipt of HB and IS	1,130,000	816,000	188,000	127,000
Total assessed under the Local Reference Rent scheme	157,000	129,000	15,000	13,000
Total restricted under the Local Reference Rent scheme	55,000	45,000	6,000	4,000
Average amount of restriction as a result of the Local Reference Rent scheme	£5.90	£6.30	£4.60	£3.30

Housing Benefit (HB) family recipients also in receipt of Incapacity Benefit (IB) in Great Britain—May 1998

		Family type		
	Total	*Single with dependants*	*Couple with no dependants*	*Couple with dependants*
Total in receipt of HB and IS	187,000	19,000	110,000	59,000
Total assessed under the Local Reference Rent scheme	13,000	3,000	6,000	4,000
Total restricted under the Local Reference Rent scheme	5,000	1,000	3,000	1,000
Average amount of restriction as a result of the Local Reference Rent scheme	£4.30	£4.60	£4.50	£3.10

Notes:
1. Information refers to the number of benefit units.
2. The figures are rounded to the nearest thousand and the average amounts of restriction or deduction are rounded to the nearest 10 pence.
3. Some people claim both IS and IB. Therefore, there is some overlap in the tables above.
4. Families are couples and benefit units with children; the tables exclude single people with no dependants.

Source:
Housing Benefit Management Information System, annual 1 per cent. sample, taken on the second Thursday of May 1998.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) when he expects to receive a report from his inspectorate on Housing Benefit in Islington; and if he will make a statement; [127905]

(2) what representations he has received on the competence of IT Net to administer Housing Benefit in Islington; [127906]

(3) what steps are being taken by his Department to ensure that Housing Benefit claimants in Islington receive an appropriate level of service. [127907]

Angela Eagle: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate has recently started an inspection of the administration of Housing and Council Tax Benefit in the London borough of Islington. This inspection is part of a programme to inspect the 30 authorities with the highest Housing Benefit programme spend. The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate is working closely with the authority and expects to present the report to me for publication early in 2001.

The Department is aware of media reports on the administration of Housing Benefit in Islington and of the hon. Member's interest in this issue. However, we have not received any other representations on Housing Benefit administration in Islington.

Where local authorities choose to contract out support functions for their benefit services, the local authority remains statutorily accountable for the service. It is their responsibility to manage these contracts robustly.

The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate's work will contribute to ensuring that Islington's claimants receive an appropriate level of service. Where the inspection report identifies weaknesses we shall expect the authority to remedy them. If appropriate the Secretary of State has powers to direct authorities on the standards they are to meet and the timescales for achieving them.

More widely, Best Value performance indicators have also been introduced from this April for all local authorities. The indicators we have set for Housing Benefit delivery are designed to ensure that authorities provide their communities with a faster, more accurate service which is more secure against fraud, and which provides value for money and takes account of the views and needs of clients.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what his Department's estimate is of the profits made to date by IT Net from the Housing Benefit contract with the London Borough of Islington. [127908]

Angela Eagle: Information on any profits made by IT Net is not held by the Department.

Advertising

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much has been spent by his Department on advertising in each year since May 1997. [125696]

Mr. Bayley *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* The information is in the table.

The totals given for 1999–2000 are estimated outturns. The budget for 2000–01 has not yet been finalised.

The figure given for 1997–98 reflects the low advertising activity carried out in the immediate post election period and subsequent review of Departmental policies. The figures for 1998–99 and 1999–2000 are consistent with the amounts spent on advertising in the five years prior to 1997–98.

Year	*£*
1997–98	1,958,231
1998–99	6,529,593
1999–2000	4,791,178

Pensioner Incomes

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will conduct an analysis of the comparative position of pensioners in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* other EU states; and if he will make a statement. [127617]

Mr. Rooker: Analyses of the comparative position of pensioners in the UK, in terms of income, are included in the publications "Households Below Average Income" 1994–95 to 1997–98 and "The Pensioners' Incomes Series" 1997–98, both of which are available in the Library.

Aspects of pensioner income and poverty in different EU states are covered in selected papers in the "Statistics in Focus" series, published by Eurostat. Copies are held in the Library. There are no plans for the Department to conduct a separate analysis of the comparative position of pensioners in other EU states.

Disability Living Allowance (Epileptics)

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on *(a)* the special needs of people affected by epilepsy in applying for Disability Living Allowance and *(b)* Government proposals to improve the application process relating to them. [127722]

Mr. Bayley: Eligibility for Disability Living Allowance (DLA) is based on a person's needs, and not on recognition of their specific medical condition. People with epilepsy, as with other potentially disabling conditions, are therefore asked by the Benefits Agency to state their care and mobility needs arising from their condition when completing a DLA claim form. Decision makers are given information on the care and mobility needs arising from disabilities, including epilepsy, in the "Disability Handbook", which is compiled by senior doctors in the Department and approved and monitored by the Disability Living Allowance Advisory Board. People claiming DLA are also able to make free calls to the Benefits Inquiry Line to help them with their application.

It is particularly important, given the potentially vulnerable nature of claimants and their carers, that the application process for disability benefits is as straightforward and sensitive as possible. In consultation with a small group of disability organisations, we are trialling improved ways of gathering the information we need to deal with claims. This includes visiting claimants in their homes, to help us get a clearer picture of their disability and how it affects them.

Social Fund

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to increase the level of the Social Fund; and if he will make a statement. [127838]

Angela Eagle: The gross discretionary Social Fund budget increases each year, mainly through the recycling of loan repayments. Since the fund started, almost 17 million loans worth over £3 billion have been made for a net cost of £492 million.

Between 1997–98 and 2000–01 the gross budget has increased by over £128 million or 27 per cent. The size and allocation of the gross budget for 2001–02 will be announced in late March.

Information on expenditure is contained in the Secretary of State's Annual Reports on the Social Fund, copies of which are available in the House Library.

Details of the discretionary Social Fund budget for 2000–01 are available in the written answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) on 3 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 339W.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* pensioners and *(b)* families in Morecambe and Lunesdale benefit from the Minimum Income Guarantee. [127633]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Numbers benefiting from the Minimum Income Guarantee in Morecambe and Lunesdale

	Number
Pensioners	3,000
Pensioners with dependants	100

Notes:
1. Pensioners-are defined as where the claimant, and/or partner are aged 60 or over.
2. Pensioners with dependants—are defined as pensioners with dependants aged 18 or under.
3. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are rounded to the nearest 100. They are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.
4. Figures under 500 are based on very few sample cases and so subject to a higher degree of sampling error and so should only be used as a guide to the current situation.

Source:
Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, February 2000

Opinion Research

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 8 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 324W, on opinion research, what steps have been taken to ensure that his Department makes such results publicly available in the form required by paragraph 19 of the Cabinet Office Guidelines into Public Attitudes and Opinion Research. [127792]

Mr. Rooker: In line with Cabinet Office guidelines, public attitude or opinion research commissioned by the Department is generally either published or made available on request.

The Communications Directorate of the Department commissions research to develop and evaluate publicity campaigns or to inform other presentational issues. All reports are either placed in the Library or are available on request. If a report is not available, this may be because the full research has not yet been completed (ie reports not yet finalised by contractors, or the fieldwork is still in progress) or findings are still being employed to inform the communications activity.

Minimum Funding Requirement

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will announce the results of the review of the minimum funding requirement; and if he will make a statement. [127801]

Mr. Rooker: We have now received the report from the Faculty and Institute of Actuaries on the review of the minimum funding requirement and are considering it. We will be consulting on any proposals for change.

Widows Benefit

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proposals he has to compensate widowers following the recent ruling of the European Court of Human Rights declaring Widows Benefit to be discriminatory. [127864]

Angela Eagle: There has been no such ruling from the European Court of Human Rights. The ECHR's published judgments on two cases explained that, having reached a friendly settlement, these cases have been struck out of the list.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many parliamentary questions were tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April which requested information, pursuant to his previous answers. [128007]

Mr. Rooker: Between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 we received 57 questions which requested information pursuant to previous answers.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Serbia

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Serbia's exports of wheat and maize to *(a)* Libya, *(b)* Iraq and *(c)* Syria. [126627]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* We do not have reliable statistics on the volume of Serbian or Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) grain exports to Iraq, Libya and Syria. However, according to official FRY figures, FRY exports to all developing countries represent only 7.3 per cent. of total exports and are unlikely to do much to reduce the FRY's growing trade deficit. We do not believe that stocks available for export are high.

Qualified Majority Voting

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the matters currently decided by the Department of Health which could be determined by a qualified majority vote in the EU if the Draft Treaty of Nice is agreed. [126576]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* Extension of QMV is on the agenda of the Intergovernmental Conference, but we are still at a relatively early stage in the negotiations. There is no draft Treaty. The Commission has put forward its opinion on the IGC, but Treaty change is a matter for the member states. The Presidency report to the European Council in Feira outlined areas for discussion in the second half of this year. However, except for the rules of procedure of the European Courts, no area has yet attracted consensus for a move to QMV.

Visit Visas

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list, for each British post abroad which operates a preliminary assessment sift system for people applying for visit visas, how many people *(a)* were advised to withdraw their applications and *(b)* followed that advice in 1999. [127110]

Mr. Vaz: I regret that we do not maintain statistics on the number of people advised to withdraw applications. However, our records show that just over 55,000 applicants actually withdrew during 1999. This figure was broken down as follows:

	Number
Abu Dhabi	60
Accra	1,405
Addis Ababa	2,210
Amman	344
Amsterdam	254
Bangkok	46
Banjul	687
Beirut	3
Bombay	5,212
Bucharest	214
Cairo	302
Calcutta	109
Canberra	52
Casablanca	330
Colombo	13
Copenhagen	40
Damascus	924
Dhaka	1,002
Dubai	192
Dublin	177
Dusseldorf	564
Geneva	105
Islamabad	22,943
Kampala	21
Kiev	1
Kingston	858
Lagos	1,341
Los Angeles	2,435
Madras	1,101
Madrid	2
Manila	119
Nairobi	2
New Delhi	6,078
Oslo	84
Paris	1,741
Quito	819
Rome	349
Sanaa	779
Sarajevo	20
Sofia	1
Stockholm	38
Tehran	1,835
Tunis	493
Wellington	79

Latvia

Mr. Berry: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what arrangements there are for housing the commercial section of the British Embassy in Riga; how many staff are employed by the commercial section, broken down by *(a)* UK-based and *(b)* locally-employed staff; how much space the section occupies; and what plans he has to rehouse the section in preparation for the British Week to be held in Riga in 2001. [127858]

Mr. Vaz: The Commercial section in Riga is in the main Embassy building. The Embassy is currently undergoing refurbishment and reorganisation, which will improve the quality of Commercial Section accommodation and make it more accessible to visitors.

There are four full-time commercial staff in Riga: one UK-based and three locally engaged.

The Commercial Section occupies approximately 52m^2. An additional 28m^2 is available on the lower ground floor.

There are no plans to rehouse the Section in preparation for British Week in 2001: we do not regard this as necessary.

Kosovo

Ms Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the export of de-mining vehicles to the HALO Trust in Kosovo. [128297]

Mr. Vaz: The Government have granted a licence for the export to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) of an armour protected wheel loading tractor for use by the HALO Trust, an organisation engaged in humanitarian de-mining activities in Kosovo on behalf of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). This vehicle is rated on the UK's Military List.

Although UN Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 1160 (1998) imposed an arms embargo on the FRY, UNSCR 1160 shall not apply to the sale or supply of arms and related material for use by the international civil and security presence in Kosovo. We have notified the UN FRY Sanctions Committee of this export and they have raised no objection.

Thailand

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he made about the case of Sandra Gregory during his recent visit to Thailand; and if he will make a statement. [128147]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was briefed on the case of Sandra Gregory before his visit to Thailand. However, he did not raise any consular issues during his visit.

Ms Gregory submitted a Royal Pardon Petition in May 1997. Ms Gregory is waiting for His Majesty the King of Thailand to make his decision on her application. Our Embassy in Bangkok continues to make regular inquiries with the Thai authorities on the progress of Ms Gregory's Royal Pardon Petition.

Jordan

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to visit Jordan to discuss trade issues. [127811]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs visited Jordan in January 2000 and I did so in March 2000 when trade issues were discussed.

Indonesia (Arms Exports)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent assessment he has made of the *(a)* use and *(b)* location of British arms exported to Indonesia; and if he will make a statement. [127891]

Mr. Battle: We are in close touch with our Embassy in Jakarta on this issue and we have seen no evidence that any of the reduced amount of military equipment supplied by this Administration has been used for internal repression in Indonesia. We have asked for and received assurances from the Indonesian Government that UK supplied equipment, wherever it is located in Indonesia, is not used for internal repression.

Saudi Arabia (Human Rights)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Saudi Arabia concerning abuse of human rights; and if he will make a statement. [127892]

Mr. Hain: We are firmly committed to constructive engagement on human rights with Saudi Arabia and discuss the issue regularly with the Saudis. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary did so most recently on 22 May at the EU/GCC Joint Ministerial Meeting in Brussels with the Saudi Foreign Minister.

West Papua

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which representatives from the British Embassy in Jakarta, Indonesia, attended the congress for self-determination in Japura, West Papua; and if he will make a statement. [127904]

Mr. Battle: No representatives from the British Embassy attended the Papuan Congress in Jayapura. In light of the declaration made by the Congress, the EU issued a statement on 8 June stressing its support for a strong, democratic, united and prosperous Indonesia. It also reaffirmed its support for Indonesia's territorial integrity and for the efforts of the current Indonesian Government to solve problems, such as in Aceh and West Papua, through peaceful negotiation.

TREASURY

Working Families Tax Credit

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families have received the Working Families Tax Credit in the Crosby constituency. [127168]

Dawn Primarolo: The number of families in receipt of Working Families Tax Credit at the end of April 2000 is provisionally estimated at 1,053,000. Available figures by constituency are given in tables which have been deposited in the Library.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the practicalities of paying Working Families Tax Credit by means other than through employers; what assessment he has made of the impact of the Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to automatic processing of personal data (ETS No. 108, 28.1.1981) on his policy on payment of Working Families Tax Credit; and what assessment he has made of Recommendation No. R(90) 19, adopted by the Committee of Ministers, on the Protection of Personal Data used for payment and other related operations on 13 September 1990. [128025]

Dawn Primarolo: Paying Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) through the wage packet helps to demonstrate the rewards of work and to make work pay for families on low incomes. An employee applying for WFTC will be paid the tax credit by his or her employer as part of the pay packet and will be able to see clearly the amount of tax credit being paid in each pay period. If the applicant is self-employed or is not working the tax credit is paid by the Inland Revenue either by Automatic Credit Transfer (ACT) into a bank account or by Order Book.

The Government's policy on payment of WFTC does not conflict with the provisions of the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to automatic processing of personal data (ETS No. 108, 28.1.1981) or the associated Recommendation No. R(90) 19.

Stress Audit

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place in the Library a copy of the independently conducted Stress Audit of the Treasury. [127885]

Mr. Timms: I have done so.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 3 April on behalf of his constituent the Reverend Mr. Leeke. [127890]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I replied to the right hon. Member on 5 June. A further copy will be forwarded.

National Minimum Wage

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the numbers of people in the Crosby constituency that have benefited from the minimum wage. [127171]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mrs. Curtis-Thomas, dated 28 June 2000:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question regarding the number of people who have been affected by the national minimum wage in the Crosby constituency.

Definitive estimates on the number of people that have been affected by the national minimum wage are not yet available. Currently available estimates for assessing the effect draw on data from both the New Earnings Survey and the Labour Force Survey, and recognise the particular value that each survey adds to the quality and analytical details that can be provided. However, the latest adjusted estimates are mainly based on data for the spring (March-May) 1999 Labour Force Survey. Because the reference period spans the implementation date for the National Minimum Wage Act on 1 April 1999, these adjusted estimates are unlikely to accurately measure the effect of the Minimum Wage legislation since there are employees who could have been earning below the minimum wage rates in March 1999, before the law took effect.

The currently available estimates for March-May 1999 were published in an Office for National Statistics (ONS) First Release on 14 October 1999 and show that the number of people earning

below the minimum wage rates set in April 1999 had fallen significantly between 1998 and 1999. A copy of this first release is available in the House of Commons Library.

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate how many people in Morecambe and Lunesdale have benefited from the national minimum wage. [127632]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Miss Geraldine Smith, dated 28 June 2000:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question regarding the number of people who have been affected by the national minimum wage in the Morecambe and Lunesdale constituency (127632).

Definitive estimates on the number of people that have been affected by the national minimum wage are not yet available. Currently available estimates for assessing the effect draw on data from both the New Earnings Survey and the Labour Force Survey, and recognise the particular value that each survey adds to the quality and analytical details that can be provided. However, the latest adjusted estimates are mainly based on data for the Spring (March-May) 1999 Labour Force Survey. Because the reference period spans the implementation date for the National Minimum Wage Act on 1 April 1999, these adjusted estimates are unlikely to accurately measure the effect of this Legislation since there are employees who could have been earning below the minimum wage rates in March 1999, before the law took effect.

The currently available estimates for March-May 1999 were published in an Office for National Statistics (ONS) First Release on 14 October 1999 and show that the number of people earning below the minimum wage rates set in April 1999 had fallen significantly between 1998 and 1999. A copy of this first release is available in the House of Commons Library.

Single Currency

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how the rate of entry for Sterling into the euro will be determined; what the scope is for negotiation of the rate; how long the exchange rate has to be maintained before entry; and if the relativity to be maintained to the euro allows for changes in the euro rate. [127557]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The rate at which sterling would enter the single currency would need to be consistent with economic fundamentals in the UK and compatible with sustainable convergence between the UK and other euro area economies.

Average Wage (Young People)

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the average wage paid to 16 and 17 year-olds in full-time work with no training. [127616]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Vernon Coaker, dated 28 June 2000:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question regarding the average wage of 16 and 17 year-olds in full-time work with no training. (127616)

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is National Statistics' major source of labour market data on individuals and is the most appropriate source of data to answer this question. LFS estimates show that in the UK in winter (December to February) 1999/2000, the average gross weekly earnings of 16 and 17 year-old full-time employees who had not received any job-related training in the last 13 weeks and were not currently enrolled on an education course was £139. This estimate is not seasonally adjusted.

Internet Access

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 19 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 105W, on the knowledge economy, how he defines access to the internet through a public access point; on what terms such access shall be available; and if he will make a statement. [127865]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Public internet access points are defined as any facility, whether provided by the public, voluntary, or private sector, which provides internet access for the general public. The Government are making community internet access points available through a number of initiatives, including ICT learning centres, and putting libraries on-line.

Non-contributory Benefits

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much was paid from the National Insurance Fund to pay for non-contributory benefits in the last financial year. [127986]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 27 June 2000]:* Appendix 4 of the Government Actuary's Benefits up-rating report (Cm 4587) lists the estimated payments from the National Insurance Fund for both contributory and non-contributory benefits.

Motor Fuel

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what study his Department has made of the implications for the United Kingdom economy of rising motor fuel prices; [127733]

(2) if he will assess the impact for the United Kingdom economy of petrol prices reaching £4 per gallon before 31 March 2001. [127734]

Mr. Timms: The Budget economic forecast took into account developments in motor fuel prices up to mid-March and their implications for both economic activity and inflation. The Treasury's next assessment of economic prospects, including the impact from higher world oil prices, will be published in the pre-Budget Report later this year.

Interactive Voice Response Systems

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how many agencies of his Department use interactive voice response systems when dealing with telephone inquiries from the general public; [127117]

(2) how many of his Department's telephone lines used by the general public are responded to by interactive voice response systems. [127389]

Miss Melanie Johnson: There are no Voice Recognition Systems used.

Electronic Data Systems

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which Government Departments have *(a)* contracts and *(b)* framework agreements with Electronic Data Systems. [121789]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 12 May 2000]:* The following Government Departments currently have contracts with Electronic Data Systems (EDS):

Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions

Department for Education and Employment

Department of Social Security

Home Office (Prison Service)

Inland Revenue

Lord Chancellor's Department

Ministry of Defence

Treasury (Office of Government Commerce).

Of the contracts listed, three are framework agreements (one with MOD and two with the Treasury (OGC)).

Road Tolls (VAT)

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the amount of VAT which the UK would be required to collect if the proposed extension of VAT to road tolls were to be applied retrospectively. [127384]

Dawn Primarolo: If, in its judgment due on 12 September, the European Court of Justice agrees with the earlier opinion of the Advocate-General—that VAT should be charged on road tolls—VAT will not be imposed upon motorists or toll operators retrospectively. It may, however, be necessary for the UK to recalculate contributions made to the European Commission budget from 1984. While it is not possible accurately to calculate the amount involved, it will be very small in relation to our overall contribution.

Tax Demands

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many income tax demands for amounts under £5 were dispatched in the last tax year; what the total value of the tax billed in these demands was; and what the estimated cost of recovering the tax was. [127649]

Dawn Primarolo: Taxpayers within Self Assessment are issued with statements at specific points in their tax affairs showing the current position, which may include small amounts. Information on how many such debts there are at any given time is not available.

Pensioners (Self-assessment)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to simplify tax self-assessment for pensioners; and what advice and support the Inland Revenue provides for the completion of such forms. [127878]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government want to minimise the number of people who have to complete self-assessment tax returns. That is why last July I announced changes to the criteria determining who should receive self-assessment tax returns which meant that up to 200,000 older people should no longer have to complete returns. The Inland Revenue are considering whether there are other changes which can be made.

For those pensioners who have to complete a tax return the Revenue is committed to giving the help they need. The Inland Revenue will help pensioners complete any forms if they cannot complete them themselves. They will visit the pensioner in his or her home if a face-to-face discussion is necessary and the pensioner is too infirm to get to the local tax office. Most Inland Revenue offices are equipped with magnifying lenses and induction loops—and all will be within the next few months. For those who prefer to contact the Revenue by telephone, they can contact their own tax office or use the helpline on 0845 9000 444. Research shows that the Revenue's help is valued as pensioners are the Inland Revenue's most satisfied customer group.

Tax Credits

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many claimants of Family Credit there were in *(a)* the North-East region, *(b)* the City of Newcastle and *(c)* the constituency of Newcastle upon Tyne, Central in April 1997; what was the average payment of Family Credit in each area; how many claimants of the Working Families Tax Credit there are for (a), (b) and (c); and what has been the average payment of Working Families Tax Credit (i) with and (ii) without child care tax credit. [127880]

Dawn Primarolo: The estimated numbers of families in receipt of awards are as follows:

	Estimate of number of recipients of Family Credit (FC) at the end of April 1997	*Provisional estimate of number of recipients of Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) at the end of April 2000*
North-East region	45,900	61,000
Newcastle upon Tyne local authority	4,300	5,200
Newcastle upon Tyne, Central constituency	1,100	1,300

Note:
All the estimates in the table are based on 5 per cent. samples of awards and are therefore subject to sampling error. This should be borne in mind when making comparisons over time, by area, and between types of award.

For the North-East region, the average FC award at April 1997 was £58 per week, and the provisional estimate of the average WFTC award at April 2000 is £71 per week. The corresponding figures for WFTC awards with and without the child care tax credit are £88 per week and £70 per week, respectively. There are too few sample cases to provide reliable estimates of average awards at the local authority or constituency level.

IR35

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer of the IR35 contracts examined by the Inland Revenue, what were the job categories of the contracts submitted; how many were found to be *(a)* exempt and *(b)* not exempt from the IR 35 rates; and if he has revised the expected revenue yield from IR35. [127868]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer the hon. Member to the remarks I made in the course of the Finance Bill Standing Committee Debate on 6 June 2000, *Official Report, Standing Committee,* column 450.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 19 June 2000, *Official Report,* column 106W, on what date he will answer the question tabled by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead on 9 May. [128034]

Mr. Timms: I have done so today, at column 541W.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

ONE Service

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what back-up systems exist to assist jobseekers in the case of the *(a)* breakdown and *(b)* malfunctioning of the ONE system; when he will review the operation of the ONE system; and if he will make a statement. [125891]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 13 June 2000]:* The ONE Call Centre service, one of the three main variants of the ONE model, is proving popular with clients and staff. It streamlines the service and makes it more convenient to clients, who are able to provide information by telephone.

The ONE Call Centre service is delivered from four sites. Each pilot has agreed contingency plans in the event of a breakdown or malfunction of systems, which ensures that the delivery of services to jobseekers is not put at risk.

The advantage of having four sites sharing the same telephony and IT is that, should a breakdown or malfunction occur in one site, the service can be offered by telephone from one of the other three call centres. Additional contingency plans involve the delivery of services face to face and the use of clerical records and forms rather than IT systems. These contingencies have been tested by the pilots in a number of situations since they became operational on 29 November 1999 and have proven robust.

The operation of the ONE pilots is under constant review and regular reports are provided to Ministers. The pilots are due to run for three years (to March 2002) and a formal evaluation will be completed at that time.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment which organisations and individuals he has consulted while undertaking the cross departmental review on Welfare to Work and ONE; in what form he has consulted them; on how many occasions he has met them; and if he will make a statement. [126294]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* All the Departments involved have consulted widely with both individuals and groups from all the Departments. This was reinforced by a seminar which included many people from the academic and wider policy community held on 18 January 2000 to discuss policy priorities. We have also sought other advice during the course of the review, for instance, from the New Deal Task Force.

The Welfare to Work and ONE Spending Review is progressing well. In due course details of all aspects of the 2000 Spending Review will be included in a Spending Review White Paper in the normal way.

Teachers (Early Leavers)

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary school teachers left the teaching profession before reaching the age of 40 in each of the last 10 years; and how many of them did so within five years of qualifying as a teacher. [126315]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table shows the number of maintained nursery, primary and secondary full and part-time teachers in England who left the maintained nursery, primary, secondary, special and PRU sector[1, 2] under age 40 and the number who left within five years of qualifying as a teacher.

	Nursery/primary teachers aged under 40		*Secondary teachers aged under 40*	
Financial year	*All leavers*	*Leavers within five years*	*All leavers*	*Leavers within five years*
1988–89	6,300	1,300	10,000	2,300
1989–90	5,900	1,800	8,900	2,400
1990–91	6,800	2,200	8,600	2,400
1991–92	5,900	2,000	6,600	2,000
1992–93	5,100	1,800	5,700	1,800
1993–94	4,600	1,800	5,100	1,700
1994–95	5,100	2,100	5,400	2,100
1995–96	4,400	1,900	5,000	2,300
1996–97	4,700	2,100	4,900	2,400
1997–98	5,000	2,200	5,100	2,500

[1] Excludes those leaving sixth form colleges. Sixth form colleges became part of the FE sector as at 1 March 1993.
[2] Includes those taking ill-health retirement, barred and dying in service, which amounts to less than 200 in either phase for any year
Note:
Figures are rounded to the nearest 100.

There was a growth in total numbers of 3,500 full-time equivalent regular teachers in maintained nursery/primary schools and 3,100 full-time equivalent regular teachers in maintained secondary schools between January 1998 and January 2000.

Cars for Work Scheme

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many people he estimates will participate in the Cars for Work scheme; [126844]

(2) if he has made an environmental impact assessment of the implementation of the Cars for Work scheme; [126842]

(3) how the Cars for Work scheme will be evaluated; and if he will make a statement. [126843]

Ms Jowell: Car loan or leasing schemes may form part of the forthcoming Action Teams for Jobs initiative. In these areas we are setting up specialist teams to tackle the barriers that stop jobless people in deprived communities taking up work. Each team will have the flexibility to focus its resource on solving the problems unique to its area. This will include solutions to transport problems but will also cover other barriers to finding, keeping and progressing in work. Action Teams will be fully evaluated and the findings published in due course.

New Deal

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people had left the New Deal for Lone Parents in *(a)* Edinburgh and *(b)* Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh, up to (i) the end of March and (ii) the latest available date by immediate destination, including those who (1) left income support and went into employment, (2) left income support and transferred to other benefits, (3) left income support and became ineligible for NDLP, (4) were still on income support and went into employment, (5) were still on income support and declined to join the caseload and (6) were still on income support and withdrew for other reasons. [125751]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* The information requested is in the following table:

	(a) Edinburgh	*(b) Edinburgh East and Musselburgh*
(1) left Income Support and went into employment	198	33
(2) left Income Support and transferred to other benefits	5	1
(3) left Income Support and became ineligible for NDLP	39	5
(4) were still on Income Support and went into employment	3	1
(5) were still on Income Support and declined to join the caseload	10	1
(6) were still on Income Support and withdrew for other reasons	166	31

Note:
These figures are cumulative to the end of March 2000

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people were on the New Deal for Lone Parents in *(a)* Edinburgh, *(b)* Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh, *(c)* Scotland and *(d)* Great Britain (i) at the end of March and (ii) at the latest available date who were (1) receiving advice and guidance, (2) in education and training, (3) receiving in work support on income support and (4) receiving in work support off income support; and how many people in total have been in categories (i) and (ii). [125752]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* The information requested is in the following table:

	(a) Edinburgh	*(b) Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh*	*(c) Scotland*	*(d) Great Britain*
(1) receiving advice and guidance	340	79	4,305	48,640
(2) in education and training	72	11	660	7,500
(3) receiving in work support on IS	3	0	69	1,070
(4) receiving in work support off IS	161	42	1,599	17,940

Note:
These figures are cumulative to the end of March 2000

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people in *(a)* Edinburgh, *(b)* Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh, *(c)* Scotland and *(d)* Great Britain, (i) up to the end of March and (ii) up to the latest available date have (1) found sustained subsidised employment, (2) found sustained and unsubsidised employment, (3) found subsidised employment for less than 13 weeks and (4) found unsubsidised employment for less than 13 weeks. [125753]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 20 June 2000]:* The information requested, covering the period from June 1998 to the end of March 2000, the latest date for which information is available, is contained in the table:

	Edinburgh	*Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh*	*Scotland*	*Great Britain*
Sustained subsidised employment	43	7	766	7,800
Sustained unsubsidised employment	167	38	2,092	26,920
Subsidised employment less than 13 weeks	2	0	62	600
Unsubsidised employment less than 13 weeks	30	4	538	5,830

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what change in the level of unemployment has occurred in the Crosby constituency as a result of the New Deals. [127172]

Ms Jowell: The New Deal for Young People is aimed at people aged 18–24 who have been claiming unemployment benefits for six months or more.

Claimant unemployment among this group has fallen by 70 per cent. in the three years since April 1997 and by 56 per cent. since April 1998 when the New Deal was introduced. Part of this fall is due to the delivery of a strong and stable economy, but the New Deal for Young People has helped unemployment to fall even faster. The fall of 56 per cent. since the New Deal was introduced compares with a fall of 18 per cent. in total

unemployment, 23 per cent. in total youth (18–24) unemployment and 26 per cent. in the total number unemployed for six months or more. The positive effect of the New Deal is confirmed by independent research from the National Institute of Economic and Social Research.

It is not possible to measure the New Deal effect exactly in each constituency. However, in Crosby the falls in unemployment among the New Deal client group have also been substantially faster than for other groups. In Crosby constituency in the two years since April 1998 claimant unemployment among those aged 18–24, unemployed for six months or more, has fallen by 52 per cent. from 161 to 77. This compares with a fall of 19 per cent. in total unemployment, 31 per cent. in total youth (18–24) unemployment, and 20 per cent. in the total number unemployed for six months or more.

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the total number of people in *(a)* Scotland, *(b)* Great Britain, *(c)* Edinburgh and *(d)* Edinburgh East and Musselburgh involved in the New Deal for 25-plus, (i) at the end of March 2000 and (ii) at the latest available date, who (1) had been in the advisory interview process, (2) had found unsubsidised jobs through the advisory interview process, (3) had transferred to other provision, (4) had entered subsidised employment, (5) had taken education and training opportunities, (6) had entered Training for Work and (7) had entered Follow Through. [126307]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 22 June 2000]:* The information to the end of March 2000 is contained in the table.

	Edinburgh	*Edinburgh East and Musselburgh*	*Scotland*	*Great Britain*
Starts to Advisory Interview Process	1,573	236	23,180	232,010
Unsubsidised jobs from the Advisory Interview Process	160	35	1,910	24,100
Left for other benefits	119	22	2,080	19,700
Subsidised employment starts	52	9	1,000	10,100
Education and Training opportunity	61	7	240	5,700
Training for Work starts	63	5	1,240	15,800
Starts to Follow Through	28	4	350	4,050

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the total number of people in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* Edinburgh who had (i) joined the 18–24 New Deal, (ii) gained subsidised jobs from the 18–24 New Deal, (iii) gained unsubsidised jobs from the 18–24 New Deal, (iv) started on the 18–24 New Deal Gateway, (v) entered each of the 18–24 New Deal options and (vi) been on Follow-Through by (1) the end of March 2000 and (2) the latest available date. [126308]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 22 June 2000]:* The information to the end of March 2000, which is the latest available, is as follows:

	Edinburgh	*Scotland*
New Deal 18–24 starts	3,099	50,560
subsidised job starts	[1]232	[1]4,420
unsubsidised job starts	1,238	20,900
Gateway starts	2,739	45,020
starts to Employment option	[1]232	[1]4,420
starts to Full-time Education and Training option	397	7,710
Starts to Voluntary Sector option	239	4,010
Starts to Environment Task Force option	194	4,340
starts to Follow Through	594	10,290

[1] Subsidised job starts and starts to the employment option are the same figure

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people in Morecambe and Lunesdale have participated in New Deal programmes. [127637]

Ms Jowell: Latest figures to the end of March 2000, show that in Morecambe and Lunesdale parliamentary constituency, 873 young people have started the New Deal for Young People, 461 have started the New Deal for long-term unemployed people aged 25 or over, and 229 have started the new Deal for Lone Parents. It is a measure of the success of the Government's Welfare to Work policies that 573 people in Morecambe and Lunesdale have found work through the New Deals. Many other people in Morecambe and Lunesdale are benefiting from the New Deals for the disabled, partners of the unemployed and 50 plus.

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people in Carlisle have *(a)* joined the New Deal for 18 to 24 year olds, *(b)* gained subsidised jobs, *(c)* gained unsubsidised jobs and *(d)* started on the New Deal Gateway to date. [127808]

Ms Jowell: Latest figures to the end of March 2000, show that in Carlisle parliamentary constituency, 681 young people have started New Deal. 334 of these have gained unsubsidised jobs and 85 started on the subsidised Employment option. 622 young people have started on the New Deal Gateway. We are well on target to meet our commitment of helping 250,000 young people into jobs through the New Deal.

Equal Rights

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the impact of the decisions made by the European Commission in its meeting of 7 June on equal rights legislation in the United Kingdom; and what his policy is thereon. [127185]

Ms Jowell: On 7 June the European Commission adopted a Communication on a Community framework strategy on gender equality 2001–05. The strategy includes a proposal that there be a Council Decision on a support programme. The Commission also adopted a proposal that there be a European Parliament and Council Directive amending the Equal Treatment Directive (76/207) on equality for men and women. The Government will study each of the proposals carefully (including any impact on domestic legislation such as the

Sex Discrimination Act 1975) and report to Parliament in accordance with the usual procedures for scrutiny of European legislative proposals.

Class Sizes

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the primary schools in Morecambe and Lunesdale which have received additional money to reduce class sizes. [127635]

Ms Estelle Morris: The schools in Morecambe and Lunesdale which have received additional funding as part of the Government's initiative to limit infant classes to 30 pupils are listed. £620 million is available to support the initiative, and allocations so far to Lancashire LEA amount to nearly £15 million. This has helped to reduce the size of the average Key Stage 1 class in Morecambe and Lunesdale to 26.0. The figure in January 1997 was 29.1.

Morecambe and Heysham Sandylands Primary
Slyne with Hest, St. Luke's CE Primary
Nether Kellet Primary
Morecambe and Heysham Torrisholme Primary
Bolton-le-Sands CE Primary
Heysham St. Peter's CE Primary
Overton St. Helen's CE Primary
Great Wood Primary
Warton Archbishop Hutton's Primary
Carnforth North Road Primary
Lancaster Ryelands Primary
Skerton Community Primary
Morecambe Bay Community Primary
Lancaster Road Primary
Morecambe and Heysham Trumacar Community Primary
Grosvenor Park Primary
Carnforth Christ Church CE VA Primary
St. Wilfrid's CE Primary
Poulton-le-Sands Ce Primary
Silverdale St. John's CE VA Primary
St. Patrick's Catholic Primary
Over Kellet Wilson's Endowed CE Primary
St. Mary's Catholic Primary.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many five, six and seven-year-olds in Warrington North constituency were being taught in classes of over 30 *(a)* in May 1997 and *(b)* on the most recent date for which figures are available. [127320]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 26 June 2000]:* The latest available information on class sizes in the Parliamentary constituency of Warrington, North is shown in the table.

Provisional national estimates of Key Stage 1 class sizes for January 2000 were recently published in a Statistical First Release "Class sizes in maintained schools in England: January 2000 (15/2000)" on 12 April 2000. Class size information broken down by local education authority area is also available from the House of Commons Library.

National figures for infant class sizes in September 1999 were published in Statistical First Release "Infant class sizes in England (2/2000)" on 21 January 2000.

The Government are well on course to limit all infant classes for five, six and 7-year-olds to 30 or below by September 2001 at the latest.

Number and percentage of pupils in Key Stage 1 classes of size 31 or more taught by one teacher in maintained primary schools in the Parliamentary constituency of Warrington North and England: 1997 and 2000[1]

Position as at January

	Number of pupils in classes of over 30[2]	*Percentage of pupils in classes of over 30*
1997		
Warrington North	1,450	34
England	476,820	29
2000		
Warrington North	710	18
England	177,020	11

[1] Provisional
[2] Figures have been rounded to the nearest 10 pupils

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the cost of *(a)* reducing all primary school class sizes to 25 pupils or fewer and *(b)* introducing a maximum average class size of 25 in primary schools; and if he will make a statement. [127507]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 27 June 2000]:* It has been estimated that the cost of reducing class sizes to 25 for all primary school children would be around £3 billion. We have not made an estimate of the cost of a maximum average class size of 25 in primary schools.

The size of the average primary class fell for the second year running between January 1999 and January 2000, from 27.5 to 27.1, after rising for the previous 10 years. The size of the average primary class in the Truro and St. Austell parliamentary constituency has gone down from 27.5 in January 1997 to 27.2 in January 2000.

At the same time, we are well on the way to delivering our pledge to limit infant classes to 30 pupils. £620 million is available to support the pledge, and allocations so far to Cornwall LEA amount to some £3.5 million. This has helped to reduce the size of the average Key Stage 1 class in Truro and St. Austell to 24.9. The figure in January 1997 was 25.4.

Disability Access

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many toilets at buildings owned or controlled by his Department *(a)* have and *(b)* do not have access for disabled people. [127598]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 27 June 2000]:* Central records are not kept on the total number of toilets in buildings owned or controlled by the Department. This information could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. Specialist toilet facilities for disabled people are currently available in over 700 (64 per cent.) of these buildings, and we intend to increase the number of buildings that have facilities for disabled people as soon as practicable.

Teacher Vacancies

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teacher vacancies in (i) maintained nursery schools, (ii) maintained primary schools and (iii) maintained secondary schools there were in *(a)* Great Britain and *(b)* each local education authority, for each year since 1997; and if he will make a statement. [127208]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 23 June 2000]:* The following table shows the number of full-time teacher vacancies in maintained nursery and primary schools[1] and maintained secondary schools, in England, January 1997 to 2000, by local authority[2].

[1] Teacher vacancies in nursery schools are not collected separately.

[2] New unitary local authorities created by local government re-organisation are shown immediately following the reference to their former local authority.

	1997		1998		1999		2000	
	Nursery and Primary	*Secondary*	*Nursery and Primary*	*Secondary*	*Nursery and Primary*	*Secondary*	*Nursery and Primary*	*Secondary*
former Durham	4	2	—	—	—	—	—	—
Darlington	—	—	3	4	0	0	3	0
Durham	—	—	11	7	2	0	2	0
Hartlepool	4	3	3	1	6	3	2	1
Middlesbrough	1	3	5	6	4	2	2	2
Redcar and Cleveland	5	2	1	9	2	4	0	5
Stockton on Tees	3	9	3	6	2	5	1	5
Northumberland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gateshead	6	1	3	1	9	0	5	0
Newcastle upon Tyne	4	1	3	2	7	10	4	5
North Tyneside	0	0	0	0	10	16	1	14
South Tyneside	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	1
Sunderland	10	5	7	7	6	5	9	4
former Lancashire	13	18	27	9	—	—	—	—
Blackburn with Darwen	—	—	—	—	11	3	7	6
Blackpool	—	—	—	—	2	1	3	6
Lancashire	—	—	—	—	18	12	17	4
former Cheshire	15	6	25	14	—	—	—	—
Halton	—	—	—	—	2	2	1	5
Warrington	—	—	—	—	7	0	9	2
Cheshire	—	—	—	—	10	4	12	11
Cumbria	0	4	1	1	0	2	0	0
Bolton	1	0	0	2	0	2	0	1
Bury	1	3	0	1	0	1	1	0
Manchester	3	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
Oldham	12	8	10	3	6	3	7	4
Rochdale	9	0	10	2	4	2	2	2
Salford	3	3	0	0	0	1	1	2
Stockport	0	1	0	0	3	2	0	6
Tameside	1	4	2	4	0	5	1	0
Trafford	0	3	0	2	0	1	0	0
Wigan	9	4	5	0	5	10	3	10
Knowsley	1	3	6	7	3	1	5	6
Liverpool	0	1	0	4	4	1	0	2
St. Helens	4	4	1	4	4	1	1	0
Sefton	1	3	0	0	0	1	3	5
Wirral	5	2	4	10	13	4	2	8
East Riding of Yorkshire	0	0	1	0	4	0	2	0
City of Kingston Upon Hull	0	2	0	1	0	1	0	0
North East Lincolnshire	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
North Lincolnshire	3	3	2	0	4	3	8	2
York	0	0	0	0	1	6	1	5
North Yorkshire	0	0	8	8	3	5	4	5
Barnsley	1	0	2	5	1	1	0	2
Doncaster	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Rotherham	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Sheffield	9	4	14	6	2	0	6	0
Bradford	0	2	14	34	15	3	14	28
Calderdale	12	8	11	3	4	1	3	0
Kirklees	1	1	0	6	2	1	0	3
Leeds	1	9	16	9	6	1	8	10
Wakefield	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
former Derbyshire	22	10	—	—	—	—	—	—
Derby	—	—	6	4	13	6	8	11
Derbyshire	—	—	25	13	11	13	25	11
former Leicestershire	21	11	—	—	—	—	—	—
Leicester	—	—	2	9	5	8	11	9
Leicestershire	—	—	5	7	8	3	7	6
Rutland	—	—	1	1	0	1	2	0

	1997		1998		1999		2000	
	Nursery and Primary	Secondary	Nursery and Primary	Secondary	Nursery and Primary	Secondary	Nursery and Primary	Secondary
former Nottinghamshire	0	0	0	0	—	—	—	—
Nottingham	—	—	—	—	0	0	18	6
Nottinghamshire	—	—	—	—	0	0	0	0
Lincolnshire	20	12	37	21	11	11	11	8
Northamptonshire	0	1	1	2	3	3	1	9
former Hereford and Worcester	1	3	1	6	—	—	—	—
Herefordshire	—	—	—	—	2	4	8	3
Worcestershire	—	—	—	—	6	5	3	3
former Staffordshire	1	25	—	—	—	—	—	—
Stoke on Trent	—	—	10	8	2	1	8	14
Staffordshire	—	—	13	8	15	6	17	10
former Shropshire	1	2	1	0	—	—	—	—
Telford and Wrekin	—	—	—	—	0	0	7	4
Shropshire	—	—	—	—	0	1	1	1
Warwickshire	4	6	11	1	9	5	7	6
Birmingham	9	23	7	30	59	12	39	21
Coventry	4	8	4	3	2	10	8	15
Dudley	7	1	5	9	2	5	7	9
Sandwell	8	12	8	7	17	11	7	8
Solihull	1	2	3	4	2	0	5	6
Walsall	4	4	15	21	5	7	2	6
Wolverhampton	5	4	2	6	14	19	5	5
former Bedfordshire	26	7	—	—	—	—	—	—
Luton	—	—	7	16	7	17	5	9
Bedfordshire	—	—	11	12	5	19	20	19
former Cambridgeshire	2	4	1	6	—	—	—	—
Peterborough	—	—	—	—	0	2	0	0
Cambridgeshire	—	—	—	—	1	0	0	0
former Essex	45	33	56	46	—	—	—	—
Southend on Sea	—	—	—	—	6	3	5	16
Thurrock	—	—	—	—	48	34	19	9
Essex	—	—	—	—	9	12	83	73
Hertfordshire	21	12	31	36	12	19	10	7
Norfolk	18	12	19	11	47	10	15	15
Suffolk	15	15	8	14	14	17	8	11
Camden	7	9	12	2	21	8	17	13
City of London	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Hackney	23	1	51	9	38	30	47	22
Hammersmith and Fulham	16	8	35	12	15	8	14	8
Haringey	22	20	20	10	20	13	19	14
Islington	3	14	27	15	10	3	20	11
Kensington and Chelsea	0	0	17	3	3	6	3	2
Lambeth	20	4	6	6	46	12	36	12
Lewisham	16	7	31	18	21	8	18	20
Newham	70	29	61	21	34	3	40	14
Southwark	18	6	54	6	47	14	42	30
Tower Hamlets	45	12	52	13	80	12	71	26
Wandsworth	16	13	29	5	17	12	13	10
City of Westminster	16	2	13	4	14	11	15	14
Barking and Dagenham	27	14	10	7	12	3	8	9
Barnet	9	6	8	14	11	21	29	20
Bexley	1	4	1	5	0	7	13	16
Brent	16	10	20	8	13	17	5	5
Bromley	6	5	11	4	6	7	9	3
Croydon	21	2	8	5	25	11	8	28
Ealing	15	8	17	30	32	22	14	14
Enfield	5	4	11	6	19	9	13	15
Greenwich	5	14	31	22	52	9	16	14
Harrow	4	1	9	2	12	5	24	14
Havering	0	9	0	15	3	10	1	17
Hillingdon	10	9	15	13	8	19	9	14
Hounslow	7	7	8	14	5	10	3	5
Kingston upon Thames	0	3	5	1	6	3	1	7
Merton	5	3	7	0	5	6	3	13
Redbridge	2	2	7	10	7	7	6	1
Richmond upon Thames	3	0	2	1	2	2	3	12
Sutton	3	2	4	5	2	5	0	1
Waltham Forest	35	6	43	4	2	5	0	4
former Berkshire	2	3	0	5	—	—	—	—
Bracknell Forest	—	—	—	—	0	0	4	5

	1997		1998		1999		2000	
	Nursery and Primary	Secondary	Nursery and Primary	Secondary	Nursery and Primary	Secondary	Nursery and Primary	Secondary
Reading	—	—	—	—	0	2	10	4
Slough	—	—	—	—	8	10	3	10
West Berkshire	—	—	—	—	2	0	4	0
Windsor and Maidenhead	—	—	—	—	3	6	4	5
Wokingham	—	—	—	—	9	5	5	9
former East Sussex	18	8	—	—	—	—	—	—
Brighton and Hove	—	—	8	5	2	2	5	6
East Sussex	—	—	18	11	10	12	9	14
Isle of Wight	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
former Kent	67	27	55	34	—	—	—	—
Medway	—	—	—	—	10	6	4	9
Kent	—	—	—	—	52	37	32	48
former Buckinghamshire	16	18	—	—	—	—	—	—
Milton Keynes	—	—	5	0	8	2	6	1
Buckinghamshire	—	—	10	14	18	15	36	16
former Hampshire	43	33	—	—	—	—	—	—
Portsmouth	—	—	8	15	10	3	6	13
Southampton	—	—	6	13	6	9	8	17
Hampshire	—	—	38	19	36	57	89	53
Oxfordshire	1	0	4	3	7	4	4	4
Surrey	18	19	27	14	11	9	13	24
West Sussex	29	8	31	8	9	8	27	11
Bath and North East Somerset	3	0	5	0	3	1	3	1
former Dorset	4	8	—	—	—	—	—	—
Bournemouth	—	—	0	0	0	1	0	2
Poole	—	—	1	2	2	3	2	0
Dorset	—	—	9	7	1	1	9	10
City of Bristol	8	6	9	5	6	6	9	4
North Somerset	7	2	5	5	3	7	8	6
former Devon	12	10	15	7	—	—	—	—
Plymouth	—	—	—	—	0	5	4	19
Torbay	—	—	—	—	2	1	2	5
Devon	—	—	—	—	6	2	18	10
South Gloucestershire	8	2	3	4	3	1	2	1
former Wiltshire	10	9	—	—	—	—	—	—
Swindon	—	—	5	2	8	2	5	5
Wiltshire	—	—	5	13	17	4	10	4
Cornwall	6	3	6	2	6	0	8	3
Isles of Scilly	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gloucestershire	12	2	3	5	5	4	20	5
Somerset	0	0	1	3	7	4	6	4
England	1,088	726	1,391	968	1,376	939	1,420	1,242

The supply of teachers in Scotland is the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament, and in Wales, the responsibility of the National Assembly for Wales.

Numeracy and Literacy Strategies (Hampstead and Highgate)

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the number of children *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* in Hampstead and Highgate who have benefited from current national numeracy and literacy strategies. [127852]

Ms Estelle Morris: Up to 4,000,000 pupils in England, and 4,600 pupils in Hampstead and Highgate, have benefited from the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy and National Numeracy Strategy in September 1998 and September 1999 respectively.

Women

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the findings of the consultation conducted by the Women's Unit in respect of stereotyping experienced by girls in subject and career choice counselling. [127248]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 26 June 2000]:* Young people were consulted about their job expectations and asked to examine the different expectations of boys and girls. Young women felt that despite their better performance than boys in school exams, the full range of career choices was not always presented to them. As a result we have developed a range of work experience programmes for girls with major companies and the Ministry of Defence to give girls an experience of different non-traditional work areas such as IT, engineering, construction, property and the armed forces.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans have been made for the summit for Women in the New Economy. [127250]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 26 June 2000]:* The Government are planning to organise a two day event early next year that will focus on women in the UK maximising their potential in the labour market, whether it be starting a business, returning to work, considering a career change, or wishing to progress within their current organisation. Women from a range of backgrounds and locations will be given the opportunity to explore the choices available. The event will include exhibitors, (both public and private sector), workshops and seminars and women will be encouraged to participate in all of these.

Highly Able Pupils

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to develop provision for highly able pupils in schools. [127253]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 27 June 2000]:* From this September, the gifted and talented strand of Excellence in Cities will be improving provision in over 20 per cent. of maintained secondary schools, and a pilot scheme will be operating in some 400 primary schools. This summer's national programme of 500 summer schools for gifted and talented pupils aged 10–14 will extend to almost all local education authorities and Education Action Zones. Planned expenditure for this financial year is over £40 million. Future provision depends on the outcomes of the spending review.

Education Funding

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much money Devon LEA received from *(a)* his Department through the SSA, *(b)* New Deal for Schools and *(c)* public-private partnership schemes in the last twelve months. [128000]

Ms Estelle Morris: Devon's education SSA for 1999–2000 was £243.8 million, an increase of £15.9 million on the previous year. £7,416,360 was allocated to Devon LEA on 11 April 2000 through the New Deal for Schools programme. No allocations have been made to Devon in the last 12 months for public private partnerships.

Learning and Skills Councils

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the progress being made on the appointment of the chairmen of the Local Learning and Skills Councils. [128259]

Mr. Wicks: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has today appointed the chairs of 21 of the Local Learning and Skills Councils. They are:

Local Learning and Skills Council	*Chair*
East of England	
Bedfordshire	Jim McGivern
Essex	Mike Malone-Lee
Cambridgeshire	Sal Brinton
Hertfordshire	Stelio Stefanou
Norfolk	Geoff Loades
Suffolk	Tony Preston
East Midlands	
Derbyshire	John Kirkland
Leicestershire	Ashwin Mistry
Lincolnshire	Roger Begy
Northamptonshire	Christopher Ripper
Nottinghamshire	Duncan Sedgwick
South East	
Surrey	Robert Douglas
Sussex	Norman Boyland
Oxford/Bucks/Milton Keynes	Patrick Upson
Kent/Medway	Alan Chisholm
Hampshire/Isle of Wight	Penelope Melville-Brown
Berkshire	Tom Melvin
North East	
Northumberland	Barry Morgan
Tyne and Wear	Ashley Winter
County Durham	Olivia Grant
Tees Valley	Miles Middleton

We will be announcing further appointments shortly and a list of the remaining appointments will be placed in the Library in due course.

The local Chairs bring with them a wealth of experience, not least from business, which will be a positive force for success in shaping the work of the Local Learning and Skills Councils.

School Milk (Northern Region)

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the *(a)* infant, *(b)* junior and *(c)* primary schools in the Northern Region that are in receipt of the European subsidy for school milk; and if he will make a statement. [127009]

Ms Quin: I have been asked to reply.

Of the 159 local education authorities which claim the EU School Milk Subsidy, 42 claim in the Northern Region on behalf of approximately 5,000 schools. The information requested on the breakdown between infant, junior and primary schools is not held centrally.

WALES

Poverty

10. **Ms Julie Morgan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on progress in the Joint Ministerial Committee on tackling poverty. [126703]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Joint Ministerial Committee on Poverty held its second meeting on 26 May. The Committee agreed that the Government and the devolved Administrations should participate in a joint programme to increase the take-up of the minimum income guarantee, as well as other benefits and services for pensioners.

The Committee provides an excellent opportunity for the UK Government and the devolved Administrations to work together to tackle the problems of poverty and social exclusion. It enables us to ensure that we can share information and learn from each other's best practices.

New Deal

11. **Mr. Brady:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the effectiveness of the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds in Wales. [126704]

Mr. Hanson: The New Deal has more than proved how successful it has been by achieving beyond its original target of 13,000 by employing 14,400 18 to 24-year-olds up to March 2000.

Since the New Deal was launched throughout Wales, there has been a 62 per cent. fall in the number of 18 to 24-year-olds unemployed and claiming Job Seeker's Allowance for six months or more.

24. **Mr. Martyn Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on the New Deal in Wales. [126717]

Mr. Hanson: Last month I attended a New Deal checkpoint meeting with other ministerial colleagues and colleagues from the devolved administrations, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities. We welcomed the success to date of New Deal, which had succeeded in securing jobs for some 21,500 people in Wales by the end of March this year, and discussed ways of building on this success in the future.

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on the operation of the New Deal in Wales. [126707]

Mr. Hanson: Last month I attended a New Deal checkpoint meeting with other ministerial colleagues and colleagues from the devolved administrations, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities.

The Government's aim has always been to reconnect people with the labour market, so that they can play a full and productive part in society. At the end of March 2000 over 21,000 people had entered employment through the New Deal programme in Wales.

Police Funding

12. **Mrs. Lawrence:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with Welsh Chief Constables about the funding of police authorities in Wales. [126705]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I met the Chief Constables on 17 March. We discussed a wide range of issues including developments in modern policing, and staffing and funding levels.

Joint Ministerial Committee on Health

13. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the Joint Ministerial Committee on Health which met on Friday 16 June. [126706]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The purpose of the Joint Ministerial Committee on Health was to provide an opportunity for all parts of the UK to share ideas and best practices.

I know that everyone has found the exchange of experiences a useful tool for putting together plans for the future.

Following the three meetings held so far I understand that Jane Hutt, the Assembly Health and Social Services Secretary will be making a statement to the National Assembly for Wales in July on progress in improving the NHS in Wales and her plans for further action.

Cross-border Issues

15. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had recently with the First Secretary on Welsh-English cross-border issues; and if he will make a statement. [126708]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Secretary regularly to discuss a range of issues including this one.

Where decisions affect communities on the English/Welsh border, the Assembly engages in discussions with the lead Whitehall department. I would become involved only if I were asked to intervene to help resolve a difficulty.

Sheepmeat Premium

16. **Mr. Llwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has held with the Agriculture and Rural Development Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales regarding the sheepmeat premium. [126709]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I discuss a wide range of topics with my colleagues in the National Assembly for Wales on a regular basis and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary meets the Assembly Secretary for Agriculture and Rural Development every quarter. The UK Agriculture Ministers have been in discussion to agree a UK position on the anticipated Commission proposals for reform of the sheepmeat regime, expected in the autumn. The Assembly Agriculture and Rural Development Secretary is responsible for these matters in Wales, but my office is being kept fully informed of progress.

Hunting with Hounds

17. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the impact of a ban on hunting with hounds on *(a)* the Welsh countryside and *(b)* employment, tourism and economic development in Wales. [126710]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have made no specific assessment of the impact of a ban on hunting with hounds. However I am following this issue very closely as the potential repercussions on the Welsh countryside and employment, tourism and economic development in Wales are of course of great importance to me. The decision on the merits of hunting is a matter for Parliament and a free vote. It is a matter for each Member of Parliament to reach their own conclusion in the light of information which the Burns Report has added to the debate.

21. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had this year about further transfer of powers to the Welsh Assembly relating to hunting. [126714]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I regularly discuss a wide range of topics with my colleagues both in Whitehall and the National Assembly for Wales. It is anticipated that a Government Bill containing a series of legislative options will be introduced early in the next Parliamentary Session. As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary stated in the House on 12 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 639–41 Wales and England are one common-law jurisdiction and as such the issue is not the responsibility of the National Assembly for Wales. We have no plans for a transfer of functions to the Assembly in relation to hunting.

29. **Mr. Caton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent representations he has received about banning the hunting of foxes with dogs. [126722]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have received no specific representations about banning the hunting of foxes with dogs, but am in close contact with colleagues in Whitehall as Government policy on this issue progresses.

Unemployment

18. **Mr. Jon Owen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary about the number of unemployed people in Wales in May 1997 and May 2000. [126711]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend regularly meets the First Secretary and discusses a wide range of issues including employment in Wales. In addition, I hold quarterly liaison meetings with the Assembly Secretary for Education and Training.

This Government's record of continuing commitment to getting people off benefits and back into work is highlighted by the fact that the number of claimants on Jobseeker's Allowance for April 2000 has been significantly reduced to 59,170 compared to 80,322 for May 1997 when this Government took office.

22. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on assistance for long-term unemployed people over the age of 25 years. [126715]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The New Deal programmes, Work Based Learning for Adults, "Employment Zones", and a range of Employment Service programmes provide training to equip workless people aged 25 and over with the skills they need to gain and hold down a job. The latest statistical information on the "New Deal for 25 Plus" indicates that, in Wales, 13,200 people had joined the programme, and 2,700 had entered employment (of which 2,300 had secured sustained jobs).

Some improvements, including the introduction of a New Deal Gateway and access to a range of external Gateway services, were put in place on the "New Deal for 25 Plus" in April. A more comprehensive package of measures will operate from April 2001, with the aim of broadening the attractiveness of the programme to clients by providing a wider range of opportunities.

Hospital Waiting Lists

19. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary on the impact of funding on the change in NHS waiting lists in Wales for those waiting over six months since 1 May 1997. [126712]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I regularly meet the First Secretary and the Assembly Health and Social Services Secretary to discuss the wide range of health issues affecting Wales.

The subject of waiting lists and the impact on them of additional funding allocated by the Assembly is, of course, an important part of these discussions.

Severn Bridge

20. **Mr. Loughton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussion he has had with the First Secretary on charging VAT on crossing the Severn bridge. [126713]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular discussion with the First Secretary on a wide range of transport issues and I recognise the significance of this issue to Wales.

The issue of whether to charge VAT on toll charges is presently the subject of proceedings before the European Court of Justice. We understand that the judgment of the court is not due until 12 September.

The Severn Crossings, which are mainly in England, remain the responsibility of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Assisted Areas

23. **Mr. Wigley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary of the National Assembly and with officials of the EU Commission on the introduction of the new regional development maps for Wales. [126716]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Assisted Areas map is a matter for the UK Government, but I have, of course, discussed the designation of Welsh areas with the First Secretary and the UK Government maintain close contact with both the European Commission and the National Assembly for Wales on this issue.

The Government are still in discussion with the European Commission and are pressing for early approval of the Assisted Areas map. Within the framework set by the European Commission, all concerned have tried to include, so far as possible, revised proposals reflecting local and national priorities. The Government will make an announcement when the map is approved.

NHS (Private Capital)

25. **Mr. Hammond:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary and the Welsh Health and Social Services Secretary with regard to the use of private capital in the running of the NHS. [126718]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State and I have regular discussions with the First Secretary and the Assembly Health and Social Services Secretary about the wide range of issues that affect the NHS in Wales.

It is encouraging to see the range of schemes that are being provided under the Private Finance Initiative.

Local Government

26. **Mr. Öpik:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the consequences arising

from the proposed Cabinet structure for local government for those councils which consist mainly of independent councillors. [126719]

Mr. Hanson: I have discussed the proposals with Welsh local councils individually and with the WLGA. The majority of Welsh councils—including some of those consisting mainly of independents—are currently piloting some form of executive style decision making. We have made no general assessment of pilots individual councils are currently pursuing, however these innovations are being carried out under the existing legislative framework which is not designed for executive arrangements.

The Local Government Bill [*Lords*] provides a tailor made framework for executive arrangements including cabinets and directly elected mayors. The National Assembly for Wales will have the power to make further forms of executive available to Welsh councils if appropriate.

Knowledge Economy

27. **Mrs. Betty Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on progress in the Joint Ministerial Committee on developing the knowledge economy. [126720]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The subjects covered by the Joint Ministerial Committee on the Knowledge Economy includes both responsibilities which have been transferred to the Assembly and some which have not. The Committee provides a forum for the UK Government and the devolved administrations to exchange information and best practice.

The Committee's remit includes consideration of the level and availability of Information Technology training in the UK; the uptake by business of E-Commerce processes; and liaison between the administrations on electronic procurement. The Committee's remit also covers the employment opportunities created by the knowledge economy.

Transport Links

28. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary on improving transport links between Wales and continental Europe. [126721]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Secretary regularly and discuss a wide range of transport issues. The Assembly, who have responsibility for the majority of transport policy in Wales, continue to consider transport links to continental Europe when formulating their policies.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many of the written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April have not received substantive answers, citing as the reason that the information is *(a)* not held centrally, *(b)* not held in the form requested and *(c)* not available. [128012]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The information requested is as follows: *(a)* three, *(b)* nil and *(c)* two.

In some of these answers we provided part of the information requested, while citing the above reasons for not providing all of the information requested.

Electoral System

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary about the working of the Government of Wales Act 1998 and the electoral system. [126700]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Secretary regularly to discuss a range of issues.

CABINET OFFICE

Interactive Voice Response Systems

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many Government Departments and agencies use interactive voice response systems to deal with inquiries from the general public departments. [127116]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

This matter comes under the responsibility of the Office of Government Commerce, which has been a Treasury Department since April 2000. Each Government Department is responsible for deciding the most appropriate telecommunications systems to meet its business requirements. Obtaining records from each of these on any use of interactive voice response systems to deal with public inquiries would be disproportionately costly.

Statistics

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what statistics relating to the responsibilities of her Department are collated by parliamentary constituency, indicating the dates covered in each case. [123848]

Mr. Stringer: My Department does not routinely collate any statistical data at parliamentary constituency level.

The Cabinet Office does, however, compile statistics in response to specific inquiries from hon. and right hon. Members at constituency level.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office for how many parliamentary questions tabled between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 her Department has given advice on answers; how many of these questions were instances of the same question being tabled to different Departments by the same hon. Members; and how many such questions there were. [127105]

Marjorie Mowlam: Detailed information in the form requested is not held centrally. My Department issues advice to Departments on a range of issues including Parliamentary Questions where appropriate. This is the practice adopted over many years by successive Administrations.

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many parliamentary questions were tabled to her Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April which requested information, pursuant to her previous answers. [128008]

Mr. Stringer: Between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 there were 18 parliamentary questions tabled to my Department which requested information pursuant to previous answers.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Judicial Appointments

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will place in the Library a copy of the report into QC and judicial appointments by Dr. Kate Malleson. [127727]

Jane Kennedy: Dr. Kate Malleson and Dr. Fareda Banda recently completed research into the factors that affect decisions to apply for judicial appointments and Queen's Counsel. A copy of their report has been placed in the Library.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the findings of the independent report commissioned by his Department from Dr. Kate Malleson into the system of appointment of QCs and judges. [127726]

Jane Kennedy: In December 1998, the Lord Chancellor's Department commissioned research into the factors that affect decisions to apply for judicial appointment and Queen's Counsel. Dr. Kate Malleson and Dr. Fareda Banda undertook the research and their report was published on 15 June 2000. The research found that there is a wide range of factors that affect decisions to apply for judicial appointment and/or Queen's Counsel. Some respondents did not have a judicial appointment in their career plan, while others were concerned about the consultation procedures for assessing candidates for judicial office; concerns based on largely inaccurate perceptions of how the system actually works. The report made no findings into the system of appointment of QCs and judges.

Conveyancing

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on progress with the trials of the new system for home buying and selling. [127700]

Mr. Lock: The seller's information pack pilot project under way in Bristol is now two thirds complete. Citizens' workshops to test how packs might operate in relation to lower value properties have been undertaken in Burnley and Bradford. A summary of the interim research findings was published on 27 June and copies have been placed in the House of Commons Library. A final research report is expected to be published later in the year.

Family Law

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Board on Family law plans to publish its Third Annual report. [128442]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor's Advisory Board on Family Law has today published its Third Annual Report and copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 29 June 2000

HEALTH

Breast Screening

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the North of London Breast Screening Unit based at Edgware Community Hospital; and what proposals he has arising out of that assessment. [126161]

Yvette Cooper: As part of its regular visiting programme, the London Region Breast Screening Quality Assurance Reference Centre visited the North of London Breast Screening Service on 25 November 1999. Following that visit, a number of recommendations were made to strengthen the service and improve quality. An action plan taking account of them is due to be submitted shortly to the region's quality assurance director.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) on what date and at what location a mobile breast screening unit last operated in Brent; [126082]

(2) what bids he has received from Brent and Harrow Health Authority for funding from the New Opportunities Fund to provide additional mobile breast screening units; [126160]

(3) on what date and at what location a mobile breast screening unit last made a visit in the Brent and Harrow Health Authority Area; [126081]

(4) how many mobile breast screening units serve the Brent and Harrow Health Authority area; how many of these are fully functioning; and how many of the fully-functioning mobile breast screening units serving that area have been mobile in the year 2000 to date. [126164]

Yvette Cooper: There is currently one mobile breast screening unit that serves the Brent and Harrow Health Authority area. This unit is fully functional and forms a part of the North of London Breast Screening Service based at Edgware Community Hospital, which is managed by the Barnet and Chase Farm Hospitals National Health Service Trust. The service provides breast screening for the population of Brent and Harrow, Barnet and part of West Hertfordshire Health Authorities. Following a successful bid from the Barnet and Chase Farm Hospitals Trust, the New Opportunities Fund notified the trust in December 1999 that it would provide the capital necessary for the replacement of this and one other unit and for the purchase of one additional trailer. The London Regional Office of the NHS Executive has agreed to meet capital costs for associated equipment.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what delays there have been in *(a)* assessing women who have been found to have abnormal mammograms and *(b)* reporting results to such women in the Brent and Harrow Health Area in the past year. [126163]

Yvette Cooper: The national standard is that women should be assessed within three weeks. During the period 1 April 1999 to 31 August 1999, the time taken for assessment of women in the Brent and Harrow Health Authority area whose mammograms were abnormal was:

less than three weeks: 30 women (23.62 per cent.)

four weeks: 55 women (43.30 per cent.)

five weeks and over: 42 women (33.08 per cent.)

Source:

NHS Breast Screening Programme—London Quality Assurance Reference Centre.

All women should be given an outline of the diagnosis on the day of assessment and, if any further results were to be given, would return within a week to receive them.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the spending *(a)* in the current financial year, *(b)* committed and *(c)* projected on breast screening, assessment and surgery of (i) Brent and Harrow Health Authority, (ii) Barnet Health Authority, (iii) Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow Health Authority, (iv) Hillingdon Health Authority, (v) Camden and Islington Health Authority and (vi) Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster Health Authority. [126159]

Yvette Cooper: Data in the form requested are not held centrally. The following figures are for individual health authorities spending in 2000–01 on breast screening services:

	£000
Brent and Harrow Health Authority	343
Barnet Health Authority	245
Ealing Hammersmith and Hounslow Health Authority	547
Hillingdon Health Authority	202
Camden and Islington Health Authority	292
Kensington Chelsea and Westminster Health Authority	290

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of women *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the Brent and Harrow Health Authority Area receive regular screening within the time periods recommended by his Department for the different age groups. [126165]

Yvette Cooper: Women in the target age group 50 to 64 are invited for breast screening every three years. Information about coverage of the target age group for 1999, the latest year available, is in the table.

	Eligible population (thousand)	*Coverage percentage*[1]
England	4,261.5	67.6
Brent and Harrow HA	39.2	58.3

[1] Less than three years since last test

Source:

Form KC62

Statistics Division SD2B

Infertility Treatment

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many representations he has received in the last 12 months for increasing infertility treatment provision; and if he will make a statement. [126270]

Yvette Cooper: We have received 251 representations for increasing infertility treatment in the last 12 months.

We share the concerns about the postcode lottery in infertility services. We will shortly be publishing a survey into infertility provision across the country which demonstrates variations in the service. The Department will be examining ways to tackle the postcode lottery while continuing to target our priority areas of cancer and heart disease.

Alcoholism

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the total cost was of treatment services for alcoholics and alcoholism, including in-patient and out-patient care and prevention schemes, in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980, *(c)* 1990 and *(d)* 1999. [126837]

Yvette Cooper: Estimates of the cost to the National Health Service of alcohol-related illnesses and injuries vary widely. The total cost of alcohol-related illnesses treated by hospitals is information that is not collected centrally and therefore no data are available for the periods in question.

The most recent academic estimate of which we are aware is for the costs of alcohol misuse in the NHS in England and Wales in 1992 and is reproduced in the table.

£ million

	Cost
Inpatient costs—direct alcohol diagnosis	40.8
Inpatient costs—other alcohol-related diagnosis	120.2
General practice costs	3.1
Total	164.0

Source:
Health Education Authority: Health Update: Alcohol (1997)—after Godfrey, C. and Hardman, G. (1994))

Heart Disease

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the incidence was of *(a)* pulmonary heart disease, *(b)* chronic obstructive pulmonary heart disease and *(c)* lung cancer in (i) 1970, (ii) 1980, (iii) 1990 and (iv) 1999; and how much it cost to treat each of those diseases in those years. [126825]

Yvette Cooper: Information about the incidence of pulmonary heart disease (PHD) and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is derived from the morbidity studies from general practice in the years 1991–92 (the latest year available), 1981–82 and 1971–72. Figures in the table represent patients in England and Wales who consulted their GP for the first time.

per 10,000 population

	PHD	*COPD*
1971–72	4.0	84
1981–82	2.0	122
1991–92	more than 0.5	107

In order not to place too large a burden on the National Health Service, data collected centrally on expenditure do not permit analysis at the level of detail requested.

Office for National Statistics data shows that the number and rates per 100,000 of new cases of lung cancer in 1971, 1980, 1990 and 1996 (provisional figures) are as follows:

Lung cancer—number and rates per 100,000 new cases, England and Wales

	1971	*1980*	*1990*	*1996*[1]
Number of registrations				
Male	25,711	27,791	25,037	22,300
Female	5,767	8,837	11,567	12,700
Age standardised rate per 100,000 population[2]				
Male	108.8	110.0	91.8	77.2
Female	19.2	27.2	32.8	35.1

[1] Provisional
[2] Directly age standardised using the European standard population
Source:
Office for National Statistics

Information on the cost of treatment by cancer site is not available.

Midwives

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many midwives were in training in NHS hospitals in the Greater London area on 1 May. [127869]

Mr. Denham: The responsibility for the training of midwives rests with higher education institutions rather than National Health Service trusts. Trusts do however provide clinical placements for student midwives and continuing professional development opportunities. The information requested is not collected centrally.

Beta Interferon

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to receive from NICE its assessment of the efficacy of beta interferon in treating persons with MS. [127860]

Mr. Denham: I understand that the National Institute for Clinical Excellence plans to issue its guidance to the National Health Service in early August, unless one of the parties concerned appeals formally against the outcome of the appraisal.

Foster Care

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his plans to provide for young people to remain in foster care beyond the age of 18 years. [128315]

Mr. Hutton: Under the Children Act 1989, children can be looked after until they reach the age of 18. Foster care therefore comes to an end at 18. However, it would be possible, if desired, for the young person to continue to live with his former foster parents, for example under a supported lodgings arrangement. In addition, under section 20(5) of the Children Act a council can provide accommodation in a community home for a person aged between 16 and 21 should his welfare require it.

The Children (Leaving Care) Bill does not affect either of these provisions. However, the Bill does create significant new aftercare duties which will require councils to continue to assist care leavers, should their welfare require it, until they are 21, or beyond if they are still in an agreed programme of education or training.

Waterhouse Report

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he intends to publish the Government's response to the report of the Tribunal of Inquiry into the abuse of children in care in the former county council areas of Gwynedd and Clwyd since 1974, entitled "Lost in Care". [128313]

Mr. Hutton: I am pleased to announce that the Government's response to Sir Ronald Waterhouse's report into the tragic events in North Wales is being published today. The response is called "Learning the Lessons" and copies have been placed in the Vote Office and the Library.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Income Support

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioner claimants of income support there were in *(a)* the North East, *(b)* the City of Newcastle upon Tyne and *(c)* the constituency of Newcastle upon Tyne and what the average payment of income support was in each of the last three years; how many claimants of the pensioners' income guarantee there now are for the same areas; and what was the average payment of income support in each of the last three years. [127973]

Mr. Bayley: The Minimum Income Guarantee is delivered through Income Support. It was designed to provide poorer pensioners with a higher income threshold and this April was increased in line with average earnings. The current rates are £78.45 for a single pensioner and £121.95 for a couple. The information is in the table.

Income Support pensioners in Newcastle Central Parliamentary constituency, Newcastle City local authority, and North-east Government Office region—February 1998 to 2000

	Number	*Average weekly amount (£)*
North-east		
February 1998	93,600	36.19
February 1999	91,200	36.58
February 2000	91,400	38.71
Newcastle Central PC		
February 1998	3,600	31.70
February 1999	3,500	33.78
February 2000	3,500	40.11
Newcastle City LA		
February 1998	11,500	32.89
February 1999	10,900	34.88
February 2000	11,400	37.84

Notes:

1. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.
2. Pensioners are defined as benefit units where the claimant, and/or partner are aged 60 or over.
3. Figures are rounded to the nearest hundred.

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiries, February 1998 to 2000

Winter Fuel Allowance

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people over 60 in Morecambe and Lunesdale are eligible for the Winter Fuel Allowance. [127642]

Angela Eagle: In the previous winter (1999–2000), 18,928 people in the Morecambe and Lunesdale constituency received a winter fuel payment automatically, by virtue of their entitlement to a Social Security benefit. Actual numbers of beneficiaries for winter 2000 will not be known until later in the year (the qualifying week is 18 September 2000). In addition 10,087 claims forms/ mailshots have also been issued to people in the constituency, who based on Departmental records, may be eligible for winter fuel payments for both previous winters and this coming winter as a result of the European Court judgment.

A national and regional advertising campaign will commence early July 2000 to encourage people who have not received a claim form to contact the Winter Fuel Helpline.

ACT (Fraud Savings)

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the fraud savings resulting from automation of benefit payments at post offices. [126521]

Mr. Rooker: The move to Automated Credit Transfer as the normal method of payment will bring significant savings from reduced levels of fraud. The move will begin in 2003, but full savings will not be realised until 2005, when the transition from current paper based methods of payment is complete.

A large number of fraud prevention measures are in place to manage the fraud risk relating to order books and girocheques but latest figures indicate that despite these measures around £100 million was lost in 1998–99.

The modernisation and automation of methods of payment will virtually eliminate instrument of payment fraud.

Benefit Fraud Inspectorate

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will publish the reports of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of Southwark and Maidenhead councils; and what arrangements have been made to support local authorities in their efforts to counter Housing and Council Tax Benefit fraud through the promotion of good practice guidance. [128863]

Mr. Rooker: Benefit Fraud Inspectorate reports have been published today in respect of Southwark and Windsor and Maidenhead Councils. From these reports, and others, it is clear that many local authorities are failing to reach adequate standards of performance to secure Housing and Council Tax Benefit administration and counter the threat of fraud.

We have already introduced a number of initiatives aimed at helping councils and I am pleased to announce another measure that will provide practical support. The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) has today published its second Local Authority Good Practice Guide. This Guide

provides first hand experience from the BFI's inspection work and addresses a large range of issues. The BFI has worked closely with other Agencies as well as council staff to provide authorities with an in-depth understanding of what risks and threats they face, as well as various measures that can be taken to counter them.

This is an important step forward in the intelligence available to authorities and one I expect will be used. The BFI's reports provide an early warning on local authority benefit performance standards and I will be monitoring the progress of authorities taking up these good practices through future inspection reports.

Copies of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate reports and the Local Authority Good Practice Guide have been placed in the Library.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Access Funds

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the report of the Review of Access Funds and Hardship Loans will be available. [128757]

Mr. Wicks: Copies of the Report have today been placed in the Library of the House. My noble Friend the Minister for Education and Employment is sending copies of the Executive Summary to every higher education and further education institution which administers Access Funds or Hardship Loans in England and Wales.

The Review looked at ways in which these two schemes can be used more effectively to widen access and prevent hardship, with a particular emphasis on mature students. My right hon. Friend attaches great importance to widening access and £87 million will be available next year through the Access Bursary and Hardship Funds. Hardship Loans were introduced by this Government to provide extra targeted help for students in financial difficulty.

The Review concluded that changes in the arrangements for offering help to students through these schemes were needed. The Report contains a total of 20 recommendations on administration of the Funds, as well as further support for mature students. Many of the recommendations addressed to the Department have already been implemented or are being put in place for 2000–01.

A package of measures to provide additional help for mature and disadvantaged students was announced on 25 January. This package includes £17 million for non-repayable Bursaries in 2000–01 for mature students; a new Childcare Grant from 2001–02 and £10 million for Opportunity Bursaries to improve access to higher education for bright pupils from lower socio-economic groups. In addition, we have provided £2 million to help higher education institutions with the cost of administering the Bursaries for mature students in 2000–01.

"Teachers"

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what has been the total cost of the magazine called "Teachers" since its inception. [128067]

Mr. Wills: The average cost of each issue of "Teachers" magazine is 32p per head. The magazine is subsidised by advertising which keeps this cost down.

The magazine is around £108,000 an issue or £650,000 a year. The magazine was launched in February 1999 and is published six times a year. We have published 10 issues of the magazine so far.

The magazine is a simple and effective way of communicating directly with teachers. It gives professional advice and provides a platform to share good practice to help raise standards.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April have not received substantive answers, citing as the reason *(a)* commercial and *(b)* other confidentiality. [128016]

Mr. Wills: Of replies to parliamentary questions tabled to the Department during the period stated, five concerned matters which were commercial in confidence, two stated information was commercially confidential and one referred to a document which was commercially sensitive.

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on how many occasions he has deposited papers in the Library in response to parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April. [127674]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 26 June 2000]:* Papers were deposited in the Libraries in response to parliamentary questions on 60 occasions between the dates in question.

New Deal

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* small, *(b)* medium and *(c)* large businesses in (i) Coventry and (ii) the UK are participating in the New Deal. [127456]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 27 June 2000]:* Over 73,000 employers have signed employer agreements nationally, 355 of whom are in the Coventry area. The majority of agreements are at local level, with small and medium sized businesses. Many thousands of other employers who have not signed agreements also participate in New Deal, for example by employing New Dealers in unsubsidised jobs.

Medical Students

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many medical students were at medical schools in the UK on 1 April. [127848]

Mr. Wicks: Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency show the number of full-time first degree medical students in the UK as at 1 December was 23,700.

Disability Access

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he is taking to encourage employers to improve facilities for disabled access to toilets. [127599]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 27 June 2000]:* I have been asked to reply.

Under health and safety legislation employers are required to ensure that suitable and sufficient toilet facilities are provided for all employees. Therefore, any worker with a disability must have access to toilet and other welfare facilities that are suitable for his or her use. In addition, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 also places a duty on an employer who has 15 or more employees to provide reasonable adjustments for disabled employees to ensure that they are not substantially disadvantaged. This could include providing access to toilet facilities. The newly formed Disability Rights Commission will be working to help employees enforce their rights and employers to understand their duties under the Act.

In the case of new buildings Part M of the Building Regulations covers access and facilities for disabled people and all new employment buildings are required to make reasonable provision for the sanitary arrangements of disabled people.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

ICT Access

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what Government help is available to provide access to the internet for poorer individuals. [127631]

Mr. Wills: I have been asked to reply.

We are taking forward a range of measures to help those on low incomes and benefits to access the internet. Excellent progress is being made in improving computer:pupil ratios to ensure that, in future, school leavers are able to use and benefit from new technologies.

We are providing £252 million to fund around 700 ICT learning centres in England. These centres are targeted within the 2,000 most deprived local authority wards, and rural areas with significant transport and deprivation problems. They will support disadvantaged client groups with low or no ICT skills.

50,000 additional free computer training courses will be available for jobless people across the country. We are also establishing a pilot scheme to wire up all the homes in some of our most deprived communities. And we are introducing the "Computers within Reach" pilot scheme to enable around 100,000 low-income learners and families to acquire reconditioned computers. We will continue to work with partners and the private sector to address the issue of closing the digital divide.

Small Business Unit

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what expertise the Small Business Unit has to advise farmers on diversification; and if he will make a statement. [128052]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 28 June 2000]:* The new service, which will offer tailored business advice to help farmers faced with fundamental changes in their marketplace to develop better business practices and take strategic decisions about the future of their businesses, will be delivered through the Small Business Service, working with the Business Link partnerships, other relevant organisations (eg the NFU, Lantra) and the farming industry. Farm Business Advisers delivering the service on the ground will have business expertise and knowledge of the farming industry and should be well placed to offer advice on diversification.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on how many occasions he deposited papers in the Library in response to parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April. [128011]

Mr. Byers: My Department deposited in the Library papers associated with 43 parliamentary questions tabled between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000.

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many of the written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 have not received substantive answers, citing as the reason commercial confidentiality or other confidentiality. [127436]

Mr. Byers: Answers to 11 written parliamentary questions tabled between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000 have not received substantive answers for reasons of commercial or other confidentiality.

Rail Locomotives

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many diesel engines for rail locomotives were manufactured in the UK in each of the last five years for which figures are available; what action he is taking to encourage passenger and freight operators to invest in UK-manufactured engines, locomotives and rolling stock; and if he will make a statement. [127408]

Mr. Alan Johnson: According to the Office for National Statistics, 103 rail traction diesel or semi-diesel engines were sold in 1996. No data have been published in the remaining years of the five-year period for reasons of commercial confidentiality. No data on production are available.

UK rail passenger and freight operating companies make their own commercial decisions on the purchase and maintenance of rolling stock and locomotives. The same applies to the manufacturers of such vehicles sourcing diesel engines.

DTI is working with the Railway Industries Association on an initiative to improve supply-chain performance within the sector.

Engineering

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which organisations were consulted on

Stage 1 of the Hawley Review Group; and if he will publish the responses of those who replied to the consultation on the stage one report. [127723]

Mr. Alan Johnson: This is a matter for the Engineering Council, whose review this is.

I understand that the Engineering Council sought views from nearly 700 organisations and individuals and is still receiving, considering and reviewing the many contributions it has had from various parts of the engineering community as part of its continuing work. Outcomes will be part of the Group's final report.

Director General of Fair Trading

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he intends to publish the report by the Director General of Fair Trading for the year 1999. [128758]

Mr. Byers: The 26th Annual Report of the Director General of Fair Trading has been published today. It covers the period from 1 January 1998 to 31 December 1999. Copies of the report have been laid before Parliament.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Staff Secondments

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many staff from his Department were seconded to private sector companies in *(a)* May 1997 to April 1998, *(b)* May 1998 to April 1999 and *(c)* May 1999 to April 2000; and if he will list in each case the companies to which staff were sent, the names and ranks of the staff involved and the duration of the secondment. [123419]

Mr. Mandelson: The information is contained in the following table.

Company	*Rank*	*Duration of secondment*
(a) May 1997 to April 1998[1]		
MTP Ltd., Springvale Business Park	Agric. Insp., Grade 3	1 June 1997 to 17 July 1998
Tyrone West 2000 Ltd., Omagh Business Complex	Agric. Insp., Grade 3	3 October 1994 to date
NI-CO	Executive Officer I	September 1992 to September 1998
NI-CO	Executive Officer I	April 1996 to January 2000
NI-CO	Deputy Principal	October 1991 to November 1997
NI-CO	Grade 7	May 1997 to September 1999
Advanced Learning	Grade 7	April 1996 to June 1999
NI Textiles & Apparel Ass	Grade 7	January 1998 to April 2000
NI-CO	Grade 7	October 1991 to May 1997
Growth Challenge	Deputy Secretary	November 1996 to date
Laganside Corporation	Assistant Secretary	1 September 1997 to 3 March 1999
WS Atkins Consultants	Higher Profession Technical Officer	7 July 1997 to 17 May 1998
PriceWaterhouseCoopers	Principal Economist	9 January 1997 to 3 January 1999
(b) May 1998 to April 1999[2]		
MTP Ltd., Springvale Business Park	Agric. Insp., Grade 3	1 June 1997 to 17 July 1998
Tyrone West 2000 Ltd., Omagh Business Complex	Agric. Insp., Grade 3	3 October 1994 to date
Ballyclo Ltd., 47 Main Street, Clogher	Agric. Insp., Group 2	2 October 1998 to 1 June 1999
NI-CO	Executive Officer I	September 1992 to September 1998
NI-CO	Executive Officer I	April 1996 to January 2000
NI-CO	Grade 7	May 1997 to September 1999
Advanced Learning Systems	Grade 7	April 1996 to June 1999
NI Textiles & Apparel Ass	Grade 7	January 1998 to April 2000
Growth Challenge	Deputy Secretary	November 1996 to date
WS Atkins Consultants	Higher Professional Technical Officer	7 July 1997 to 17 May 1998
Laganside Corporation	Senior Professional Technical Officer	25 June 1998 to date
NI Quality Centre	Staff Officer	1 February 1999 to 2 April 2000
(c) May 1999 to April 2000[3]		
Tyrone West 2000 Ltd., Omagh Business Complex	Agric. Insp., Grade 3	3 October 1994 to date
Ballyclo Ltd., 47 Main Street, Clogher	Agric. Insp., Group 2	2 October 1998 to 1 June 1999
NI-CO	Executive Officer I	April 1996 to January 2000
NI-CO	Grade 7	May 1997 to September 1999
Advanced Learning Systems	Grade 7	April 1996 to June 1999
NI Textiles & Apparel Ass	Grade 7	January 1998 to April 2000
Growth Challenge	Deputy Secretary	Growth Challenge
Laganside Corporation	Senior Professional Technical Officer	15 June 1998 to date
NI Quality Centre	Staff Officer	1 February 1999 to 2 April 2000

[1] 13 staff were seconded during this period

[2] 12 staff were seconded during this period

[3] Nine staff were seconded during this period

RUC (Annual Report)

Mr. Savidge: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he expects to make available the annual report for 1999 of the Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. [128693]

Mr. Ingram: Copies of the Chief Constable's annual report for 1999–2000 will be placed in the Library tomorrow. It is a general report on the carrying out by the RUC of their functions during 1999, which is submitted to the Police Authority for Northern Ireland and also to me for laying before Parliament in accordance with sections 48 and 49 of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on how many occasions he deposited papers in the Library in response to parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April. [128010]

Mr. Robin Cook: 25 papers were deposited in the Library in response to parliamentary questions tabled between 19 October and 20 April.

European Council

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the forthcoming business in the Council of the European Union for July and the major European Union events for the next six months. [128624]

Mr. Vaz: This calendar is primarily concerned with European Union matters, but certain other relevant events are also included. Events and dates quoted are based on the information available on the date of issue.

European calendar: July-December 2000

Date	*Venue*	*Event*
July		
3–7	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
7–8	Paris	Social Affairs Council (informal)
10–11	Brussels	General Affairs Council
15–16	Paris	Environment Council (informal)
17	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
17–18	Brussels	Agriculture Council
19	Tokyo	EU/Japan Summit
20	Brussels	Budget Council
20–21	Lille	Culture Council (informal)
27	Bangkok	ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Ministerial
28–29	Bangkok	ASEAN Post Ministerial
28–29	Marseilles	Justice and Home Affairs Council (informal)
August		
There are no Councils scheduled for this month.		
September		
2–3	Evian	Gymnich
3–5	Biarritz	Agriculture Council (informal)
15	Paris	EU/Ukraine Summit
9–10	Versailles	ECOFIN Council (informal)
18–19	Brussels	General Affairs Council
25–26	Brussels	Agriculture Council
28	Brussels	Internal Market/Consumer Council
28	—	Justice and Home Affairs Council (?)
29	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
October		
2	Luxembourg	Transport Council
2 (tbc)	Paris	EU/US Ministerial Meeting
3	Luxembourg	Telecommunications Council
9–10	Luxembourg	General Affairs Council
10	Luxembourg	Environment Council
13	Biarritz	European Council (informal)
16–17	Luxembourg	Labour and Social Affairs Council
17	Luxembourg	ECOFIN JHA Council
19–21	Seoul	Europe/Asia Summit
23	China	EU/China Summit
23–24	Luxembourg	Agriculture Council
25	Luxembourg	Education Council
30 (tbc)	Paris	EU-Russia Summit
November		
3 (tbc)	Paris	EU/Canada Ministerial
7	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
7	Brussels	Environment Council
9	Brussels	Education/Youth Council
13	Marseilles	Euro-Mediterranean Summit
14	Marseilles	Euro-Mediterranean Summit (possible)
16	Brussels	Research Council
17	Brussels	Fisheries Council
20–21	Brussels	General Affairs Council
20–21	Brussels	Agriculture Council
23	Brussels	Culture/Audio Council
23	Montbeliard	European Conference Ministerial
23–24	Brussels	Budget Council
27–2	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
27–2	Brussels	Labour and Social Affairs Council
30	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
30	Brussels	Internal Market/Consumers Council
29–30	Gaborone	EU/SADC Ministerial
December		
1	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
4–5	Brussels	General Affairs Council
4	Brussels	Telecommunications Council
5	Brussels	Energy and Industry Council
7–8	Nice	European Council
14–15	Brussels	Fisheries Council
18	Brussels	Environment Council
18	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
18	—	EU/United States Summit
19	Brussels	Environment Council
19–20	Brussels	Agriculture Council
19	—	EU/Canada Summit
20–21	Brussels	Transport Council

Diplomatic Immunity

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many serious offences were alleged to have been committed in 1999 by persons entitled to immunity by virtue of their employment by a diplomatic mission or an international organisation. [128625]

Mr. Vaz: From a community of over 17,500 persons entitled to immunity, 36 serious offences, allegedly committed by such persons, were drawn to the attention of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 1999. "Serious offences" are defined in accordance with the 1985 White Paper on Diplomatic Immunities and Privileges; i.e. as offences that would in certain circumstances carry a penalty of 12 months or more imprisonment.

Iran

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he is proposing to travel to Iran. [128754]

Mr. Hain: The visit to Iran of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs has been postponed, owing to the busy schedule and travel commitments of Dr. Kamal Kharrazi, the Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Both he and Dr. Kharrazi are keen for the visit to proceed and will be consulting to find a mutually convenient date.

Staff Secondments

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) of 11 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 337–38W, on secondments, if he will give the names, grades and job titles of the staff seconded into his Department from each organisation mentioned, stating in each case the name of the section they were seconded to and a summary of the work that they were involved with. [128242]

Mr. Battle: As soon as the information can be compiled I shall write to the hon. Member, and place a copy of my letter in the Libraries of the House.

Burma

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will take steps to discourage UK firms from promoting tourist travel to Burma. [127853]

Mr. Battle: Since 1998 we have written to tour operator associations and to travel companies drawing attention to the views of Burmese democratic leaders that tourism to Burma is inappropriate. We cannot stop British citizens choosing Burma as a holiday destination, but we hope that any who go there are aware of the political and human rights situation. They should also be aware that they have to exchange $300 on arrival. Every one of these dollars will directly support the regime.

Entry Clearance

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when a decision will be made on the application for entry clearance by Shamsad Anwar, lodged at Islamabad in November 1998, reference C4694. [128255]

Mr. Vaz: This application, by Muena Fatima and a child, Aisha Shamshad, to join Mr. Shamsad Anwar in the UK, is the subject of ongoing inquiries, including DNA testing, at our High Commission in Islamabad. I shall be writing separately to my hon. Friend to provide the background to this application.

Embassies

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the start-up costs were for each embassy established in Eastern European countries and the former states of the USSR since 1990. [127813]

Mr. Hain: It will take some time to collate the information requested. I will write to the hon. Member shortly with the information. Copies of the letter will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Sierra Leone

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what *(a)* technical and *(b)* financial assistance the Government have provided to ECOMOG in Sierra Leone. [128093]

Mr. Hain: We have provided around £5 million worth of practical support for the ECOMOG peacekeeping forces in Sierra Leone. This support included vehicles, ration packs, boots, tents, communications equipment and the funding of helicopter hours.

The ECOMOG peacekeeping force has now left Sierra Leone.

HOME DEPARTMENT

R *v.* Weir

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action he is taking following the judgment of the Court of Appeal (Criminal Division) in R *v.* Weir and the Attorney-General's Reference No. 3/1999 on 26 May. [128626]

Mr. Straw: I am looking at what steps need to be taken, including possible revisions to section 64 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984.

Cyclists

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) on how many occasions in each of the last five years cyclists have been prosecuted for exceeding the speed limit; [127980]

(2) how many prosecutions there have been in each of the last five years of cyclists for cycling the wrong way down one-way streets; [127968]

(3) how many prosecutions there have been in each of the last five years of cyclists for riding on pavements; [127971]

(4) how many prosecutions there have been in each of the last five years of cyclists for cycling through traffic lights at red; [127979]

(5) how many prosecutions there have been in each of the last five years of cyclists for using footpaths designated for pedestrians; [127969]

(6) how many prosecutions there have been of cyclists for failing to carry cycle lights at night in each of the last five years. [127970]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Available information for 1994 to 1998 taken from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database is given in the table. Data for 1999 will not be available until the autumn.

The fixed penalty system is also used for several pedal cycle offences, but information specific to such offences is not recorded centrally.

Number of defendants prosecuted for offences connected with pedal cycles, England and Wales 1994–98

Offence description	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Neglect of traffic directions	125	155	181	92	121
Riding on footpath	219	314	423	648	1,055
Failing to obey signal	19	11	24	43	19
Lighting and reflector offences	293	332	382	412	624
Other pedal cycle offences	2	11	16	7	16

Notes:

1. The offence of 'failing to comply with traffic light signals' may be recorded under 'Neglect of traffic directions', Failing to obey signal' or 'Other pedal cycle offence'.
2. The offence of 'Cycling the wrong way down a one-way street' may be recorded under 'Neglect of traffic direction' or 'Other pedal cycle offence'.
3. The offence of 'exceeding the speed limit' may be recorded under 'Neglect of traffic directions' or 'Other pedal cycle offence'.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many compensation claims for lost passports were lodged with the Immigration and Nationality Directorate in each year since 1992. [127975]

Mrs. Roche: The number of claims for lost passports lodged in the last four financial years is set out in the table. Information for earlier years is not available.

	Number
1996–97	30
1997–98	60
1998–99	85
1999–2000	94

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the cost to the Immigration and Nationality Directorate of settling compensation claims for lost passports in each year since 1992. [127976]

Mrs. Roche: The cost of settling claims for lost passports in each of the last four financial years is set out in the table. Information for previous years is not available.

	£
1996–97	3,000
1997–98	11,500
1998–99	12,000
1999–2000	20,000

Clandestine Entrants

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many notices of objection lodged by hauliers allegedly transporting clandestine entrants into the UK have been *(a)* upheld and *(b)* rejected in each month since the coming into force of the Carriers' Liability (Clandestine Entrants and Sale of Transporters) Regulations 2000. [127874]

Mrs. Roche: As at 25 June 2000, there have been 159 cases where notices of objection have been lodged against a penalty imposed in accordance with the Civil Penalty provisions of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Of those that have been determined, four notices of objection have been upheld and 62 rejected.

It is not possible to break these figures down on a monthly basis.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many haulage contractors were charged under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, in each month since April, with bringing clandestine entrants into the UK. [127978]

Mrs. Roche: The number of haulage contractors charged under the Civil Penalty provisions of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 in each month since April was:

Month	*Number*
April	72
May	84
June (to 25)	55
Total	211

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the average fine imposed on hauliers for transporting clandestine entrants into the UK since the coming into force of the Carriers' Liability (Clandestine Entrants and Sale of Transporters) Regulations 2000. [127873]

Mrs. Roche: The Carriers' Liability (Clandestine Entrants and Sales of Transporters) Regulations 2000 enables the imposition of a penalty of £2,000 for each clandestine entrant transported to the United Kingdom.

As at 25 June, 211 penalty notices, with a total value of £2,336,000 had been served in relation to 1,168 clandestine entrants. Twenty-four of the penalty notices served relate to vehicles that between them carried 367 clandestine entrants, with an average penalty of £30,000 in respect of 15 entrants for each vehicle. The remaining 187 penalties relate to vehicles that between them carried 801 clandestine entrants, with an average penalty of £8,000 in respect of four entrants for each vehicle.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the value of fines levied on hauliers charged under the Carriers' Liability (Clandestine Entrants and Sale of Transporters) Regulations 2000 in each month since April. [127872]

Mrs. Roche: As at 25 June, the value of penalties raised on persons under the Carriers' Liability (Clandestine Entrants and Sales of Transporters) Regulations 2000 in each month since April were as follows:

Month	£
April	848,000
May	838,000
June	650,000
Total	2,336,000

Criminal Assets

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on progress made at the Council of Ministers on fixing minimum standards for tracing and confiscating assets from crime. [128258]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The European Union Heads of State and Government meeting at the special European Council at Tampere in October 1999 called for action with regard to the approximation of criminal law and procedures on money laundering, with particular reference to the tracing, freezing and confiscation of the proceeds of crime. It has been proposed that a new ad hoc working group, which has still to be set up, will carry this work forward.

Separate discussions are taking place with regard to the application of the principle of mutual recognition to asset freezing and restraint. This will involve consideration of the minimum standards which should be applied to permit recognition of orders between member states.

The incoming French Presidency of the European Union has made action against financial crime and money laundering one of its priorities and it is clear that this will involve some action in the area of the tracing and confiscation of the proceeds of crime.

Staff Secondments

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 19 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 471W, on secondments, if he will give the names, grades and job titles of the staff seconded into his Department from each organisation mentioned, stating in each case the name of the section they were seconded to and a summary of the work that they were involved with. [128249]

Mr. Straw: Secondments and attachments are part of the Interchange Initiative which promotes the exchange of people and good practice between the civil service and other organisations. Before an Interchange can occur all parties must be satisfied that no conflict of interest arises.

The details of the two private sector staff seconded to my Department are as follows:

The first secondee was from Barclay's Bank to the Planning, Finance and Performance Group from January 1997 to January 1999. The secondee was employed on various project management activities.

The second secondee is from PriceWaterhouseCoopers to the Immigration and Nationality Directorate for 12 months from 4 August 1999. The secondee has had responsibility for various project management and operational activities.

Police Secondments

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers are seconded on duty abroad; how many officers were seconded in each of the previous five years; and if he will make a statement. [128165]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Each police force keeps its own records and comprehensive figures are not currently held centrally. Figures are available on the number of United Kingdom police officers participating in international peace-keeping missions overseas. On 28 June 2000, the United Kingdom had 264 police officers working in Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo and East Timor.

Departmental Bills

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Bills his Department has sponsored in each of the last 20 years; how many have been enacted; and if he will list the Bills and Acts per year. [128164]

Mr. Straw: Since the 1979–80 parliamentary session, the Home Office has sponsored 89 Bills, of which 79 have passed into law. The Acts listed are in Royal Assent order for their respective session followed by details of any unsuccessful legislation.

1979–80 Session

- European Assembly (Pay and Pensions) Act 1979
- Isle of Man Act 1979
- Police Negotiating Board Act 1980
- Imprisonment (Temporary Provisions) Act 1980
- Broadcasting Act 1980
- Protection of Official Information Bill

1980–81 Session

- European Assembly Elections Act 1981
- Representation of the People Act 1981
- Criminal Attempts Act 1981
- British Nationality Act 1981

1981–82 Session

- Fire Service College Board (Abolition) Act 1982
- Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982
- Criminal Justice Act 1982

1982–83 Session

- Nuclear Material (Offences) Act 1983
- Marriage Act 1983
- Data Protection Bill[1]
- Police and Criminal Evidence Bill[1]
- Telecommunications Bill[1]

1983–84 Session

- Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1984
- Data Protection Act 1984
- Juries (Disqualification) Act 1984

1984–85 Session

- Prosecution of Offences Act 1985
- Representation of the People Act 1985
- Interception of Communications Act 1985
- Sporting Events (Control of Alcohol Etc.) Act 1985

1985–86 Session

- Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986
- Drug Trafficking Offences Act 1986
- Public Order Act 1986
- Shops Bill

1986–87 Session
Broadcasting Act 1987
Criminal Justice Act 1987[2]
Fire Safety and Safety of Places of Sport Act 1987
Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act 1987
1987–88 Session
Immigration Act 1988
Licensing Act 1988
Criminal Justice Act 1988
Firearms (Amendment) Act 1988
1988–89 Session
Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1989
Security Service Act 1989
Official Secrets Act 1989
Police Officers (Central Service) Act 1989
Representation of the People Act 1989
1989–90 Session
Criminal Justice (International Co-operation) Act 1990
British Nationality (Hong Kong) Act 1990
Broadcasting Act 1990
War Crimes Bill
1990–91 Session
War Crimes Act 1991
Maintenance Enforcement Act 1991
Criminal Justice Act 1991
Dangerous Dogs Act 1991
1991–92 Session
Aggravated Vehicle Taking Act 1992
Charities Act 1992
Prison Security Act 1992
Asylum Bill[1]
1992–93 Session
Parliamentary Boundary Commission Act 1992
Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993
Criminal Justice Act 1993
National Lottery Act 1993
European Parliamentary Elections Act 1993
1993–94 Session
Sunday Trading Act 1994
Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994
Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994
1994–95 Session
Licensing (Sunday Hours) Act 1995
Criminal Appeal Act 1995
Criminal Injuries Compensation Act 1995
1995–96 Session
Prevention of Terrorism (Additional Powers) Act 1996
Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act 1996
Security Service Act 1996
Asylum and Immigration Act 1996
1996–97 Session
Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997
Crime (Sentences) Act 1997
Police Act 1997
Police and Firemen's Pensions Act 1997
Protection from Harassment Act 1997
Sex Offenders Act 1997
1997–98 Session
Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997
Special Immigration Appeals Commission Act 1997
Data Protection Act 1998
Crime and Disorder Act 1998
Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Act 1998
Human Rights Act 1998
Registration of Political Parties Act 1998
European Parliamentary Elections Bill[1]
1998–99 Session
European Parliamentary Elections Act 1999
Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999
Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill
1999–2000 Session
Representation of the People Act 2000
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill.

The following Home Office Bills for the 1999–2000 session are currently before the House:
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial)(No.2) Bill
Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill
Disqualifications Bill
Freedom of Information
Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill
Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill
Terrorism Bill

[1] Fell at dissolution.

[2] By agreement with the Opposition Parties in both Houses, Part 1 of this Bill dealing with the setting up of the Serious Fraud Office was enacted before Dissolution: the rest of the Bill was lost.

Police Radio Frequencies

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his policy in relation to the future of the existing police radio frequencies; what is the estimated commercial value of expected surplus frequencies; what is his current estimated timescale for the changes to the use of radio frequencies; and if he will make a statement. [128166]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The majority of the radio frequencies currently used by the police service, in England and Wales, will be returned to the central Government pool once the Public Safety Radio Communications service (PSRCS) is fully operational and the frequencies are no longer required. This is expected to occur in 2005.

The spectrum returned will be used to assist in re-organising the civil spectrum to improve its quality by aligning it with usage in Europe. This re-alignment will take many years and we do not expect that any parts of the spectrum currently used by the Home Office will be available for sale or for further allocation until this programme has been completed.

Police Funding

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to alter the formula for funding police forces in England and Wales; [126424]

(2) what plans he has to introduce a sparsity factor into the process of allocating funds to rural police forces; [126426]

(3) if it is his policy to accept the findings of the ORH study into police funding in respect of the additional costs of policing sparsely populated rural areas; [126423]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government set considerable store by stability in the grant system to help police authorities plan ahead. In July 1998, the Government announced a three-year freeze on changes to Standard Spending Assessment funding formulae pending the wide ranging review of the revenue support grant system across local government. In view of the moratorium, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary decided that it would not be appropriate to make substantive changes to the method of police grant distribution for 2000–01. That position remains unchanged.

The fundings of the Operational Research in Health (ORH) report on policing areas of rural sparsity were considered by a Home Office chaired Working Group, which includes representatives of the police service, police authorities and local authorities. That report was placed in the Library. Implementing the findings of the report would have meant the redistribution of around £30 million of funding almost entirely from the metropolitan forces to shire forces where call response times are longer. There was no agreement in the working group about the best way to proceed.

However, the opportunity has now arisen as a result of additional funds being made available through the budget, for the Government to recognise the special needs of rural policing. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has therefore agreed to make £15 million available for the remainder of this year to enhance the policing service in rural areas at no cost to the metropolitan forces. Funding for future years will be considered as part of the spending review 2000 process.

TREASURY

Spectrum Auction

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what account under resource accounting rules is to be taken of the right of third generation mobile spectrum licensees to amortise the cost of their licences from the amount of their future taxable profits and of the consequential future reduction in tax revenue. [128071]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 28 June 2000]:* Tax relief for the amortisation of third generation spectrum licence costs will reduce corporation tax yields over the lives of the licences. Currently, the resource accounting rules apply only to departmental resource accounts and not to corporation tax. However, subject to the passing of the Government Resources and Accounts Bill, the same accounting principles will apply in due course to the Whole of Government Accounts, which will include corporation tax revenue.

Children's Tax Credit

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the total cost of administering the Child Tax Credit in financial year 2001–02; and if he will make a statement. [128167]

Dawn Primarolo: The administration of the children's tax credit during the financial year 2001–02 will be part of the Inland Revenue's routine work and will not be separately identified in running costs.

Working Families Tax Credit

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how many people in Hampstead and Highgate benefit from the *(a)* child care tax credit, *(b)* Sure Start maternity grant and *(c)* New Deal for Lone Parents; [127851]

(2) how many families in Hampstead and Highgate receive the Working Families tax Credit; and how many will benefit from changes allowing claims to be made immediately after the birth of a child; [127911]

Dawn Primarolo: For a provisional estimate of the number of recipients of Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) in Hampstead and Highgate at the end of April 2000, I refer my hon. Friend to my answer given on 28 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 537W to my hon. Friend the Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas).

It is estimated that, in a full year, up to 70,000 families could benefit from the reforms to WFTC for mothers of new children announced in this year's Budget. No estimate is available of the number of these in Hampstead and Highgate.

About 10 per cent. of awards of Working Families Tax Credit include a child care tax credit. We are unable to provide a reliable estimate of the number of awards with a child care tax credit in Hampstead and Highgate.

The Sure Start maternity grant has been claimable from 27 March 2000 for babies due on or after 11 June and is gradually replacing the social fund maternity payment. I understand from the Department of Social Security (DSS) that figures are not available by constituency.

I understand from the Department for Social Security that, since October 1998, 40 lone parents in Hampstead and Highgate have found employment as a consequence of the New Deal for Lone Parents, and 21 lone parents have started Training and Education. 174 lone parents have joined the programme.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families in *(a)* Coventry, South, *(b)* the West Midlands region and *(c)* nationally (i) receive the Working Families Tax Credit and (ii) will benefit from the changes allowing families to make a claim as soon as a baby is born. [127252]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 26 June 2000]:* The number of families in receipt of the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) at the end of April 2000 is provisionally estimated at 1,053,000, of which 107,000 were in the West Midlands region.

I refer my hon. Friend to my answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas) on 28 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 537W for the number of WFTC awards in Coventry, South.

It is estimated that, in a full year, up to 70,000 families could benefit from the reforms to WFTC for mothers of new children announced in this year's Budget. No estimates are available of the number of these in Coventry, South or the West Midlands region.

Car Scheme Rates

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will authorise a review of the Inland Revenue's fixed profit car scheme rates which were last reviewed in 1997, with special reference to petrol prices for motorists; [128038]

(2) if he will place in the Library details of the methodology used by the Inland Revenue in calculating the motor mileage rates used in the fixed profit car scheme. [128035]

Mr. Timms: Under the current system, authorised mileage rates are calculated by reference to typical tax allowable motoring costs for cars with different engine sizes. The costs include both running costs (petrol, oil, tyres, repairs, replacements and servicing) and standing costs (VED, insurance, depreciation and subscriptions).

The Budget Day 2000 press release REV6 B—"Protecting the environment: reform of company car taxation" announced a review of the authorised mileage rates system which is now under way. The announcement stated that:

> The Inland Revenue will be considering how the authorised mileage rates for drivers who use their own cars for business journeys (which underpin the Inland Revenue's fixed profit car scheme) might be improved, on a revenue neutral basis, to send better environmental signals.

The level and structure of the authorised mileage rates will be considered in the course of the review. Comments are welcome and should be sent by 30 September 2000 to:

Kim Linton
Personal Tax Division
Room 81, New Wing
Somerset House
Strand
London, WC2R 1LB
e-mail: Kim.Linton@ir.gsi.gov.uk

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April have not received substantive answers, citing as the reason *(a)* commercial and *(b)* other confidentiality. [128015]

Mr. Timms: Five and eight respectively, either wholly or in part, of the 1,479 answers given.

Hydro-electric Schemes

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what criteria *(a)* existing and *(b)* proposed hydro-electric schemes will have to meet in order to be eligible for exemption from the climate change levy; [127150]

(2) if electricity generated by hydro-electric schemes constructed under the non-fossil fuel obligation arrangements will be exempt from the climate change levy; [127149]

(3) if additional renewable energy generating capacity created by the refurbishment and upgrade of existing hydro-electric schemes in Scotland will be exempt from the climate change levy; [127151]

(4) if additional renewable energy generating capacity created by the construction of new hydro-electric schemes will be exempt from the climate change levy; and if he will make a statement. [127152]

Mr. Timms: Electricity generated from hydro-electric installations producing more than 10 MW will be subject to the climate change levy under the normal rules. Electricity from hydro-electric installations producing less than 10 MW will be exempt from the climate change levy if supplied under an approved contract.

This principle applies whether the installations concerned are new, proposed, refurbished, upgraded or constructed under the non-fossil fuels obligation arrangements.

Government Audit

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress has been made on appointing members to the steering group for the review of the audit and accountability arrangements for central Government. [128798]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I am pleased to announce that the following persons have so far agreed to serve on the Steering Group:

Sir John Bourn, KCB, Comptroller and Auditor General

Sir Brian Carsberg, Chairman, International Accounting Standards Committee

Right hon. David Davis MP, Chairman, Public Accounts Committee, House of Commons

Andrew Likierman, Director, Financial Management Reporting and Audit Directorate, HM Treasury

Iain Plaistowe, Chairman, Auditing Practices Board

David Rendel MP, Member, Public Accounts Committee, House of Commons

Lord Sainsbury of Turville, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Department of Trade and Industry

Right hon. Andrew Smith MP, Chief Secretary to the Treasury

Rosemary Thorne, Group Finance Director, Bradford and Bingley Building Society

Professor Sir David Tweedie, Chairman, Accounting Standards Board

Right hon. Alan Williams MP, Member, Public Accounts Committee, House of Commons.

The remaining appointments to the Steering Group will be announced shortly.

PRIME MINISTER

OSCE

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Prime Minister what changes there are in the composition of the United Kingdom Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation on Security and Co-operation in Europe. [128755]

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and noble Lord Jopling, currently a substitute member is to become a full representative replacing the noble Viscount Montgomery of Alamein. The noble Earl of Northesk is to become a substitute member of the delegation.

DEFENCE

Defence Evaluation and Research Agency

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many staff employed at the DERA base at West Freugh, Wigtownshire are employed by *(a)* DERA, *(b)* the MOD, *(c)* SERCO and *(d)* other non-military companies and organisations. [127870]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Alasdair Morgan, dated 29 June 2000:

I am replying to your parliamentary question about the number of staff employed at the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) range at West Freugh since such matters relate to the operation of the range.

A total of some 200 staff are currently employed at DERA West Freugh. This comprises 26 DERA staff, 23 MOD, 131 SERCO and 16 others.

I hope the above is helpful.

Northern Ireland

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 19 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 34W, on Northern Ireland, under what section of Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Government Information he based his reply. [128026]

Mr. Spellar: The information was withheld under Section a of Exemption 1—information whose disclosure would harm national security or defence.

Anglo-Irish Meeting

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 19 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 36W, under which section of Exemption 14 his decision to withhold information was based. [128022]

Mr. Spellar: Details of the individual referred to in my answer of 19 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 36W were withheld under Exemption 14(a) (information supplied in confidence by a person who was not under any legal obligation to supply it and who has not consented to its disclosure), as well as under Exemption 4(f) (information whose disclosure could identify the source of information or assistance in confidence for law enforcement or security purposes) and Exemption 12 (privacy of an individual).

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will reply substantively to the question from the hon. Member for Dudley, South (Ref. 122262). [126599]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 19 June 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 26 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 408W.

Battle of Britain

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what initiatives his Department is taking this year, at which *(a)* stations and *(b)* establishments, to mark the commemoration by the Royal Air Force of the sixtieth anniversary of the Battle of Britain. [127735]

Dr. Moonie: The RAF is very conscious that the year 2000 marks the 60th Anniversary year of the Battle of Britain and the RAF is participating in many events nationwide throughout the year to commemorate the Battle.

A Battle of Britain Service and Reception at Westminster Abbey on 17 September is the main official commemoration of the campaign. The Westminster Abbey service is held annually in September each year, but is enhanced on this occasion in recognition both that it is the 60th Anniversary and that it is likely to be the last major commemorative event of the Battle that many of the participants will be able to attend. Members of the Government, High Commissioners, the Air Force Board and representatives of the aviation industry attend each year and, in view of the importance of this particular anniversary, members of the Royal Family have also been invited.

A Battle of Britain Dinner at RAF Bentley Prior is being hosted on 15 September by the Air Force Board for members of the Battle of Britain Fighter Association, ground crew and plotters. It is planned that Service personnel, aviation industry representatives and others with a connection to the Battle will attend. Members of the Royal Family and Defence Ministers will also be invited.

The Battle of Britain Memorial Trust Day will be held on 9 July. The Battle of Britain Memorial Trust is arranging a ceremony at Capel le Ferne on the cliffs of Dover at the site of the Trust memorial to commemorate the Battle. The Lord Lieutenant of Kent will preside over the event, which will be fully supported by the RAF, with aircrew from the 13 extant Battle of Britain Squadrons, a flypast by the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight, Bands of the RAF Regiment and Air Training Corps cadets. Members of the RauxAF will also be supporting the event. A short memorial service will be conducted by the Chaplain in Chief (RAF).

Finally, the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight is in high demand this year and will be representing the RAF at events throughout the UK and displaying for some of our WWII allies in Europe. The Battle of Britain Memorial

Flight have or will be taking part in some 41 events with a Battle of Britain 60th Anniversary theme during the period April-September.

The following table lists details of all the events the RAF is supporting which will in part commemorate the 60th Anniversary of the Battle of Britain:

Event	*Date*
60th Anniversary of Battle of Britain—Kenley, Surrey	3–4 June
Battle of Britain Memorial—Purley Way, Croydon	3–4 June
RAF Bentley Priory Battle of Britain Cocktail Party	16 June
Battle of Britain Service—St. Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh	17 June
RAF Cosford Air Show—includes Battle of Britain theme	18 June
RAF Waddington Air Day—includes Battle of Britain theme	24–25 June
Battle of Britain Memorial Day—Capel le Ferne, Kent	9 July
Royal International Air Tattoo—includes Battle of Britain theme	21–23 July
Doncaster's 60th Anniversary of Battle of Britain	5–6 August
60th Anniversary of Battle of Britain—Kenley, Surrey	19–20 August
RAFA Battle of Britain Concert	1–2 September
RAFA Battle of Britain Service—York	3 September
Propeller Service 60th Anniversary of Battle of Britain—Lincolnshire	3 September
60th Anniversary of Battle of Britain—Yorkshire	3 September
Battle of Britain Pilots Memorial Garden Annual Service—Sussex	3 September
DERA Fort Halstead Officer's Mess Battle of Britain Night Dinner	7 September
Battle of Britain Cocktail Party—RAF Northolt	7 September
Battle of Britain Cocktail Party—Keogh Barracks, Aldershot	7 September
Battle of Britain Annual Reception—RAF St. Athan	8 September
Battle of Britain Anniversary Event—Stapleford Aerodrome	9 September
RAF Thatcham Battle of Britain Reception and Dinner	13 September
Newark battle of Britain Commemoration Service and Parade	10 September
RAFA Skipton Battle of Britain Parade	10 September
Basilique de Sacre Coeur—Belgium	10 September
60th Anniversary of Battle of Britain—RAF Northolt (also 85th of RAF Northolt and 75th of 600 Sqn)	13 September
HQ Strike Command Battle of Britain Night	14 September
Northwood Officer's Mess Battle of Britain Dining in Night	14 September
Battle of Britain Drinks—Bracknell, Berks	14 September
RAFA Mount Batten Battle of Britain 60th Anniversary Air Salute—Plymouth	15–17 September
Battle of Britain Commemoration—Plymouth	15 September
Battle of Britain Ceremony, Paris	15 September
RAF Fylingdales Battle of Britain Fly Past—N. Yorkshire	15 September
RAF Bentley Priory Battle of Britain Dining in Night	15 September
Battle of Britain Tribute—Manston	15 September
RAF Leeming Battle of Britain Guest Night	15 September
Central Band of RAF—public concert outside Westminster Abbey with Battle of Britain theme	16 September
RAF Leuchars Battle of Britain International Airshow	16 September
Annual Wreathlaying Ceremony on Embankment preceding Abbey Service	17 September
Annual Battle of Britain Service in Westminster Abbey plus Air Force Board Reception for Veterans	17 September
Songs of Praise RAF Halton—BBC TV (TBC)	17 September
Battle of Britain 60th Anniversary Service—St. Clement Danes' (Central Church of the RAF)	17 September
Battle of Britain Commemoration—Waltham	17 September
Battle of Britain Wings Appeal—Falkirk	17 September
Battle of Britain Remembrance Day—Hadleigh Suffolk	17 September
Biggin Hill Battle of Britain Day	17 September
RAFA Sheringham Branch Battle of Britain Ceremony—Norfolk	17 September
RAF Honington Battle of Britain Dinner	22 September

In addition, most RAF stations will hold a Battle of Britain Guest Night to celebrate success in the Battle, with invitations to veterans who live locally. Also, most RAF stations hold a Battle of Britain Cocktail Party to host local dignitaries during September.

Medical Personnel

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the average number of fully trained, dedicated medical personnel deployed in-theatre as a proportion of the total armed forces personnel deployed in-theatre at the time of highest United Kingdom deployment during conflicts in *(a)* the Falklands, *(b)* the Gulf, *(c)* Kosovo and *(d)* Sierra Leone; and if he will make a statement. [127472]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the right hon. and learned Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his policy is on the optimum in-theatre deployment of fully trained, dedicated medical personnel as a proportion of total armed forces personnel; what factors he takes into account in deciding this policy; and if he will make a statement. [127471]

Dr. Moonie: The optimal quantity and configuration of medical support is calculated individually for each operational deployment to ensure that the support is tailored to the particular task in hand. Factors taken into account in reaching a decision on the level of medical support required include the type of operation; the force size and composition; military threat and risk assessments;

possible casualty rates; risk of disease and other non battle injuries; local environmental factors, such as climate and water availability and quality; and the availability of medical resources provided by allies.

Staff Secondments

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) of 8 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 109–10W, on secondments, if he will give the names, grades and job titles of the staff seconded into his Department from each organisation mentioned, stating in each case the name of the section they were seconded to and a summary of the work that they were involved with. [128238]

Dr. Moonie: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Sierra Leone

Ann Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the Government will respond to requests for arms and ammunition from the Government of Sierra Leone. [128694]

Mr. Hoon: The Government have made it clear that they will consider requests for assistance from the Government of Sierra Leone. Following a request for ammunition to meet urgent operational needs, therefore, Ministers have agreed that the Government will supply five million rounds of 7.62mm rifle ammunition and four thousand rounds of 81mm mortar ammunition, which are available as surplus from MOD stocks. This will be transported to Sierra Leone subject to the Government of Sierra Leone securing formal agreement from the ECOWAS Secretariat that this ammunition can be imported as an exception to their Small Arms Moratorium. In accordance with UNSCR 1171 (1998), this shipment will be notified to the UN Sanctions Committee. The Government have received confirmation from President Kabbah that the ammunition will be used only by regular Sierra Leone Army soldiers, in accordance with international humanitarian law and human rights standards, and not by child soldiers. The Government remain prepared to consider further requests for assistance from the Government of Sierra Leone.

Defence Diversification Agency

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent discussions he has had with the Department for Trade and Industry concerning the Defence Diversification Agency. [128092]

Dr. Moonie: Officials are in regular contact with the DTI on this subject.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the annual report of the Defence Diversification Agency will be published. [128094]

Dr. Moonie: The activities of the Defence Diversification Agency since its establishment last year will be reported on in this year's Annual Report of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, of which the Defence Diversification Agency forms a part. We expect that that report will be laid before Parliament next month.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Waste Management

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce a risk-based system for the inspection of licensed waste management sites; and if he will make a statement. [128760]

Mr. Meacher: Following the publication last year of the consultation paper on "Operator Pollution Risk Appraisal (OPRA) for waste," I am issuing revised guidance to the Environment Agency to enable the introduction of a risk-based system for the inspection of sites licensed under Part II of the Environmental Protection Act 1990.

We must ensure that waste is recovered or disposed of in ways which protect the environment and human health. The site inspections which the Agency carries out are a vital part of this process. The new system will further improve standards by targeting inspections on those sites where they are most needed and making more effective use of the Agency's waste inspection resources.

It will also provide site licence holders with a risk management system which enables them to identify the environmental risks associated with their site and the operations they carry out; and to assess and improve the quality of their performance in managing those operations and their environmental risks. A copy of the revised guidance, which I am issuing to the Agency under section 35(8) of the 1990 Act, is being placed in the Library of the House.

GLA Election

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what reports he has received from the Greater London returning officer on the election of the Mayor and Assembly for London; and if he will make a statement. [128464]

Mr. Hill: I have now had advice from the Greater London Returning Officer (GLRO) about the first election of the Mayor and Assembly for London. There were a number of innovations at the election designed to make voting more convenient and to speed up the counting process. These included electronic counting, early voting, opening polling stations an hour earlier than usual and sending a leaflet to every elector containing an election address from each candidate contesting the Mayoral election.

Two issues have emerged in relation to the count: the speed of the count and the number of votes classified as "rejected".

Although the count took a few hours longer than originally expected, the GLRO has stressed that Ministers can be satisfied that the first use of electronic counting in an election of this size and complexity went well. There were some technical problems with some scanning machines on the night, but a manual count would have taken many more days to complete. In all other respects the electronic counting system worked very well and fully in line with expectations.

A number of other factors also contributed to the slower than expected count. For example, there were a larger than expected number of ballot papers out-sorted by the scanning machines for manual checking, before they were entered into the system. It is also the case that as this was the first time that staff had used an electronic counting system in an election, they quite rightly took time to make sure that the new procedures were followed properly. These factors inevitably slow things up.

The other issue was the larger than expected number of electors who chose not to cast a vote in one or more of the elections. Each elector had four opportunities to vote—first choice for Mayor, second choice for Mayor, constituency assembly member and London Assembly Member—and each is recorded separately. If an elector chooses not to vote in any of the four ballots—as they have every right to do—this is recorded as a "rejected" vote even though the ballot paper was left blank. For example, if a voter selects a first choice for Mayor but not a second choice, and does not vote at all in the two Assembly elections, the system would record one valid vote and three "rejected" votes.

Over 6.5 million votes were cast by about 1.75 million electors. Around 0.5 million votes were recorded as "rejected". These were made up of multiple votes (where the voter had voted more than once in a column), papers where marks identified the voter, blanks where no vote had been cast and uncertain votes, where even after manual checking the voter's intention was still not clear.

The majority of votes classified as "rejected" simply record the fact that many electors chose not to use all the four votes at their disposal. Almost 300,000 people did not use their second preference vote for the Mayor, although they did give a first preference. About 130,000 did not cast vote for a constituency assembly member and about 70,000 did not cast a vote for a London assembly member. About 1 per cent. of ballot papers were "rejected" because they were either marked with multiple votes or had marks that identified the voter. This proportion is in line with other elections.

Over 3 per cent. of voters took advantage of early voting. Almost all of them welcomed the opportunity to vote early and said they would use it again if it is available. Just under half of those who used the facility said that they would not have voted on polling day.

About 3 per cent. of voters also took advantage of the extended polling hours on polling day and voted between 7am and 8am on polling day. In some polling stations 11 per cent. of voters voted in the first hour. Most were on their way to work and 20 per cent. said that they would not have been able to vote at another time on the day. More people preferred the polls to open an extra hour in the morning rather than later in the evening.

A leaflet containing election addresses for all 11 mayoral candidates was produced and delivered to every elector in London, as required by law.

Disability Access

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he is taking in respect of the recommendation of the Disability Rights Task Force in "From Exclusion to Inclusion" that his Department should establish a statutory group on improving access to the built environment for disabled people. [128695]

Mr. Raynsford: I accept the thinking behind the Task Force's recommendation. I have therefore asked the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee (DPTAC) to establish a working group to advise Government on improving access to the built environment for disabled people. DPTAC has agreed to do so. This new role for the Committee will be in addition to its statutory functions in respect of the transport needs of disabled people. There will be no immediate amendment to those statutory functions.

Easy access to buildings—and facilities within buildings—are basic civil rights which are sometimes denied to people with disabilities. I will be looking to the new group to tell me how Government and industry can make improvements in this area.

Outdoor Advertisement Control

Mr. White: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how he intends to proceed in the light of the response to the "Outdoor Advertisement Control" consultation paper published in July 1999. [128759]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I am pleased by the positive reaction to the proposals in this consultation paper. The proposals received widespread support and there were also a number of helpful suggestions for improving individual proposals which are reflected in our final conclusions. I am grateful to all those who took the trouble to comment. Their views have been given careful consideration in deciding how to proceed.

I am putting in the Library of the House a list of our proposals, showing the changes made following consultation. The Department is now preparing the necessary statutory instruments and guidance to implement the changes.

Crop Contamination

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place in the Library the information he provided to the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment concerning the GM contamination of Advanta Seeds UK's Hyola Spring Oilseed when he requested their advice. [124324]

Mr. Meacher: I have today placed in the House Library a copy of the information about the Advanta seeds issue sent to the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment by my Department in order to seek their advice on this potential risk to human health and the environment.

The original document contained, for members' information only, a brief summary of DETR's legal opinion at that time. This has been omitted in light of possible legal proceedings.

Fairground Inspectors

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what

geographical area each fully-qualified and dedicated fairground inspector employed by the Health and Safety Executive is expected to cover; and how many fairs each inspector is responsible for. [127559]

Mr. Meacher: HSE inspectors work from 20 main offices of HSE and a number of outstationed offices throughout Great Britain. They are not solely concerned with fairground work. They will cover other industries such as food, drink and leisure activities. It is not possible to calculate how many fairs are covered by each inspector because there are wide regional variations of the number of fairs held.

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many dedicated and fully qualified fairground inspectors are employed by the Health and Safety Executive. [127565]

Mr. Meacher: Inspectors belonging to HSE's Consumer Services Groups are based in over 20 locations in Great Britain. They visit fairground dutyholders as well as dutyholders in other industries such as food, drink and leisure activities.

Inspectors undertaking health and safety inspections of fairgrounds are fully qualified HSE inspectors who receive specific guidance and training on fairground inspection.

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many inspections of fairgrounds were carried out by fully-qualified staff employed by the Health and Safety Executive in 1999; and how many of those inspections were *(a)* proactive and *(b)* reactive. [127566]

Mr. Meacher: Between 1 April 1999 and 31 March 2000, HSE inspectors made 2,200 contacts with fairground and amusement parks dutyholders. Of these contacts 1,503 were planned proactive contacts and 697 were specifically concerned with reactive contacts or visits.

Motorway Hard Shoulders

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what criteria his Department uses when allowing motorway hard shoulders to be used as traffic lanes. [127397]

Mr. Hill: Trunk road investment proposals are appraised against the criteria—environmental impact, safety, economy, accessibility and integration—as required by the New Approach To Appraisal.

To date, only a few short sections of hard shoulder have been converted to provide additional capacity at junctions. This technique is used when queueing traffic on the slip road extends back towards the main carriageway, compromises safety and/or disrupts throughput on the main carriageway.

Fuel Poverty

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the ways in which other EU member states tackle problems of fuel poverty. [127574]

Mr. Meacher: Work by National Energy Action and others indicate that fuel poverty is not widely recognised in other member states of the European Union, with the exception of Ireland.

Fuel poverty is caused mainly by a combination of low income and poor energy efficiency in homes. The links between temperature and winter mortality is strong and typically 30,000 more people die in winter in the UK than would be expected given the average death rate for the year. Although this excess mortality is caused by both exposure to outdoor conditions as well as cold homes, it is much higher in the UK than in other areas, such as Scandinavia, where winter outdoor conditions are more severe but homes are more energy efficient.

The Government believe it is unacceptable for households, particularly those most vulnerable to cold-related ill health—the old, disabled and children—not to be able to afford the heat they need to keep warm. The Inter-ministerial Group on fuel poverty is currently developing a fuel poverty strategy for publication in the autumn, that sets out objectives and the policies and targets to achieve them. It is likely that the strategy will cover both measures to tackle low incomes as well as improvements in energy efficiency of homes.

Energy Efficiency

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make energy efficiency the priority in his policy on the environmental performance of refrigeration and air-conditioning technology; and if he will make a statement. [127699]

Mr. Meacher: We are consulting on proposals to amend the energy efficiency requirements of the Building Regulations. The proposed changes would introduce energy performance requirements for air conditioning equipment and include guidance to encourage the use of energy efficient components in well-designed systems. The consultation period ends on 29 September.

We are also concerned that HFC emissions from refrigeration and air-conditioning equipment are forecast to grow strongly in the near future. This trend is unsustainable and action needs to be taken to limit the projected growth. That is why we have given a clear signal to industry and users to look closely at alternative refrigerants and to select those that are more environmentally acceptable where they do exist. Safety, technical feasibility and cost effectiveness should be taken into account before investment decisions are taken. Where HFCs are used we intend to discuss with industry and users what measures could be taken to minimise emissions.

M27

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when a decision will be made on the resurfacing of the M27 with a quieter surface; and if he will make a statement. [127646]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Peter Nutt, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Nutt to Sandra Gidley, dated 29 June 2000:

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has asked me to reply to your recent question about when a decision will be made on resurfacing the M27 with a quieter surface.

I am pleased to tell you that, within your constituency, resurfacing of both carriageways of the M27 between Junctions 2 and 4 will begin in spring 2001. The work will take approximately six months as there is a need for major reconstruction work, drainage repairs, safety fencing work and minor works to structures. I can confirm that the concrete surface will be replaced with a quieter thin surfacing which will reduce the road noise at nearby properties. In addition, Junctions 4 - 5 were resurfaced at the beginning of this year and also received a low noise surfacing treatment.

I will ensure that you are provided with more detailed information nearer the start date for the Junction 2 - 4 work.

Council Tax

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received from mobile home owners and their organisations about the banding of properties for council tax purposes. [127648]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We have received three representations in the last three months, none of which were from organisations representing mobile home owners.

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to change *(a)* the number of council tax bands and *(b)* the ratio of payment rates between different bands of property regarding council tax liability. [127647]

Ms Beverley Hughes: As we made clear in our 1998 White Paper, "Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People", we do not propose to make any major changes to the council tax during the course of this Parliament.

CFC Gases

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps the Government are taking to ensure that discarded domestic refrigeration appliances producing CFC gases are collected in Cumbria. [127806]

Mr. Mullin: Waste collection authorities have a duty under section 45 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, to collect household waste, including items such as refrigerators if requested. They also have a duty to collect waste which is fly-tipped, under section 59 of the Act. Similarly, waste disposal authorities have a duty to provide civic amenity sites, under section 51(1)(b) at which residents may deposit, for example, discarded refrigerators and that such sites are situated:

> within the area of the authority or so as to be reasonably accessible to persons resident in its area

(section 51(2)(a)). Furthermore, local authorities have a "duty of care" (section 34(1)(b)) covering the receipt and holding of such waste, including CFCs contained within, whereby they must ensure that:

> all measures are taken as are reasonable in the circumstances to prevent the escape of the waste from their control.

EU Funding

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the wards in Morecambe and Lunesdale eligible for *(a)* Single Regeneration Budget funding, *(b)* Objective 2 European funding and *(c)* regional selective assistance. [127636]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The information is as follows:

(a) Single Regeneration Budget Eligibility

Local regeneration partnerships may include any of the wards in Morecambe and Lunesdale in a bid for Single Regeneration Budget funding.

(b) Objective 2 funding eligibility

New Objective 2 Area, 2000–06

Wards:

- Alexandra
- Heysham North
- Heysham Central
- Heysham South
- Overton

Transitional Areas (former Objective 5b areas)

Wards:

- Arkholme
- Halton-with-Aughton
- Kellet

(c) Regional Selective Assistance (Tier 2)—proposed eligibility

Wards:

- Alexandra
- Harbour
- Heysham North
- Heysham Central
- Heysham South
- Overton
- Poulton
- Skerton Central
- Skerton East
- Skerton West
- Torrisholme
- Victoria.

Air Services (South-West)

Mr. Bradshaw: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reason the Air Link Strategy for the South-West has not been published; and when it will be. [127879]

Mr. Mullin: The South-West Regional Air Service Study has reported as one of six regional studies which form the first part of a two-stage process leading to the publication of a series of Regional Consultation documents. The original Regional Air Services Studies are currently being co-ordinated and audited for consistency as part of the Regional Air Services Co-ordination (RASCO) Study.

Once that work has been completed, six Regional Consultation documents, which will include a summary of the study findings for their respective region, will be published as part of a major public consultation exercise informing the preparation of the Air Transport White Paper.

Northfield Relief Road

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received in respect of the Birmingham Northfield regeneration/relief road plan. [127961]

Mr. Hill: Birmingham City Council submitted an Outline Business Case for a PFI scheme for the regeneration of Northfield, including a new relief road, in September 1999. The City Council also submitted the Relief Road as a major scheme bid in their Provisional Local Transport Plan in July 1999. We deferred consideration of the Relief Road bid because of the absence of a qualified assessment of the costs and benefits of the scheme. At a meeting with the City Council on 5 April 2000, officials made clear to the Council that the relief road would need to be justified on its transport merits, and submitted as part of the West Midlands Full Local Transport Plan in July 2000.

Road Accidents (Cyclists and Pedestrians)

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people have received hospital treatment in each of the last five years following collisions between cyclists and pedestrians. [127963]

Mr. Hill: No information is available on the number of people who receive medical treatment following collisions between cyclists and pedestrians. However, the table shows the number of casualties in this type of accident by injury severity.

Casualties in accidents between pedal cycles and pedestrians: GB 1994–98

	Severity of casualty							
	Fatal[1]		Serious[2]		Slight[3]		Total	
	Pedestrian	Cyclist	Pedestrian	Cyclist	Pedestrian	Cyclist	Pedestrian	Cyclist
1994	3	0	95	14	242	68	340	82
1995	4	1	89	19	266	78	359	98
1996	2	1	88	15	230	68	320	84
1997	3	3	88	14	253	76	344	93
1998	2	0	71	14	201	53	274	67

[1] Fatal injury: Human casualties who sustained injuries which caused death less than 30 days after the accident (excluding confirmed suicides)
[2] Serious injury: An injury for which a person is detained in hospital as an 'in-patient', or any of the following injuries whether or not they are detained in hospital: fractures, concussion, internal injuries, crushing, severe cuts and lacerations, severe general shock requiring medical treatment and injuries causing death 30 or more days after the accident. An injured casualty is recorded as seriously or slightly injured by the police on the basis of information available within a short time of the accident. This generally will not reflect the results of a medical examination, but may be influenced according to whether the casualty is hospitalised or not. Hospitalisation procedures will vary regionally.
[3] Slight injury: An injury of a minor character such as a sprain, bruise or cut which are not judged to be severe, or slight shock requiring roadside attention. This definition includes injuries not requiring medical treatment.
Note:
The statistics shown in the table are for single vehicle accidents involving one or more pedestrians.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many of the written parliamentary questions tabled to his Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April have not received substantive answers, citing as the reason that the information is *(a)* not held centrally, *(b)* not held in the form requested and *(c)* not available. [128013]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I refer the right hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 23 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 311–12W. Of the 36 occasions my Department cited disproportionate cost as the reason for not providing substantive answers, we did so because *(a)* in 14 cases the information was not held centrally, *(b)* in 16 cases the information was not held in the form requested and *(c)* in six cases the information was not available.

GM Crops

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what consultation there was with local authorities before selection of the locations for field trials of genetically modified crops; and if he will make a statement. [128045]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 28 June 2000]:* Although there is no specific request for such consultation in the legislation, we did hold a series of 12 meetings focused on local authority areas around groups of sites, in order to explain the purpose of the field study experiments to answer local concerns.

Railways (Investment)

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to increase the level of investment in the railways; and if he will make a statement. [128133]

Mr. Hill: Our plans for future investment in the railways are subject to the outcome of the Spending Review 2000, and will be detailed in our forthcoming Ten Year Plan for Transport. We will set out in our Ten Year Plan for Transport a programme of measures for delivering at least a 75 per cent. increase in rail freight movements and a 50 per cent. increase in rail passenger journeys.

Heathrow

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with BAA concerning the effect of a fifth terminal at Heathrow on his carbon dioxide emission reduction target. [127897]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 28 June 2000]:* None. It would not be appropriate to hold such discussions because the planning application for a fifth terminal was the subject of a Public Inquiry and the Secretary of State awaits the Inspector's report. Carbon dioxide issues were considered during the Inquiry and he will take these into account as part of the decision making process.

Global Warming

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the effects of global warming in the next 50 years on the *(a)* area of agricultural land that may be lost and *(b)* number of people displaced by loss of land in the United Kingdom. [127655]

Mr. Morley: I have been asked to reply.

The land below high tide level is already vulnerable to flooding and depends on flood and coastal defences. These low lying areas form around 5 per cent. of the land area of England, including a similar proportion of the developed urban land, and over 50 per cent. of the highest grade agricultural land.

This land could be at increased risk through climate change. We need to respond to the challenge primarily by ensuring that, where necessary and appropriate, existing defences are replaced and upgraded. Since 1989, MAFF has issued flood and coastal defence operating authorities with allowances for sea level rise for them to take into account when designing new or upgraded schemes; these allowances reflect both climate change and long term geological land movement.

However, the response to climate change cannot be automatically to surround Britain in concrete by building ever higher sea defences. Sustainability is a key criterion and we cannot commit future generations to unsustainable defence options. In assessing defence options the operating authorities need to consider alternative approaches including "managed realignment" of defences to reduce such pressure on the inter-tidal area, compensate for habitat losses and provide more sustainable long term lines of coastal defence. Decisions on such matters will need to be made by the operating authorities over the coming years.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Staff Secondments

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), of 8 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 132W, on secondments, if he will give the names, grades and job titles of the staff seconded into his Department from each organisation mentioned, stating in each case the name of the section they were seconded to and a summary of the work that they were involved with. [128251]

Mr. Lock: Secondments and attachments are part of the Interchange Initiative, which promotes the exchange of people and good practice between the Civil Service and other organisations. Before an Interchange can occur, all parties must be satisfied that no conflict of interest arises.

The secondment to the Law Commission was of a solicitor to work on a company law reform project; and the secondee from ICL provided an external perspective on information systems/information technology strategy work in the LCD and on the development of the Department's Year 2000 programme.

WALES

Post Offices

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the Government's policy towards post offices and its impact on Wales. [128580]

Mr. Paul Murphy: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry yesterday announced the publication of the Performance and Innovation Unit's report commissioned by the Prime Minister, "Counter Revolution: Modernising the Post Office Network", and the Government's response to this (Vol. 352, columns 907–11). The Government fully accept the PIU's 24 recommendations and will work in partnership with the Post Office and the devolved Administrations to build a bright future for a modernised network, including more than 1,500 post offices in Wales.

My right hon. Friend outlined today how the Government will act to protect a nationwide network of post offices:

We are requiring the Post Office to maintain the rural network and to prevent any avoidable closures of post offices;

We have made the budgetary provision to back up this commitment where necessary, on the basis of powers taken in the Postal Services Bill to give subsidies;

We will provide funding to improve post offices in deprived urban areas and sustain post offices and retail facilities in deprived urban areas. The National Assembly for Wales will receive a share of new funding available in England and will be responsible for deciding whether it wishes to implement similar proposals in the urban post offices in Wales;

We will work with the Post Office and the devolved Administrations on pilot schemes to use post offices as sites for information on Government services and internet access learning points;

We want the Post Office to set up a Universal bank to help address the problems of financial exclusion. This will be the vehicle for delivering our pledge that people will still be able to get their benefits in cash at the Post Office after the switch to Automated Credit Transfer;

£480 million has already been invested in HORIZON, a project to automate the entire Post Office network by next spring.

The Government want the Post Office to work creatively to seize new lines of business suggested in the PIU report, such as the Universal bank, one-stop shops for Government information and transactions and the opportunities offered by e-commerce, so the network is not dependent on subsidy. However, Government funding will be available to support our proposals as necessary and we have identified funding in the current spending review. Precise figures will be announced in July as part of the Spending Review.

Most of these proposals are for the UK Government to take forward with the Post Office, although some will be for the Assembly to decide on. In areas which fall within the Assembly's policy remit, Wales will receive a share of any new funding and it will be for the Assembly to decide how it uses that money. I am in close contact with the First Secretary on this matter and the Assembly will no doubt wish to make its own announcement in due course.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Farmers Markets

6. **Mr. Chaytor:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to encourage farmers markets. [127036]

13. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to promote and encourage the development of farmers markets. [127042]

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend the Minister attended the launch of the National Association of Farmers Markets as well as a number of individual farmers markets. He also wrote to the leaders of all local authorities drawing their attention to the new association and the benefits which farmers markets can bring. The National Association of Farmers Markets was offered a grant under the first round of the agricultural development scheme. For the future, we are considering bids under the 2nd round of the ADS and farmers markets will be potentially eligible for financial support under the provisions of the England rural development plan.

23. **Mr. Plaskitt:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he last met with the National Association of Farmers Markets to discuss the farmers market movement. [127054]

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend the Minister met the National Association of Farmers Markets at their launch on 25 May.

26. **Mr. Ronnie Campbell:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the number of farmers markets in the UK. [127057]

Ms Quin: The National Association of Farmers Markets has recently estimated that there are now over 200 farmers markets in regular operation across the country.

Countryside Stewardship Scheme

14. **Charlotte Atkins:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if the Staffordshire Moorlands and Staffordshire Peak District area has benefited from the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. [127043]

Mr. Morley: In my hon. Friend's constituency the majority of agri-environment expenditure is channelled through the Environmentally Sensitive Area Scheme rather than the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. There are over 700 ESA agreements in the South West Peak covering 23,700 hectares. In Staffordshire as a whole there are 230 agreements under the Countryside Stewardship and Arable Stewardship, and a further 81 applications this year which are awaiting processing.

Livestock Farmers

15. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assistance the Government have given to Britain's livestock farmers in the last year. [127045]

Ms Quin: Since August 1999, the Government have announced two significant packages of assistance for the livestock sector delivering in total £419 million. Livestock farmers receive some £750 million in payment under the CAP, to which this £419 million is an addition.

Farm Incomes

16. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on trends in farm incomes. [127046]

Ms Quin: In real terms Total Income From Farming doubled between 1990 and 1995 before falling back by over 60 per cent. between 1995 and 1999 to an average of £10,330 per full time farmer.

Looking further ahead, future trends in farm incomes will be shaped by:

future market developments;

the trend in the exchange rate;

the impact CAP reform has in shifting Agriculture toward a freer market;

the pace and extent of industry re-structuring.

Common Fisheries Policy

17. **Mr. Quinn:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what his priorities are for the 2002 review of the common fisheries policy. [127047]

Mr. Morley: The Government wish to maintain key features of the present arrangements such as national quotas based on relative stability and access restrictions within 6/12 mile limits. At the same time, we want to secure improvements to make CFP a more effective instrument for conserving fish stocks, including enhancing the regional dimension and integrating environmental considerations more fully.

Agricultural Wages Boards

18. **Mr. Watts:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what evaluation he has made of the effect of the Agricultural Wages Board arrangements on low-paid employees in rural areas. [127048]

Ms Quin: As part of the quinquennial review of the Agricultural Wages Board, announced in December 1999, independent research has been undertaken to evaluate the impact of the provisions in the Agricultural Wages Order.

21. **Mr. Pond:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what evaluation he has made of the effect of the Agricultural Wages Board arrangements on low-paid employees in rural areas. [127051]

Ms Quin: While we have made no special assessment of the effect of the Agricultural Wages Board on rural rates of pay in general, we are aware that over the years some rural employers have based the pay for non-agricultural workers on the rates set by the Agricultural Wages Board.

Horticulture

19. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what meetings he has held with horiculturalists' representatives to discuss horticulture in the last month. [127049]

Ms Quin: During the past month I have met representatives of the potato and ornamental horticulture sectors and visited a wide cross section of growers in the Vale of Evesham. I have also invited leading horticulture members of the National Farmers Union to a meeting to discuss the climate change levy.

Genetic Modification

20. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will operate the precautionary principle in relation to new products involving genetic modification. [127050]

Mr. Nick Brown: The current legislation prohibits the placing on the market of a new product involving genetic modification until it has been approved through the European Union. Consents are only granted once Member States are satisfied that all appropriate measures have been taken to avoid adverse effects on human health and the environment.

Abattoirs

22. **Mr. Sawford:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action he is taking to maintain the continued viability of small and medium-sized abattoirs; and if he will make a statement. [127053]

Ms Quin: I am well aware of the position of small and medium sized abattoirs. Meat inspection charges are a matter for the Food Standards Agency.

Environmentally Sustainable Agriculture

24. **Mr. Dobbin:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action he is taking to promote environmentally sustainable forms of agricultural production. [127055]

25. **Mr. Alan Simpson:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action he is taking to promote environmentally sustainable forms of agricultural production. [127056]

Mr. Morley: The Government have a range of policies to promote environmentally sustainable forms of agricultural production. These include advice and encouragement, incentives to help farmers in their dual role of food producers and stewards of the countryside, regulation to protect against threats to environmental resources and research and development.

Organic Farming

27. **Ms Drown:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what his Department's expenditure is on research and development into organic farming methods. [127058]

Mr. Morley: The budget for MAFF's dedicated programme of research into organic farming methods is £2.1 million in this financial year.

Under-10-metre Fleet

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what changes are proposed in the licensing and quota management arrangements for the under 10 metre fleet; and if he will make a statement. [128756]

Mr. Morley: The under-10-metre fleet is an important part of the UK fishing industry and I am concerned to promote and ensure a stable future for our inshore fishermen.

Last year the Ministry and the other Fisheries Departments invited comments on measures to improve the management of the under-10-metre fleet. More than 250 replies have been received from fishermen's organisations and individual fishermen. The majority of those commenting were opposed to further constraints being placed on this part of the industry such as a prohibition on weekend fishing, regional licensing or species specific licences.

Although we have been successful in limiting the closure of fisheries, we do need to safeguard against the consequences of further increases in fishing effort. In recent years there has been a sharp increase in the construction of vessels between 9 and 10 metres. This trend prompted the Fisheries Departments to introduce monthly catch limits for North Sea nephrops last Autumn and to extend these arrangements to Area VII and West of Scotland nephrops for the year 2000.

In our view it would be prudent to adopt further measures to constrain future growth in fishing effort within the under-10-metre fleet. Consequently, from 1 January 2001 it will not be possible to aggregate licences from vessels under eight metres onto vessels between eight and 10 metres and a limit of 70 vessel capacity units (VCUs) will apply to the aggregation of licences onto vessels below eight metres. Additionally, the Licensing Review Working Group, comprising representatives from industry and Fisheries Departments, has been asked to consider whether any changes should be made in the capacity penalties applying to the transfer or aggregation of licences within the under 10 metre fleet.

The Fisheries Departments will continue to manage quota allocations for the under-10-metre fleet with the objective of providing fishing opportunities throughout the year. Steps have already been taken to underpin the main stocks of interest to under-10-metre vessels and special arrangements have been made for low impact fisheries such as handlining for mackerel. In future any surplus that arises on underpinned allocations will be utilised to acquire additional quota for this part of the fleet. Greater use will also be made of EU provisions on end year flexibility enabling quota to be borrowed from the following year and for certain stocks for any surplus to be banked. Consideration will also be given to whether suitable arrangements might be possible that would enable Producer Organisations to manage quota in respect of under-10-metre vessels within their membership.

CAP

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to reduce the cost of the Common Agricultural Policy to *(a)* taxpayers and *(b)* consumers. [127044]

Ms Quin: One of my Department's objectives, set out in its business plan, is to reduce the cost of the CAP to consumers and taxpayers. Agenda 2000 began this process, and the Government continue to press for further reform.

Fishing Fleet

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the current fisheries agreements with non-EU countries indicating the cost of each to the Community's budget; how many vessels are involved in each case; and how many are *(a)* UK flagged and *(b)* UK owned. [127186]

Mr. Morley: The table lists current fisheries agreements between the EU and third countries and their estimated annual cost to the Community budget.

The manner in which the fishing opportunities obtained in third country waters is expressed varies from agreement to agreement. Total vessel capacity, number of licences, reference tonnages and numerical quotas are used singly or in combination to describe the fishing opportunities available to community vessels. It is not, therefore, possible to determine the number of vessels involved in every case. However, the table indicates which member states benefit from the opportunities made available under each agreement.

Country	*Estimated annual cost £ eu*[1]	*Beneficiaries*
Cape Verde	317,836	France, Spain, Portugal
Comores	224,100	Spain, France, Portugal, Italy
Equatorial Guinea	1,999,200	Spain, France, Portugal, Italy
Estonia	[2]134,893	Denmark, Finland, Germany, Sweden
Faroe Islands	Reciprocal	Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, UK
Gabon	450,188	Spain, France, Portugal
Greenland[3]	24,090,750	UK, Germany, France, Denmark
Guinea Bissau	5,602,500	Spain, Italy, Portugal
Guinea Conakry	1,842,600	Spain, Italy, Greece, France, Portugal
Iceland	Reciprocal	Germany, UK, Belgium, France
Ivory Coast	622,500	Spain, France, Portugal
Latvia	[2]156,870	Denmark, Finland, Germany, Sweden
Lithuania	[2]340,010	Denmark, Finland, Germany, Sweden
Madagascar	473,100	Spain, France
Mauritania	32,469,600	Spain, Portugal, Italy, France
Mauritius	256,781	Spain, Portugal, Italy, France
Norway	Reciprocal	UK, Portugal, France, Spain, Greece, Ireland, Denmark, Netherlands, Germany, Belgium
Poland	Reciprocal	Sweden
Russian Federation	Reciprocal	Sweden
Sao Tome e Principe	396,844	France, Spain, Portugal
Senegal	7,470,000	France, Spain, Portugal, Italy
Seychelles	2,147,625	Spain, UK, France, Portugal, Italy

[1] Using exchange rate of one euro = £0.6225
[2] Plus reciprocal exchange
[3] Community quotas of polar cod and capelin in Greenland waters are open to all member states

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on planned changes in the size of the UK fishing fleet; what corresponding changes are planned for other EU fleets, indicating *(a)* how many vessels will be affected and *(b)* what proportion of that country's fleet this represents; and what measures he is taking to use these changes to reduce the number of flagged vessels. [127187]

Mr. Morley: In document 7426/00, the European Commission recently published its mid-term review of the fourth Multi-annual Guidance Programme (MAGP IV). At the Council of Fisheries Ministers on 16 June, the UK and a number of other member states expressed reservations about the Commission's recommendations for future policy on fleet restructuring. The Commission will be consulting extensively on the report's findings before making formal proposals for new legislation and the Government will be playing an active part in those discussions.

Member states continue to be bound by the obligations for fleet reductions set out in MAGP IV and in the coming weeks the Commission will be publishing its report on Member states' progress (at 31 December 1999) in meeting those objectives. In implementing MAGP IV we are obliged to consider all vessels on the UK register.

Live Animal Exports

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make it his policy to replace the long-distance transport of live farm animals from Britain to southern Europe by a trade in meat and carcases; and if he will make a statement. [127300]

Mr. Morley: It is not legally open to the Government to end the trade in live farm animals to other member states if the arrangements for transporting them comply with the relevant EU animal welfare rules. We do devote considerable effort to ensuring these rules are met while the animals are on our territory, as well as to urging other member states, bilaterally and through discussions in Brussels, to follow our example. We shall also press strongly for improvements to the rules in the forthcoming review. Our preference is for a carcase trade.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make it his policy to propose changes to EU law to the effect that live animals are not considered goods or products; and if he will make a statement. [127298]

Mr. Morley: The Government have already obtained, at the intergovernmental Conference in Amsterdam, a Protocol to the Treaty which characterises animals as sentient beings and requires the Community and the

member states, in formulating and implementing the Community's agriculture, transport, internal market and research policies, to pay full regard to the welfare requirements of animals.

Agriculture Council

Mr. Casale: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the outcome was of the Agriculture Council held in Luxembourg on 19 and 20 June; and if he will make a statement. [127555]

Mr. Nick Brown: I represented the United Kingdom at the Agriculture Council meeting in Luxembourg on 19 June 2000, accompanied by Brid Rodgers MLA, Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development in the Northern Ireland Executive.

The main topic for discussion was a proposal for EU-wide rules governing the use of Specified Risk Materials to prevent the spread of transmissible spongiform encephalopathies. There was no qualified majority for the proposal in the Council (Austria, Finland, Spain and Greece opposing, Germany abstaining) but the absence of a simple majority of member states opposing means the Commission are free to adopt it under the relevant procedures. I welcomed this important consumer safety measure which will apply appropriate controls on SRMs in all EU countries, and for which the UK has long been pressing.

The Council deferred a decision on the 2000–01 CAP price proposals until its July meeting. In order to avoid a legal vacuum when the sugar and pigmeat marketing years begin on 1 July however, the Council agreed to extend current price supports as from that date. I, Sweden and the Netherlands voted against the decision on sugar for which we consider a support price cut is required. The decision on pigmeat was agreed unanimously.

A first Council discussion of the Commission's proposal to establish income stabilisation funds in the pigmeat sector revealed a divergence of views. Many member states, including the UK, expressed fears that the proposal would exacerbate market price volatility and distort competition. Others felt provision of Community finance and greater compulsion on producers to participate in stabilisation funds was the key. The Council will return to this issue in due course.

Under Other Business I urged the Commission to review its approach to the allocation of export refunds for processed agricultural products in the context of budget and WTO constraints. I expressed particular concern at the Commission's decision to suspend the issue of refund certificates, which has caught out many companies through no fault of their own. I also requested Commissioner Fischler to ensure that cutbacks in refunds for future years avoid placing a disproportionate burden on particular sectors, notably cereals-based spirit drinks.

Also under Other Business I strongly supported the Swedish Minister's call for better enforcement by all member states of the EU rules on the welfare of animals in transit, as well as further, more rigorous legislation. I particularly welcomed the new Commission's Working Group, which Commissioner Byrne has established, at the United Kingdom's suggestion, to address these issues.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Charter of Fundamental Rights

32. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Solicitor-General what discussions he has had with the Foreign Secretary regarding the status of the proposed EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. [127063]

The Solicitor-General: The Attorney-General and I regularly meet with the Foreign Secretary and other ministerial colleagues to discuss matters of mutual interest. However, by long standing convention, adhered to by successive Governments, neither the fact that the Law Officers have been consulted on an issue, nor the substance of the advice they have been given, is disclosed outside Government and other than in exceptional circumstances. I therefore am not prepared to say whether the Foreign Secretary has consulted the Law Officers about the proposed Charter.

Crown Prosecution Service

33. **Mr. Paterson:** To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement on the measures he has taken to improve the efficiency of the Crown Prosecution Service. [127064]

The Solicitor-General: In my answer to the hon. Member's question on 25 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 1107, I outlined the initiatives in place to improve efficiency in the Crown Prosecution Service. These include a major programme of IT modernisation, the development of joint/police/CPS Criminal Justice Units and Trial Units and the implementation of the provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1988. Good progress continues to be made on all these initiatives.

I am pleased to say that the first Criminal Justice Unit and the first Trials Unit were opened in Bristol on Monday 26 June 2000. police administrators and CPS lawyers and caseworkers are working together in the Criminal Justice Unit at New Bridewell Police Station, serving all the magistrates courts in Avon. Similar joint working is proceeding in the CPS premises, Froomsgate House, which is preparing cases for hearing at Bristol Crown Court.

These joint working arrangements will reduce duplication and delay, release additional resources for the police and for the CPS to focus on serious casework in the Crown Court.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Solicitor-General what the estimated legal costs are to the defence of the Employment Tribunal cases brought against the CPS by Mrs. Bamieh; and if he will make a statement [128119]

The Solicitor-General: The estimated legal costs incurred by the CPS are £155,630.91 The legal costs covered six separate cases brought against the CPS by Mrs. Bamieh which contained a large number of allegations. Two separate Tribunal Hearings were involved and a remedies hearing. All outstanding cases between the CPS and Mrs. Bamieh were resolved when a settlement, the terms of which are confidential to the parties, was reached on 8 February 2000. Mrs. Bamieh continues to work for the CPS.

Espionage

34. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Solicitor-General what discussions he has had on the handling of decisions on whether to prosecute in espionage cases following the Intelligence and Security Committee's report dealing with the case of Mrs. Melita Norwood. [127065]

The Solicitor-General: As the report of the Intelligence and Security Committee indicates, procedures for reviewing cases for possible prosecution have been strengthened. While criteria exist for prosecutions, the Security Service has agreed to send all material relevant to prosecutions to the Legal Secretariat to the Law Officers on a trial basis for 12 months. This will allow the Law Officers to assess when a prosecution is possible for all cases and validate these criteria for future use.

Lenient Sentences

35. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Solicitor-General what criteria the Law Officers apply when determining whether to refer an unduly lenient sentence to the Court of Appeal. [127066]

The Solicitor-General: The Attorney-General and I have the power to refer sentences to the Court of Appeal if we consider them to be unduly lenient.

An unduly lenient sentence is not one which is merely lenient but one which falls outside the range of sentences that a judge, applying his or her mind to all the relevant circumstances of the case, could reasonably consider appropriate. The appropriate range must be determined by consideration of the principles of sentencing and other guidance laid down by the Court of Appeal.

Court Cases (Duration)

36. **Dr. George Turner:** To ask the Solicitor-General what progress is being made in speeding up the completion of court cases, with particular reference to cases involving persistent young offenders; and what role the Crown Prosecution Service is playing in this. [127067]

The Solicitor-General: The Crown Prosecution Service is fully committed to playing its part in delivering the Government's pledge to reduce delays in the youth justice system, particularly with regard to persistent young offenders.

The figures (announced today) for the average time from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders in England and Wales in the first quarter of this year showed a fall from 108 days in 1999 to 96 in 2000. This compares with 125 days in 1998 and 141 days in 1997. This downward trend in the figures has been a continuing feature since the Government's Pledge.

At a national level, the Crown Prosecution Service has been, and continues to work closely with other Criminal Justice System partners; the Narey reforms and the new local good practice already introduced into the Youth Court will help to make further progress.

Vandalism

Mr. Baker: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement on the criteria applied by the Crown Prosecution Service in decisions on whether to prosecute for alleged crimes of vandalism. [127068]

The Solicitor-General: As with any other offence, the Crown Prosecution Service is guided by the Code for Crown Prosecutors when deciding on whether a prosecution should be brought in relation to offences involving vandalism.

If the evidential test in the Code for Crown Prosecutors is satisfied on the facts of a particular case, consideration of the public interest factors set out in the Code will follow in the usual way.

If these tests are satisfied then offences resulting from vandalism are prosecuted primarily under the Criminal Damage Act 1971.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Dome

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 6 June, *Official Report*, column 217W, on the Millennium Dome, what factors underlay the length of time taken by his Department to establish that it was impossible to provide any meaningful statistical breakdown of visitors by region. [125528]

Janet Anderson: The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) examined various ways of distilling the information requested in a format that would be meaningful. NMEC discovered, however, that given the wide range of ways in which visitors to the Dome are able to purchase admission tickets, it was not possible to provide any meaningful statistical breakdown of visitors by region.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what software systems are being used in selling or booking tickets to the Millennium Dome; [125530]

(2) what proportion of ticket sales to the Millennium Dome has been purchased at *(a)* central sales points, *(b)* the Millennium Dome call centre and *(c)* other locations. [125531]

Janet Anderson: The following software systems are used to sell Dome admissions:

Door sales—Enta;

Dome ticket line and Dome trade line—Enta;

National Lottery retailers—G-Tech (Camelot system with software changes to enable sale of Dome admission);

National Express—NE reservations system via interface to Enta;

Train Operating Companies—Tribute, Facets, Apris;

Overflow Call Centres—BOCS, WTS, classic TicketMaster;

City Cruises—Enta, Haven;

Web sales—bespoke web sales engine developed by Compaq.

In addition each of 100 or so key accounts use their own reservations systems to sell Dome admissions which are confirmed and billed using Enta via the Dome trade line. Sales reports are received electronically from all of

the above systems and are consolidated into a bespoke channels database from which consolidated sales reports are generated.

Ticket sales through central sales points to 19 June:

Door sales—424,048 (15 per cent.);

Dome ticket line, Dome trade line 1,552,884 (53 per cent.);

Other locations (travel trade, Camelot etc.)—966,110 (32 per cent.).

Stonehenge

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement about visitor activity at Stonehenge on 20 and 21 June. [127709]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Approximately 10,000 people peacefully celebrated the summer solstice at Stonehenge on 20 June this year. English Heritage, in close a positive liaison with Druid and pagan groups and the Wiltshire Constabulary, successfully implemented a policy of managed open access. The site was stewarded by over 70 English Heritage personnel, ably assisted by volunteer stewards from Druid and pagan groups, who were encouraged to self-steward. I am grateful to the police for their skilful and imaginative support, and I am pleased to report that there were no arrests or significant incidents. There was no camping at the site and the visitors willingly left by the agreed time of 07.30 the next morning, most taking their litter with them. Stonehenge reopened to the public at 09.00 on Wednesday 21 June.

Conference Facilities (London)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the desirability of additional conference facilities in central London. [127712]

Janet Anderson: The Government appreciate the value to London which would be associated with the development of a new international convention centre in the capital, particularly in terms of the additional business tourism which it would attract. In particular, Ministers have welcomed the work done by London's business organisations to explore the feasibility of the proposal and have taken an active interest in the campaign to find commercial developers.

Royal Palaces

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport which royal palaces and other buildings occupied by members of the royal family are owned by the State. [127711]

Mr. Alan Howarth: None. The Occupied Royal Palaces are owned by The Sovereign on behalf of the nation. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport is statutorily responsible for the maintenance of the English Palaces under the Crown Lands Act 1851. Property services for these palaces are funded by grant in aid to the Royal Household from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Interactive Voice Response Systems

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many of his Department's telephone lines used by the general public are responded to by interactive voice response systems. [127118]

Mr. Foulkes: The Department for International Development has no interactive voice response systems that deal with telephone inquiries from the general public operational either within the Department or in use in any agencies thereof.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many of the written parliamentary questions tabled to her Department between 19 October 1999 and 20 April have not received substantive answers, excluding those not answered *(a)* citing disproportionate cost, *(b)* stating that the information is not available, not held centrally, or not held in the form requested and *(c)* citing commercial or other confidentiality. [128019]

Mr. Foulkes: No parliamentary questions tabled to my Department, between 19 October 1999 and 20 April 2000, remain outstanding.

China Western Poverty Reduction Project

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the report of the Independent Inspection Panel commissioned by the World Bank on the China Western Poverty Reduction Project. [127578]

Mr. Foulkes: Britain supported this project in the Bank Board meeting in June 1999 because it would bring significant benefits to 1.7 million of the poorest people in China. We also supported the Board's conclusion that no funds would be disbursed on the Qinghai component of the project until an independent Inspection Panel had conducted an investigation, and pending further environmental and social assessments.

The report by the Independent Inspection Panel, and the Bank Management's response to it, will be discussed at a World Bank Board meeting in early July 2000. We will be looking very carefully at the conclusions of the Inspection Panel Report, and the Bank Management's response to it, in advance of the Bank Board meeting.

SCOTLAND

Correspondence

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he will reply to the letter of 17 May from the Reverend David Pitkeathly of the Parish Church of St. Andrew, Peterhead. [128029]

Mr. Wilson: I replied to the Reverend David Pitkeathly's letter of 17 May on Friday 23 June.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Appointments Commission

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council if she will ensure that the proposed advertisements from the Appointments Commission soliciting applications for membership of the House of Lords are *(a)* placed in the Big Issue, *(b)* shown on TV and in cinemas and *(c)* broadcast on radio and the Commission's website. [128335]

Mrs. Beckett: This is a matter for the Commission.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council when she last met the Chair and the other members of the Appointments Commission. [128311]

Mrs. Beckett: I have never met them in their present capacity, nor would I expect to do so. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House of Lords met the Chairman, Lord Stevenson, on 29 June as the last in his series of meetings with the party leaders in the other place.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council when the Appointments Commission will launch its website. [128336]

Mrs. Beckett: That is a matter for the Commission. However, I understand they expect to launch it later in the summer.

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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 352**

SESSION 1999–2000

19th June—29th June 2000

Printed indexes to Hansard

The volume index is one of three printed indexes to Commons Hansard produced from the House of Commons Library's Parliamentary On-Line Indexing Service (POLIS). It contains references to material in the bound volumes of Hansard. The other indexes produced are:

- The fortnightly index to Hansard. This covers the same date range as the volume index but references are to the column numbering in the daily parts and weekly edition of Hansard.
- The sessional index to Hansard. This contains references to material in the bound volumes for a whole session.

Indexes on the Parliamentary website

Fortnightly, volume and sessional indexes covering material from the beginning of the 1999/2000 session will also appear on the Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk with links to the full text of Hansard.

SCOPE

The indexes include entries covering:

- The content of all material recorded in Hansard, including debates, procedural motions and questions.
- The names of all Members contributing to the Parliamentary business recorded in Hansard.
- The names of some types of Parliamentary business whenever they occur in Hansard. These are 'Ministerial statements', 'Business statements', 'Opposition days' and 'Estimates days'.

ARRANGEMENT

- All headings are in one word-by-word alphabetical sequence, with Members' contribution entries distinguished from other entries by italics.
- Where a Member contributes to Parliamentary business and is the subject of Parliamentary business there are separate contribution and subject entries, the subject entry coming first.
- Entries beginning 'Mac' and 'Mc' are sorted in one sequence as 'Mac'.
- 'St', when abbreviated for Saint, is filed as 'Saint'.
- Numbers are filed as if spelt out, e.g. '10 Downing Street' as if 'Ten Downing Street'.

HEADINGS

Choice of headings

- *Specificity*—Entries summarise the overall content of a debate or question as specifically as the various POLIS thesauruses allow. For example, Education, Higher education, Universities or the name of a particular university is used depending on the breadth of the item.
- *Name headings*—Specific entries are included for the names of people, places, institutions, organisations, committees, programmes, initiatives, publications and legislation when these constitute the overall subject of an item.
- *Organisations and subjects*—Organisation entries are preferred for material about the general performance, administration and staffing of an organisation (for example, United Kingdom Passports Agency, Standards). Subject entries are preferred for what organisations do as part of their duties (for example, Passports, Fees and charges).

Geographical coverage

- *Subject headings*—Subject headings are assumed to refer to the whole of England, Great Britain or the United Kingdom unless otherwise stated.
- *Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales*—Material relating to the whole of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales is indexed under these headings.
- *Places within the UK*—Material about specific towns, areas and institutions is entered under the name of the specific town, area or institution.
- *Foreign countries*—Most material relating to foreign countries is collected under the name of that country. Some additional material may be found under the names of—groups of countries, areas within countries, geographical features, place names associated with particular issues, politicians and heads of state, international bodies, and institutions and companies operating in those countries.
- *EC/EU material*—General material about the European Communities and European institutions as bodies is entered under 'European Communities' and 'EC institutions'. Organisational material about specific communities and institutions is entered under the name of the body, for example 'European Coal and Steel Community' or 'European Parliament'. Material about what the Communities and institutions are doing or propose to do is entered under various subject headings beginning 'EC' such as 'EC environmental policy'.

Parliamentary material and business

- *Material about Parliament*—This is indexed under 'Parliament', the names of the two Houses, the 'Palace of Westminster' and parts of the Parliamentary estate (such as 'Portcullis House').
- *Committees*—Material about committees is indexed under 'Committees', types of committee (such as 'Select committees') and the names of individual committees (such as 'Home Affairs Select Committee').
- *Parliamentary proceedings/procedures*—Material discussing these is indexed under the specific type of proceeding (such as 'Parliamentary questions' or 'Oral questions'), procedure (such as 'Calling of Members') or issue (such as 'Unparliamentary expressions').
- *Legislation*—Entries for Parliamentary proceedings on bills and statutory instruments are entered under their titles. Where the lead word of the bill or statutory instrument does not provide a full or clear indication of the subject there are additional subject entries when the bill or instrument is debated. For example, debates on the 'Child Support Pensions and Social Security Bill' have entries under 'Pensions' and 'Social security benefits' as well as under the title of the Bill.
- *Members' names*—These are given in the form by which the Member prefers to be known.
- *Speaker and Chair*—Contributions by the Speaker and deputies are brought together under the heading 'Speaker and deputies'. Contributions from the chair during Committees of the Whole House are brought together under 'Chairman of Committee of the Whole House'. Significant rulings and statements (as opposed to routine comments) are indicated by the sub-heading 'Rulings and statements' in both cases.

Guidance on headings

- *Cross references*—'See' references indicate all the material has been entered under another heading. 'See also' references indicate that additional information may be found under another heading.
- *Concept thesaurus*—A copy of the subject thesaurus to POLIS, listing the concept entries used in the index, is available on the Parliamentary website. A hard copy is available from the Head of the POLIS Unit, House of Commons Library, 1 Derby Gate, London, SW1A 2DG (020 7219 6456).

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- References in the indexes are to columns rather than pages.
- References to debates, but not questions, are accompanied by the date of the item.
- There are separate sequences in Hansard for the material taken on the floor of the House, Westminster Hall sittings and written questions:
  - References consisting of a number by itself indicate material taken on the floor of the House.
  - References ending in 'wh' indicate Westminster Hall sittings.
  - References ending in 'w' indicate written questions.
- References under all headings except the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in one numerical sequence irrespective of whether the material is taken on the floor of the House, is discussed at a Westminster Hall sitting or is a written question.
- References under the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in numerical sequence under the following headings:
  - *Debates etc.* (which includes interventions and points of order as well as significant contributions to debates);
  - *Sittings in Westminster Hall* (covering all debates held as part of the Westminster Hall sittings); and
  - *Questions* (which includes written, oral and private notice questions).

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in connection with the progress of bills:

- 1R=First reading
- 2R=Second reading
- Com=Committee stage
- Rep=Report stage
- 3R=Third reading
- res=resolution
- amendt(s)=amendment(s)
- *=matter taken formally without debate or division.

Parliamentary background

- The Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk contains a range of information about Parliament and the full text of some Parliamentary papers and proceedings including Hansard.
- Information on current Parliamentary business is provided in the House of Commons Information Office *Weekly Information Bulletin*, available on the website and from The Stationery Office (020 7873 8499).
- Further information on Parliamentary proceedings and procedures is available from the House of Commons Information Office (020 7219 4272).

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